

The Complete Crockett

The Galloway Raiders

digital edition

Scottish works



CINDERELLA

S.R. CROCKETT

Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

First published in book form in 1901 by James Clarke & Co.

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.

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INTRODUCTION

The novel's title instantly alerts the reader to the origins of this archetypal story, but it is given a thorough working over by Crockett for contemporary readers.

The young Hester Stirling is the victim of a family feud which has seen her father disowned and a local feud between the families of Stirling and Darroch. The opening of the story is somewhat reminiscent of that of 'Jane Eyre,' with Hester being spurned by her cousins. Their out and out cruelty in setting Dick the terrier on the cats and their teasing and disregard for Hester's feelings or wellbeing, immediately alerts the reader to the inequalities within the family.

Cinderella was first published in 1901 by James Clarke & Co, who had also published *Kit Kennedy* in 1899. They were in the market for character driven romances and with *Cinderella*, Crockett does not disappoint. Crockett had six novels published by James Clark over an eight year period. He wrote *The Flower of the Corn* in 1902, and another three Galloway based novels; *The Loves of Miss Anne*, (1904), *Kid McGhie*, (1906) and *Vida*, (1907). These Galloway novels have a common factor: one might term it 'social romance.' All are written from the perspective of the ordinary people and comment upon the social iniquities of the day. The heroes and heroines are of a distinctly domestic variety and the novels are all the better for that.

In *Cinderella*, Hester's father returns briefly in her childhood, having made money in rubies; but events

conspire to make sure that Hester is not going to benefit from this. Unwelcome at the family home, he goes away again. The subsequent death of Hester's grandmother leaves her unscrupulous relatives in charge. Believing her father to have been murdered in Burma, they ensure that she is cheated out of her inheritance. A lot of the story hangs on a bag of rubies. The 'value' of jewels and the problems caused by them runs as a theme throughout the story. It is also the background for much subterfuge.

Due to the machinations of her family, Hester is stuck between classes for much of the novel. And thus we see the influence of class on the individual in the early 20th century. Hester grows up with the servant Megsy Tipperlin, quite happily working for the local minister. While humorously described, it is also clear that this pastoral life is not to last. In Crockett's romances there is always adventure in the form of jeopardy, even if it is domestic jeopardy. For example, only Crockett could turn the dusting of bookshelves into an ironically humorous comment on the nature of social class. But he does. We cannot fail but be amused to discover that the minister cannot retain servants due to the mountain of dusty books he has all over the house. Cleanliness is next to Godliness?

Treated as the poor relation, Hester goes to London more as a servant than a young lady and this causes problems with Carus Darroch, whom she met as a child and who is now the potential love interest for the story. Carus and Hester are clearly made for each other, but of course the path of true love cannot run smoothly. Through them, Crockett illustrates how vast the gap is between the social

classes, and notes that this gap remains even when it has been wrongly constructed by those with agendas of their own.

Like Hester, Felix 'Carus' Darroch has his own family problems. His father is profligate and wants to sell off some of the family land. When Carus refuses, his father threatens to ruin the estate if Carus does not allow the sale to Dr Sylvanus (Hester's uncle) and marry one of Hester's cousins. Thus Crockett shows that both Hester and Carus have to face up to the corrupting influence of money. They also have to deal with the generational impact of class on the individual. Both Sylvanus Torphican and Lord Darroch show the worst side of aspirational and aristocratic lives. Hester and Carus are the natural inheritors but they are held back by the shortcomings and machinations of those in power.

The contrast between the settings of Galloway and London could not be clearer. London is a place where 'class' is what matters and where people live shallow and pointless lives. It is also a place of danger. Hester is arrested and jailed there. The trial takes up several chapters and is as good as anything Dickens writes in the same vein. The tedious workings of the courts are given an added interest with the introduction of exoticism in the form of a variety of 'expert' witnesses.

Neither Hester nor Carus can be comfortable in London; both dream of being back in the rural peace of Galloway. London life is reserved for the likes of the Torphican-Stirling cousins and for people with more shallow concerns. It is both a challenge and something to be endured for Hester and Carus,

giving them the opportunity to find their own, higher values. That Carus 'saves' Hester both in Galloway as a child and London as a young woman, suggests that they will be suitable partners. Of course, society and their families conspire against this natural union.

Showing up the great contrast of 'worlds', it is small wonder that on her original train journey south Hester reflects, 'I am leaving behind me all I love, and I am going to those who will hate and despise me.' The journey from Cairn Edward to St Pancras is much longer than the distance covered. It represents a complete change in lifestyle. While Crockett himself was enthusiastic about railways, he allows many of his characters to show a scepticism for this new fangled mode of travel, and suggests that the ease with which railways connect the two 'worlds' is a double edged sword.

We are, as ever, left in no illusion that at least for Crockett, Galloway is certainly more a place of the heart than London. The natural description of Galloway is as fine in *Cinderella* as always, and as always it is not all pastoral idyll. Rather, we literally feel the harshness of nature; 'Winter bites snell between Moniaive and the Kells range.' This strikes a chord for anyone who has lived in this region of the country, as I have.

The Galloway sections of *Cinderella* are set around Crockett's familiar fictionalised version of Castle Douglas, Cairn Edward. We are also treated to descriptions of Clachan St John (St John's Town of Dalry) and Darroch water, Nether Aird, Ironmannoch and Glencairn water. Crockett fictionalises this wonderful part of Galloway

beautifully, with enough of the reality to be familiar to those who know the region and enough emotion to draw a picture for those who do not; and which surely has them longing to visit. Crockett's natural description is one of his strongest attributes as a writer and *Cinderella* has plenty for the reader to enjoy in this respect.

Life in a small Scottish village pre First World War is admirably described. Megsy Tipperlin, Grumphy Guddlestone and Anders MacQuaker are well drawn characters. We note the idiosyncrasy that in this society people are known by their 'place'; for example a man is simply referred to as 'Ironmannoch' because that is his homestead. This ties the people to the land in an important way and yet is worlds away from the construction of 'titled' connections of the likes of Lord Darroch. The latter implies an ownership of man imposed on nature whereas the former suggests a symbiotic connection between the land and the man who works it. The author, through the narrator, discusses the relation between Scotsmen and their 'names' which shows that it is not just the Highland clan system which has importance for Scottish society. People are of their place, of their family, of their work. That both Hester and Carus feel at home in their 'natural' place, speaks volumes for their characters.

There is commentary on other contemporary issues. Already mentioned, the new railways are considered with some scepticism and fear by certain people. 'Tax' carts and gamekeepers give local flavour while Tibetan prayer wheels and Burmese Ambassadors place this essentially domestic drama into a larger context.

Indeed, there is much more to *Cinderella* than its light fairy tale title suggests. It may not have the depth of some of his more robust novels, being written specifically for a contemporary female romance readership, but it retains his trademark ironic humour and descriptive powers, as well as his ability to look beneath the surface of social class and make comment upon the follies of various people within these classes. Most of this is lost in the silent film version from 1921/1922. *A Lowland Cinderella* (also known as *A Highland Maid*) was an adaptation by Sidney Morgan, starring his daughter Joan. Unlike *The Lilac Sunbonnet*, also produced by Sidney Morgan and Progress Films (in 1922/1923) a copy of the film still exists but bears scant relation to Crockett's work. More information can be found at various online sites including: <https://screenarchive.brighton.ac.uk/detail/8434/> and <https://www2.bfi.org.uk/films-tvpeople/4ce2b6af5490c>

Cally Phillips
(editor, *The Galloway Collection*)

CHAPTER ONE

THE HOUSE OF ARIOLAND

Day broke hopefully over the old house of Arioland. The cock from his high perch on the stable dyke sent a gay challenge across hill and dale. To him in another moment responded his brother down at the Lincolns. Nether Aird on its broomy knowe took up the chime, the sound diminishing as it receded, till that which issued clarion-clear and defiant from the farmyard of Arioland had become delicate as the tinkling of fairy bells ere it reached the dim blue borders of the strath.

Most hopefully of all dawned the day of the 21st of August, 18—, in the little, beating, eager heart of Hester Stirling. Usually she slept on till from the grieve's house she heard the horn blow for breakfast; or she struggled into consciousness as the horses came clattering homeward from their morning spell of work, and was only fully awake when Megsy Tipperlin herself entered with her staid 'Good morning, Miss Hester.' Then she watched Megsy lay a pile of neatly-folded clothes on a chair, and go to the window to draw aside the heavy curtain.

But this morning Hester had seen the earliest rooks rise clamorous from beneath the black umbrellas of the tall trees beyond the shrubbery. She had opened her window and looked out when the sky was only a bath of cool grey mist, and no man was yet abroad.

For, long expected, vehemently desired, her

cousins were coming from the city, all four of them, Ethel and Vic and Claudia, girls older than herself, and with them (quantity deliciously unknown!) a boy — a real boy in trousers — Thomas Alistair Torphichan, of whom, ever since she could remember, Hester had thought as the bravest, noblest, and altogether most exalted being in the world. From the time when Megsy Tipperlin still carried her over the burns and up the steep places 'Cousin Tom' had shone steady as a star in the tremulous, imaginative, eager heart of the little girl. And today, at last, she was to see him in the flesh.

But before we proceed I must tell something more of Arioland and of Hester Stirling.

The house of Arioland was a pleasant place to dwell in. A heathery hill, that just stopped short of being a mountain, rose behind it, where you could get lost among the tall ling and brown bent grasses; a broad sweep of strath spread below, through which, now blue, now grey, now flashing silver, a dimpling river ran over gravel that talked and sand that only soughed and whispered. Then at the front door of Arioland the wonderful brass knocker hung, shaped after the fashion of a lion's head, not to be touched save by Her Grace, when she came to call on Hester's grandmother; or Megsy Tipperlin, when for the best part of an hour on Saturday forenoons she stood on a chair and breathed upon it, painted it grey with paste, and rubbed it bright again with the remote air of a priestess of the mysteries.

For at Arioland no age of gold ever succeeded the iron reign of Megsy Tipperlin. But its grimness was of the outward and apparent only, for the light of humour played about the corners of Megsy's mouth

and lurked in her steadfast grey eye.

Megsy tyrannised over every created thing within the walls of Arioland, from the hens that laid in the 'baulks' to Mistress Stirling herself, the 'auld Leddy o' Arioland,' as she was called in the easy Debrett of the country folks' speech. But Megsy's kingdom stopped at the white wall about the grieve's house.

The farm of Arioland, considered as a thing of fields and acres, was let to one John Gowanlock, a rich man with many farms, who came there but seldom (and that usually in order to institute a little day of judgment). But since Gowanlock was not, Sandy the grieve reigned in his stead, in a full-blown empire, over plowmen, reapers, haymakers, and turnip-singlers. Between all of whom and Megsy Tipperlin there was war open, and with the formalities declared.

For Sandy MacWhutterick's empire, wide as it undoubtedly was, stopped short, even as Megsy's did, at the white wall and low stile. The shrubberies were not his, nor yet the policies beneath. Not his the little park that surrounded the avenue of the Big Hoose o' Arioland with a fringe of green. He was indeed hemmed in on three sides by rival potentates — this redheaded, red-bearded, arrogant Sandy the grieve. There was first of all Megsy, his neighbour to the south, with whom he was at strife as to the water-rights and garden privileges. Then, in the second place, there was the tenant of the Dairy, to whom for a consideration the farmer of Arioland sub-let his wide byres and sleek herd of sixty Ayrshire kine. Colin MacKinstrey was the name of the dairyman, and he was a man out of the North country about whom was growing up a light militia

of strapping sons and well limbed daughters, whose trespasses daily vexed the righteous soul of Sandy the griever.

Then, in the third place, there was his master, John Gowanlock, the one and only. He abode at a distance, truly, yet even upon the farm he had eyes that spied and feet that ran unseen to do his bidding and bring him word again. He had a faculty also for descending upon erring herds and grieves from a gig — as it were, a bolt out of the blue.

But Saunders MacWhutterick (as he called himself) was an exceedingly just man and fear dwelled not in him. For his work was to him as his God—or it may be, since Saunders made no brag of religion, even a little more.

‘The child is not a pretty child. She is brown-skinned like her father, and has her mother’s wide mouth!’

This was the dictum spoken authoritatively by Hester’s aunt as, suddenly grown shy and awkward, that trembling mite stood clutching a corner of her clean pinafore with one hand, while the forefinger of the other went up rustically to the maligned mouth, as if to accentuate its width.

Then as Hester stood a moment, her heart beating wildly within her, her eyes gypsy-dark and gleaming, the tall majestic lady took up the burden of her prophecy, ‘Mother, you spoil the girl — indeed you do. I said so to Sylvanus, my husband, only this morning. Where is Sylvanus? Oh, he has been detained by an important case. He will follow immediately!’

Then turning again to Hester Stirling, she continued, ‘Girl, what is your name? What, no

answer! Do you not hear me speak? And why do you not come and kiss your cousins prettily — have you never been taught so much as that? Ah, this comes of indulging a child for the sake of a good-for-nothing father. In my opinion, that parable of the Prodigal Son has done more harm than all the romances and improper literature that are all too common even in homes which call themselves Christian! I was saying so to Sylvanus only this morning! Oh, your name is Hester, is it? Hester Sybilla Stirling — well, let me see you bow prettily and kiss your cousins!’

Hester did as she was bid, but it was with a sinking at her heart and a sense of being thrown emptily on her own resources. She wanted her grandmother's rustling black silk gown to cling to, or even the corner of Megsy Tipperlin's stuff apron would have been grateful, though that always felt like dry sand between the finger and thumb. But now the cool parlour of Arioland seemed suddenly so wide about her. It made her little legs feel quite tottery. And her cousins were so tall and stood up so stiffly that she thought with hopeless awe how good they must be, and how well taught and obedient to their mother.

Nevertheless, she went staidly over to Ethel the eldest, who in a careless and almost contemptuous manner held down her cheek to her cousin, with the contempt of city fifteen for rustic seven. Then she passed on to Vic, who tried to trip Hester up by thrusting a foot out suddenly in front of her.

‘I must have been mistaken,’ thought Hester, ‘she would never do that on purpose — she is too well brought up.’

Nevertheless, she liked Vic better because she did not even pretend that she wanted to kiss her. But Claudia, the youngest of all, behaved quite differently. She took Hester about the neck and kissed her on the brow, keeping at the same time an eye upon her mother to see that she noticed. She did notice.

‘Ah, that is my own sweet child,’ cried Mrs. Sylvanus Torphichan. ‘Mother, did you see? That girl is a wonder, little more than eleven years of age, and already a member of ten societies. The Association for Feeding Sparrows in Hard Winters was quite grateful to Claudia last year. They gave her a medal. The dear lamb collected subscriptions from all the farmers in the neighbourhood where we went in summer. A few were rude, but eventually all contributed something. Claudia simply would not go away without! She is quite an example to all the neighbourhood. Is she not, Ethel, dear?’

Ethel appeared to be immersed in a brown study, and did not hear her mother.

Suddenly there came a sharp little cry of pain which rang through the parlour of Arioland, and was heard even of Megsy Tipperlin on the stairs, as she was coming up with a tray of cleaned silver.

‘Oh, you hurt!’

It was the voice of Hester Stirling. Her cousin Vic, watching her opportunity, had given the wistfully hesitant little figure a great push against her brother Tom, who on his part instantly boxed her ears, and then stood with arms innocently at his side ready for the turning round of his mother and grandmother. He had been at school two years, and was quite clever at that sort of thing.

'What is the matter?' cried Hester's grandmother, who was busy with the teacups, 'I hope you did not hurt yourselves?'

'Oh, no; it was only that little Hester who was stupid, grandmamma,' explained Ethel Torphichan; 'she stumbled over the hearthrug, and then pretended Vic had pushed her down.'

'I never did, you know,' said Vic stoutly.

'Of course not, my dears — of course not,' Mrs. Torphichan chimed in from the other side of the room, 'well-bred children are quite incapable of such conduct. Are they not, Claudia? Does not Miss Martinett often say so?'

'Yes, mamma,' said Claudia, who answered exactly like a clever mechanical doll whenever her mother put a question to her.

'You did not see anything of this, Claudia?'

'No, mamma — no, indeed, mamma. Victoria never so much as touched the girl — little country silly!'

The tears rose to Hester's eager gypsy eyes, making the darkness in them glitter, and a great, dry, sandy lump rose and hurt in her throat. Yet neither broke. But oh, the aching disappointment, the sharp tooth of pain eating into that small heart which beat under the white pinafore. No mere man can tell of these. For none can remember all the surprised agony when a child's first dream is torn into shreds, when a cherished idol is thrown down from its pedestal and lies shattered before its very eyes.

'Now, children, run and play,' said Mrs. Sylvanus Torphichan, lifting her finger impressively, 'and always remember who sees you. You know who that

is, don't you?'

'Yes, mamma!' the three girls said in decorous chorus. Vic nudged Tom with her elbow when her mother was not looking. Tom giggled audibly.

'Who laughed when I spoke just now?' said the lady, turning rapidly about, as if she worked on a pivot.

All four Torphichans were instantly united. They said nothing, indeed, but only gazed solemnly and reproachfully at Hester, who stood like a culprit, her knees trembling under her. She longed to run to her grandmother, and say, 'Oh, please send them away! I want just you and Megsy Tipperlin!'

But her grandmother was a little deaf, and also she was much fluttered and excited by the coming of her only daughter, whose husband had become so great an Abercairn physician — some said he would be a professor one day, but that was perhaps too much honour to be hoped for in this world.

Very sedately and with their six eyes on the carpet, their six hands primly clasped before them a little above the waist, and their thirty toes carefully turned out, the three girls departed, while Tom sulked in the offing, vainly trying to get a chance to pinch Vic as she passed.

Their mother gazed admiringly after them and pointed out to Mrs. Stirling their manner of leaving a room,

'That is solely due to my instruction,' she said, 'and perhaps a little to being sent early to Miss Martinett's school — in Rutland Square, you know, mother, where only children of the nobility and gentry are allowed! The religious instruction is so thoroughly well attended to and the general tone is

so good, that one does not grudge the very high fees. At least, my dear Sylvanus does not. 'Let them grow up to be models of all the graces and compendia of all virtues, as you are yourself, my love,' he often says. We are so like-minded, Sylvanus and I, and he does express himself so beautifully! I never forget one word he ever says!

She reverted to the subject of Hester, which somehow obtruded itself upon her domestic bliss in an unpleasant manner.

'But, anyway, you must do something with that little girl — she is running altogether wild. What did I tell you, Hester Sybilla? Don't poke your chin, it is bad manners! And don't stand with one shoulder touching your ear, nor wring your hands as if you were at a washing tub, Now I declare, you are picking at your pinafore! Oh, if Miss Martinett only had you for an hour! Did you remember to say your prayers this morning?'

Hester had—she always did say them, supposing that the sky would very promptly have fallen if she had not. But she was becoming hardened to her aunt's pour of questioning, and so refrained from all answer.

'Ah, you are growing up a careless, wicked, regardless girl, I can see that;' her aunt went on. 'Mother, you must trust her to Miss Martinett, for a while at least. We will change all that. Not say your prayers, wicked girl! Do you know who sees us when we do wrong and punishes us?'

'Yes,' blurted out the frightened little girl, and through her unshed tears she added the explanation, 'it is Sandy the grieve!'

Mrs. Sylvanus Torphichan lifted up her hands in

the most pious kind of horror, and made a little clucking sound with her tongue against the roof of her mouth. Speech was denied her, and she could only clutch her reticule and extract therefrom her smelling salts in a red bottle of the size and appearance of a small decanter. Her head fell back, and she had just strength to extract the stopper feebly and wave the open bottle between herself and the small culprit as a kind of fumigatory against infection and blasphemy.

‘Go!’ she gasped, ‘go, wicked girl! Wicked, wicked girl! When dear Sylvanus comes we will consult with your grandmother as to your future! Go, and if you dare to pollute my innocent lambs, remember where you will go to — a Place which I will not so much as mention. In addition to which I shall whip you very severely with my own hands!’

CHAPTER TWO

THE INNOCENT LAMBS

Thus encouraged, Hester Stirling went out to find Mrs. Torphichan's innocent lambs. But the yearning gladness of the morning was gone. The gold had all greyed over. Never had idol been more ruthlessly shattered. Yet this little girl did not cry. One or two tears might have got themselves wiped away at the dark places of the stairs, but I put it to you, if that can be called crying?

When she passed Megsy Tipperlin, she stared her straight in the face, and to the question, 'Where are you going, Hester Stirlin?' she replied, promptly, 'To find my cousins!'

'Foul fa' them!' grumbled Megsy, fervently, as she turned away. For Megsy used no respect of persons, and in particular hated her mistress's daughter, who came, as she believed, to Arioland for the sole purposes of sneaking into the store-cupboards, counting the spoons, and seeing whether Megsy bought more flour and bacon than she could account for.

'May her e'en blear in her heid, the pridefu' madam!' muttered Megsy, as she made crosses and whorls of pattern old as the flood (or older) on the blue whinstone of the kitchen flags, 'her and a' her ill-set weans. They gang tearin' and gilravagin' through ilka thing about the decent hoose o' Arioland. Certes, I wad wheep them a' wi' briar tethers on the bare back, till their skin was in tatters — so I wad. Aye, an' lay it on mysel' —

besoms that they are! Gin they steer or fricht my bairn — I, Margaret Tipperlin, that am a Christian woman, will...'

But at this point Megsy became needlessly particular in her threatenings, so that the faithful chronicler has to look away embarrassed. However, she ended thus — 'Oh, that Maister Davvid had never gane awa — my bonny lad — to leave his wee bit lass to a deaf auld woman (Guid forgie me for speakin' that gate o' a kind mistress!) and the tender mercies o' a pack o' Jezebels an' bletherin' slowbellies! May the Almichty Preserver o' the weedow and orphan tak' them in His ain hand, and daud them wi' the flails o' His wrath — yea, like sheafs on the threshing-floor of Abelmeholah!'

The prayers of Megsy the daughter of Tipperlin were ended.

Hester walked forth to find her cousins almost as sedately as if for years she had dwelled with her aunt Mrs. Torphichan and been a favourite pupil of Miss Augusta Martinett at the corner of Rutland Square in the city of Abercairn.

Perhaps, after all, they would be nicer when she was alone with them. She thought once more of the treasures she had been saving up to show them. Best of all there was Fluffy, the half-Persian kitten, with the languid eyes so full of light and the fascinating way of standing on your shoulder and rubbing ears with you. Then in the High Park there was Peggie the Pet — a lamb of mature years (or rather months) and much elevation of mind. For Peggie, being, despite his name, a gentleman sheep and handsome withal, refused to consort with any of his kind, preferring the society of the sixty dairy

cows herded by the wild MacKinstreys.

As she went Hester heard the sound of her cousins' loud voices proceed from the gardens, and with a heart once more eager to realise some part of her dream she hastened after them.

'Catch her — this way — at her, Dick! You've got her! Hist —good dog! Sick her then!'

The cries grew louder, and Hester, with a wild fear suddenly taking possession of her soul, ran at full speed round the greenhouse, past the sun-dial, and there on the narrow ledge of a fence to which she had sprung from the window-sill of the potting-house stood Fluffy her own Fluffy, every hair on end with pain and anger, and her tail well-nigh as thick as her body. She was mewng piteously and flicking an ear that had been bitten through by the yapping fox-terrier which still leaped and snapped below. A drop or two of blood had distilled down and flecked Fluffy's delicate pearl-coloured fur.

Hester did not hesitate a moment. She dashed through the gooseberry bushes, tearing her dress in several places, in spite of the fact that it was her best, and she had been allowed by Megsy to put it on in honour of her cousins' visit. In a moment she had hurled her small body between Tom and Claudia, who were snapping their fingers and inciting Dick the terrier to yet greater exertions.

Hester held out her arms, and Fluffy, with one glad mew of recognition, leaped into her mistress's bosom and climbed upon her shoulder, from which safe altitude she hissed and 'fuffed' at Dick, who still leaped upward to snap her.

'Cruel — cruel,' she cried, turning furiously upon them, 'to set a great dog on my own little kitten.

Tom, I was going to love you; and I shall never now — no, never, so long as I live, you cruel boy!’

‘Don’t then,’ said Tom, sneeringly, ‘who asked you to? You are only a common little country girl. I wouldn’t be loved by you — not if it were ever so!’

‘A nasty little beast, that scratched my darling Dick’s nose — ugh, the viper! Yes, Dickie, dear, you should worry her all to bits if I had my way!’ said Claudia, who had taken the fox-terrier up in her arms and was petting him. He still struggled vehemently to get at Fluffy, and growled at his mistress when she tried to restrain him, in a manner which showed much more of indignation than affection.

Hester was moving off towards the house with Fluffy in her arms.

‘Now she’s going to tell on us — sneak!’ cried Tom, who was looking for belated gooseberries, and breaking down the bushes with his foot when he failed to find any.

‘She needn’t trouble,’ sneered superior Ethel; ‘mamma would not believe her, anyway; and poor old granny is too deaf to hear!’

‘Papa says she is only a charity child, and has no business to be living here at all,’ was Claudia’s contribution. ‘This estate is to belong to my mother when old granny dies — and she can’t last very long now, pa says!’

‘Let the little rat alone, you!’ was Vic’s more generous contribution, ‘what’s the use of standing nagging at her? Let’s get off to the woods. I mean to have some fun with the young pheasants and things, like we had before. They are ever so tame — we killed four last time we were down. You

remember, Tom?’

‘Rather — and I’m going to hunt rabbits!’ cried Tom, ‘Dick understands all about that. He’s as dead nuts on ’em as if they were cats. Eh, Dick — rabbits, my boy! Look at him, Vic! Let him go, Claudia!’

Come along before we have that crazy little Brown Patch tagging after us again!’

Hester walked into the kitchen with her heart fairly riven in two. She was no tell-tale. She had learned that ‘to be a tale-pyet’ was to sin the ultimate deadly sin. So she only told Megsy Tipperlin that a nasty dog had been trying to worry Fluffy, and begged her to keep her close in the kitchen all that day. Whereat Megsy, with only a characteristic grumble, took the kitten and locked her in the cool cheese-room, a place which Fluffy loved of all others both because there were fine fat mice there and because whenever she found herself shut up, a plentiful saucer of milk was certain to be locked up along with her.

As Hester went out with her heart still sea-working after storm, she came suddenly upon her aunt and her grandmother. They were talking together upon a stone garden seat.

‘Why, Hester,’ said the latter kindly, ‘have you not been able to find your cousins? I saw them going out of the green gate on the road to the wood.’

‘Perhaps she does not wish to be kind to her cousins on the one day they have to spend with her,’ said her aunt. ‘Now, when I was a little girl and any one came to spend a day with me, I used to make them as happy as I could, at whatever cost to myself. But, after all,’ she added, in a tone of regretful meditation, ‘what can you expect of the

child of so bad-hearted a father and so common a mother?’

‘Run away, Hester Sybilla,’ said her grandmother, who had not caught the last part of her daughter’s remarks, ‘you will find your cousins in the woods. Show them all your favourite spots. It is not like you to be selfish!’

For good grandmother Stirling was one of the people who can never see any fault in their own children. And though there was no ardent affection between them, her daughter had pleased her greatly by the wise and prudent marriage she had made, and also by the mannerly and proper way in which she had brought up her family.

Hester followed along the green path resolving that she would not be a selfish girl. Her cousins had certainly seemed unkind, but perhaps she had been over ready to hate them. Her heart, eager and passionate, quick and keen on the chase of love, yearned to forgive. It had never yet been crossed and thrown back on itself by disappointment.

As she proceeded Hester could trace the track of the army of advance by the torn sprays of columbine, the uprooted wayside flowers, the half-ripe rasps plucked and thrown in the dust. But she kept on, with a steady purposefulness. She would be kind to them in spite of all. She would yet win their liking — this love-hungry little Hester. She would show them of her choicest. She would keep nothing selfishly to herself.

Suddenly, with a unanimous yell, they leaped upon her out of the thicket of yews which grew on either side, Tom urging Dick to bark his loudest, and to snap at her heels in a way that sent Hester’s

heart into her mouth.

'Go home,' cried Ethel, 'we don't want you. You are a spy, a spy, do you hear?'

'What do you want following us?' said Claudia, turning up her nose.

'I only wanted to show you my bower,' Hester said, timidly, 'the people here think it is pretty.'

'We don't want to see any bower— nasty, dirty place, I warrant,' said Tom, scornfully. 'We are going to hunt rabbits in the woods over yonder!'

'Oh, please,' said Hester, 'you must not go beyond that fence. Those woods belong to Lord Darroch, and he is so particular!'

'Stuff!' cried Tom, 'what do I care for Lord Darroch? I would like to see him interfere with me. Come on, Vic!'

'Do let me show you the bower instead,' the little girl pleaded, making a last effort to keep her cousins from the dread sacrilege of entering Lord Darroch's covers.

'All right,' cried Vic, who alone of the four seniors showed the least consideration for seven-year-old Hester, 'come on, let me see your bower. It can't take long. The others needn't come if they don't want to!'

'You can go if you like, Vic!' said Tom, striding on, 'I shan't!'

'It's quite near,' said Hester, pleadingly, and without waiting any further reply, she led the way.

The country folk were right. Hester's bower was indeed a pretty place. It had been formed on the top of a little green mound above the Airy burn, just where it came tinkling and sparkling down through dainty linns, sulking in the green gloom of deepest copses, and then breaking away with a 'brattle' of

pebbles over the shallows on its way to join the Darroch water. To this place Hester during several summers had transported rare ferns from every damp crevice in the woods. She had planted flowers, some common like the starry trefoil and Ragged Robin; others more difficult to find, like the lady's slipper or the tall blue flax, pale like a wintry sky. She had trained creepers to grow up the trunks of the trees till the whole place glowed with colour. She was proud of it, proud of the rustic seats which she had arranged with scrupulous care in suitable corners, of her neat shelves for crockery, and of her numerous utensils for 'playing at house.'

But she was not prepared for the burst of laughter with which her pride in the bower was received. Even Vic laughed.

'What a silly old tumble-down pot-shop!' said Tom, kicking away her favourite log, on which she loved to sit and read by herself in the evening. It fell with a plunge into the pool and floated away.

'What a lark,' Tom cried; 'let's chuck 'em all in!'

'Come on, Tom,' said Vic, 'don't be a fool! We've got to get to the woods and back before father comes or there will be proper shins. Leave the kid's rubbish alone!'

Tom was trying to 'skip' on the surface of the pool with the poor bits of coloured pottery which had constituted Hester's best dinner-service. She always wiped them every day with the special duster Megsy Tipperlin had given her. But he might have thrown them all into the water, for all that Hester would have cared at that moment. She stood rooted to the spot till they were gone, and then she waited till she heard the sound of their loud voices die along the

beech avenue and out through the pastures towards Lord Darroch's woods.

Then, with a mighty aching woe in her heart, she threw herself down and buried her face among the torn creepers and desecrated furniture of her most sacred place. Sharp dry sobs came first, shaking her thin little body and heaving her shoulders. These, however, gradually ceased, as the tears gushed forth in a relieving flood and the hot drops scalded the backs of her brown and sunburnt hands.

'Oh, I wish they were dead! — I could kill them — yes, I could kill them every one!' The fierce little voice came in gusts and catches through the vehement sobbing, 'I hate them all — and I wanted to make them so happy!'

CHAPTER THREE

THE BEAST OF DEAD MAN'S POOL

Hester lay a long time thus, without moving. The hot afternoon droned away overhead as the sun swung silently round the sky. I think she sobbed herself to sleep; for it was with a strange sense of being a hundred years old at least that Hester started up. Out of the cool blue dusk of sleep (the sleep of childhood is deep blue, it grows grey and colourless afterwards) she popped up suddenly into a wrecked and desolate world. The reality of things appeared all at once to close in upon Hester with a noise like the whirring of a million wings. She sat up and began picking at a torn spray of the lesser scarlet Indian cress, the common creeper of Galloway cottage walls.

Suddenly, away to the left she heard the noise of shots that went off one after another in the Darroch woods. Hester started to her feet. She remembered how she had heard from the wild MacKinstrey herders that my Lord Darroch was coming down from London that day with a party of shooters. They would find her cousins. They would get 'taken up' for poachers. They would be sent to gaol, and she, Hester Sybilla Stirling, would be blamed for not warning them.

She was determined that, for her own sake, this last should not happen if possible. After what they had done, her cousins might spend their lives in prison. She would never so much as go and see them, She would not give them a single pet rabbit or

the newest of her dolls to play with. But in this matter her grandmother would certainly expect her to look after her cousins, to warn them of their danger.

So, without listening for the repetition of the sounds, she ran across the pastures, from which the cows had already disappeared, by which sign she knew that it must be getting late. The shadows were slanting fast, the sun growing golden yellow and what Hester called 'glimmery' in a kind of rich wine-coloured mist. Thrushes sat on the tops of trees — the young birds practising hard at their triplicate notes and not succeeding very well. For a thrush only sings truly after the frosts of a year have mellowed his voice—which in this way is like a winter-ripened apple.

Hester could not run fast enough with her best shoes on. They had been specially selected that morning by Megsy with a view to discomfort, or so at least Hester imagined. Yet she must get to the Darroch woods before her cousins should be caught and haled to prison. Else her grandmother would never trust her again, and, though she might be selfish, Hester Stirling loved her granny.

So, stooping down and picking up one foot in her hand, she stood like a goose going to sleep, and quickly unloosed the lacing of the shoe. She peeled her thin leg of its stocking. It looked like a white sprout of willow, so long it was for her size and so much paler than her brown hands and face. Then stuffing the stockings well into the toes of the shoes, so that she might not lose them by the way, she tied the long laces together and slung the whole round her neck, after the manner of the wild MacKinstrey

boys when they went bathing in the Darroch Water.

Then she started to run. At the first touch of the cool dewy grass Hester's troubles seemed to vanish. All was delicious to her—the wet coolness, the elastic cushion of the tender blades beneath the bare feet, the wind that pushed against her, as, swift as a deer, she rushed downhill. Then her hair blew out around her and the coolness of the wind clasped itself behind her neck. It was glorious. She forgave them all. She forgave them even on Fluffy's account. It seemed not to matter so much now about the bower. She had lost track of her legs. They seemed to run of their own accord. She felt herself treading on air. She was upborne by the red sunset beams into which she ran.

But the wild rush ended at a dyke which separated the small property of Arioland from the great one of Darroch. It was a tall dyke, built of the rough blue whinstone of the country, and to most children it would have been a formidable undertaking to climb it. But not so to Hester, who had been climbing such fences ever since she could remember.

It took only a brief clamber upwards to get astride the top, her dangling shoes retarding her no little, then a thin lithe figure might have been seen for a moment white against the dusk of the firs, as Hester caught a branch, and swung herself towards the ground with a gesture as true and certain as that of a monkey, or any other arboreal expert. But alas for experts, the tree was an elm, and as is the way of its kind, it proved faithless. The branch snapped, and Hester fell somewhat heavily to the ground.

And the very first step in the woods told her that

she was not now on the cool velvet of the home pastures. A sharp pain caught her in the instep of her foot, then a keener yet, as she put her foot to the ground a second time, to keep from falling. She had hurt her knee against a stone, and a thorn — Hester knew it well, had pierced her bare sole. So, with the instinct of country-bred youth she sank instantly to the ground, and took her wounded foot in her lap. The bruise on the knee did not trouble her for the moment, but the thorn was another matter. She could feel it well enough, but in the dusk of the woods she could not see to pull it out. When at last she screwed up her courage to try, she pulled part of the long black hawthorn spike out, but alas! a piece snapped off and remained nearly level with the skin. Hester's ears sang with the pain and disappointment.

Presently a gun went off much further away, and through the undergrowth she heard the rushing trample of feet, and the yapping of Dick hard on the trail of one of my Lord Darroch's rabbits. They came across the copse, Tom and Dick leading, Victoria with a flushed face careering wildly behind, while Claudia and Ethel, too grown up and ladylike to rush along with the others, followed the chase more leisurely.

Hester stood up on one foot, holding the other, which now pained her very much, in her hand, while she steadied herself against a tree.

'Please help me,' she called out to them, 'I have hurt my foot!'

'It's the Brown Patch,' cried Tom, 'she's been spying on us again! Serve her right! Come on, Vic, Dick's got something good this time!'

And though Hester cried again, 'Please don't go — I have a thorn in my foot; I can't walk home!' they all dashed headlong into the copses again.

Ethel and Claudia passed by without even looking at her, interested, but yet dignified spectators of the sport. The sounds died away down the glade, and Hester sank upon a mossy stump and the tears welled up again freely. She took her shoes from her neck and drew the stocking on her unwounded foot. She dared not move, for she could feel the hedge 'scotchings,' great thorny branches, lying thick on every side of her. It appeared to her, however, that if she could surmount the high wall of the deer-park and get back into the home pastures, she might manage to crawl to Megsy, who seemed now the only friend she had left in all the world.

But the task was too great for her. With the wounded knee and torn foot she could not hoist herself upon the top of the barrier. So, after trying to limp slowly along a little way towards the Lodge Gate of the Darroch avenue, Hester sank to the ground again, and the tears ran more freely than ever. It was not so much pain as a sense of passionate disappointment with things in general, and also some growing fear that she might have to spend the night in the woods if somebody did not speedily come to find her. Of course from a cooler and older point of view this was well-nigh impossible. For the Torphichan children, unkind and selfish though they might be, would certainly, when questioned, tell where they had last seen their cousin. But then such wise considerations did little to quiet the fears of a small girl of seven, with the night growing darker every moment about her and the last red of

the sunset burning itself out between the boles of the pine trees.

Besides, the Darroch woods were haunted — so averred the common gossip of the country-side. Hester knew that one ghost was a white lady with shut eyes, and hands outspread, who played a sort of ghostly blind-man's buff with anyone found after nightfall on her domains. To this the imagination of the MacKinstrey children had added a fearsome beast, with gleaming teeth and fiery eyes, which came up out of the water of the Dead Man's Pool and haled the unwary down to its lair among the roots of the white water-lilies. Kip MacKinstrey swore he had seen the Water Kelpie, and only escaped by climbing a tree. In her present plight, Hester certainly could not climb a tree.

At this moment a stick cracked near at hand, and with a slight cry, Hester looked up, expecting to see the horned head of the water demon, or the outstretched arms of the White Lady of Darroch, with the spectral bony fingers groping about to catch her. There was certainly something creeping along the wall towards her.

At this Hester's sorely-trying little heart now absolutely stood still. Another stick cracked quite close by, and the child's fearful eyes could make out in the deepest dusk of the leaves a moving figure. Could it be the terrible beast of the Dead Man's Pool?

It is easy enough not to be afraid in the daytime, and when there are grown-ups about, but at seven years of age and in the Darroch woods when the night is falling, that is quite another matter.

The Thing was quite close to her now, apparently

crouching in the deepest shadow. A shriek escaped from Hester's trembling lips.

‘Oh, Megsy, Megsy,’ she cried, ‘come and help me! The Beast will get me!’

CHAPTER FOUR

THE RED CROSS KNIGHT

Instantly, at her cry, the beast rose to its feet in the shape of a handsome lad with bared head, about which fair curls crisped tightly. He wore a flannel shirt, very much open at the neck, a rough tweed jacket and knickerbockers, homespun stockings and brown shoes, while his waist was girt with a blue belt.

'Hello, little girl!' he cried, in a tone of great astonishment, 'who are you? And what on earth are you doing here at this time of night?'

'You are not the Beast?' stammered Hester, gazing with all her eyes at this apparition so much less terrible than she had anticipated.

The boy laughed, a cheery careless laugh, which reassured Hester more than an affidavit from the minister of the parish.

'I have often been called so at school,' he explained; 'but which beast do you mean?'

'The beast that lives in the Dead Man's Pool, and eats little boys and girls!' said Hester, gaining courage with every word.

The lad threw back his head in a fresh laugh.

'What larks!' he said, 'to be taken for the Water Kelpie. No, I don't eat little girls. In fact, I don't like 'em! I can't abide girls at all; though little girls are not nearly so bad as the other kind!'

The handsome boy spoke with the healthy intolerance of fourteen. For at that period a colossal ignorance and self-conceit prevents the animal from

knowing that in a few years he will become the abject slave of those same girls whom he now regards as little better than so much superfluous live-stock.

Then all at once he seemed to remember.

'What's your name?' he demanded, sharply, as if Hester had been the last new boy come to school.

'Hester Sybilla Stirling,' answered the little girl. 'I am seven years old.'

'You don't look it — you are so thin and brown. But let me feel—your muscle is not half bad. I suppose you belong to Old-Woman Stirling over at the farm. What are you doing here?'

'I don't belong to 'Old-Woman Stirling at the farm,' retorted Hester indignantly; 'my grandmother is the lady of Arioland!'

'That's the same thing,' said the boy, cheerfully, not taking the least notice of her indignation; 'I wish my governor would buy the old lady out, though I like her, too. I daresay he will when she dies.'

'You are a nasty, horrid boy,' said Hester, kindling, 'My grandmother is not going to die. And I don't believe your father could buy Arioland, anyway!'

'Golly, you are about right there,' the boy said; 'my old man is a sight better at spending the 'gelt' than buying more land with it for his worshipful posterity! But you haven't told me what brought you here?'

Hester felt a strong desire to say, as she had been instructed to do on such occasions by Kip MacKinstry, 'What biznis is that of yours?' which remark Kip considered so particularly witty and effective that he always laughed at it himself.

But she refrained, and answered meekly enough, 'I came to warn my cousins that someone was shooting in my Lord Darroch's woods.'

'Oh!' cried the boy, with a slight change in his tone, 'then it was your beastly cousins who were carving merry Hades out of our covers?'

'I suppose so,' said Hester, trying to make out what he meant; 'they were after the young pheasants. They got four last year!'

'Oh, they did, did they,' cried the youth, with indignation; 'there was a beastly dog with them, too — I heard him. I wish I had got on to them. I bet I would have shifted the lot of them!'

'Don't go, they were here a minute ago,' said Hester, loyally; 'perhaps they will come back.' This she said, knowing that that night the Darroch woods should see her cousins no more.

'I wish they would come back; but what are you doing here? Are you waiting for them?'

'I've hurt my knee, and I've got a thorn in my foot; I can't walk a bit!' said Hester, summing up her troubles in a sentence,

'Jove,' cried the boy, 'why didn't you tell us that sooner. Let's have a look at them. The knee doesn't look much — come out into the open first, though — it's as black as my hat in here!'

'I can't walk, please, it hurts!'

'Nonsense; there, try with my arm.'

He offered that member with an awkwardness which showed that he had as yet had no practice in the art.

Hester did try, but sank down on the ground again with a groan of pain.

'It's no use!' she cried. 'I told you so — I can't

walk a step!

The lad with the curls laid down his gun, leaning it carefully against a tree.

'That's the governor's best double-barrelled Purdie,' he said; 'I mustn't leave it out all night, or I'll get two-and-two are five! Here, get on my back! Give me hold of your wrists and I'll hitch you up in a minute. I've got my pony down at the lodge, to ride home on. I bet I can carry you as far as that. Then we'll have a look at the foot, and ride you home to Old-Woman Stirling as jolly as eggs-a-breaking!'

'You are not to call my grandmother that, or I shall stay here all night,' said Hester, balancing herself, notwithstanding, on her one whole foot and reaching her hands over the boy's shoulders.

'Never mind your grandmother,' cried her companion. 'Now give a hop — as good as you can! One, two, three — GO! Ugh-ugh-ugh! There you are! Stride-legs is jolly, isn't it? Why I could carry you to Jericho! You're no heavier than a blessed ferret! What makes you so lean? Doesn't the old lady feed you well? Got hold of my hair behind? Then grip her for all she is worth. There, at the back of my neck, that's the shot! All set? Order arms! Eyes front! Quick march!'

And leaving his gun leaning against the tree the boy moved off steadily down the hill towards the lodge with Hester on his back, keeping as close to the wall as possible, because there the trees were fewest and the cover less tangled.

'Easy does it,' he said, 'not hurting much, eh? Carry you? I should say so — why, it's no harder than carrying a fellow's dinner. We are quite near Dickson's lodge now. Then we'll have a look at your

prop and send Dickson back for the Purdie. It will do Dickson good. He's as lazy as a hedgehog, anyway. Hitch up, little girl!

Hester 'hitched up' obediently, higher on the boy's shoulder, and clasped both her hands tightly in the thick of his short rearward curls.

'Here we are,' he cried, presently, as a light shone in front of them.

Hester's steed marched straight up to the shut door of a creeper-grown cottage and kicked vigorously. There was the screeching noise of chairs being pushed vehemently back, a child's wail, then one or two quick tootsteps and the door was flung wide open.

'If I dinna break every bane in your body, ye drucken — what — what—the young Maister, is that you, Guid save us! What's that ye hae gotten, Maister Carus?'

The burly figure of Keeper Dickson filled up the entire doorway, and over his shoulder peered the face of his wife, a little white and frightened by the hubbub. For her husband was a standing terror to all poachers within ten miles, and had often been threatened by the rough quarrymen from the Bennan quarries.

'I've found a little girl up by the wall of the deer-park, Dickson,' said the boy, in quite a different tone from that which he had used to Hester, 'she can't walk — got a thorn in her foot I think! Bring a light!'

'I declare it's wee Hester Stirlin' frae the Big Hoose o' Arioland,' cried kindly Mrs. Dickson, 'wi' lassie, what's gotten ye? What were ye doin' in the deer-park at this time o' 'nicht?'

But Hester answered not. She had fainted quietly

away during the last hundred yards. The varied excitements of the day had proved too much for her, and now she was transferred, a little limp dead-weight, into the motherly arms of the keeper's wife.

When she awoke, Dickson was gone, and his wife stood over her with a lamp. She heard her first friend say, 'This way, Mrs. Dickson; now for the old thorn! I see it. I believe I could draw it out with my teeth, if you were to hold the lamp a little lower — so!'

Then with a curious tickling thrill Hester felt warm lips pressed to the sole of her little cold foot. There came a sharp twinge of pain which made her wince, and then all at once, a blessed sense of release.

'It's out, hurrah — all clear! What a whopper! Golly, it's like a cleaning-rod!' she heard the boy cry, as he exhibited something triumphantly between finger and thumb.

'Ye are a clever laddie, Maister Carus,' said Mrs. Dickson, with admiring affection in her voice, 'an' here's my guid man wi' the powny. He'll hae the gun ower his shoulder. Gang ye your ways hame, Maister Carus. They a' will be wild about ye. Dickson will convoy the bairn hame.'

'No, indeed, Mrs. Dickson,' the boy answered, with a certain hard quality in his tone which did not escape the little girl's quick ear, 'There's not a soul about the place cares whether I ever turn up at all — except old Dickson and yourself. I'm going over to Arioland with the girl myself. Besides, I may see those young poachers, and get a chance to give 'em 'what for!'

And so it happened that the square byre yard of

the Farm Town of Arioland was witness of a strange sight.

Like another more famous battle-ground, all Arioland was divided into three parts; the 'Auld Leddy's' domains—better, perhaps, designated by the name of Megsy Tipperlin's; the territories of Sandy the grievie (which consisted of the mill, the barn, the office-houses); and the great farm-yard, which, with its quadrangle of slippery byres, sheltered the wild MacKinstreys, the horde of long-legged lasses and ragged Gallants that herded and raided, and did after their kind with everything that flew or ran or swam, in the heavens above, in the earth beneath, and (when they went 'a-guddling') some way into the waters under the earth.

To this place Tom Torphichan and Vic, his accomplice, had betaken them with their spoil. Their bag for the afternoon, taken in broad daylight, like the sturdy reivers of old, consisted of a respectable mother pheasant which had run to them from under a bush, having remained tame and confiding since feeding time, three or four unfortunate 'cheepers,' which they had knocked over with a stick, two young rabbits, and a grouse with a broken wing that Dick had routed out of a wrack of bramble bushes.

Now it chanced that Tom had too much sense to convey his plunder into the house where his father was now employed in taking supper after his journey. For Dr. Torphichan was far too much of a courtier to quarrel with a man so powerful as my Lord Darroch. Besides, as a man who one day might be the proprietor of a neighbouring, though smaller estate, he would certainly not have permitted his son and daughters to set such a bad example to the

underlings of the farm-yard as to exhibit to them their evil-doing, and share their plunder with them.

So, by the light of a stable lantern Tom and Vic, the latter still brief-skirted from her chasings through the woods after the rabbits, were engaged, with a ring of admiring MacKinstreys for chorus, in fighting their battles over again — not always, it may be, observing due proportion in the exaggeration inseparable from the narration of all exploits of the chase.

'Thirty yards off she was,' cried Tom, holding up the hen pheasant triumphantly by the tail — 'thirty yards, as I'm a living sinner! And I keeled her over the first whack with a stone. Didn't I, Vic?'

'Yes,' chimed in his sister, eager on an achievement of her own, 'and I killed the three young grouse with a stick. The rest wouldn't help a bit — and Tom was off by himself, watching the old keeper!'

'Boys, oh!' said the eldest MacKinstrey, nicknamed the Gled, because of his rapid flight and predatory habits, 'let's gang to the Auld Waa's an' hae' a rare feed. We'll pook them, an' clean them, an' boil them in a pot wi' vegetables, like the gypsies does. Me an' Kip has often done them that way!'

'I ken whaur there's some carrots I could steal!' chimed in Babbety MacKinstrey, eager to take a hand in so promising a ploy.

'An' me lots an' lots o' new pitawties! I'm that wee I can crawl through a hole in the grieve's garden-hedge.'

This was the contribution of the youngest MacKinstrey of all, whose given name of Archibald had been replaced by 'Clip-cloots,' because his

tongue was locally supposed to be of such surpassing sharpness that it could 'cut rags.'

'Give me up those birds and rabbits this instant, you young thieves!'

The interruption was dramatic in its apt suddenness. And the picture itself was a thrilling one. Tom Torphichan, all undismayed, held up the stable lantern at arm's length. Its light showed a handsome boy, of a little less than his own age, leading a piebald pony. His head was thrown back, and his whole mien betokened the two things which Tom hated most in the world, aristocratic pride and a strict attention to personal cleanliness. Tom, elevated on the MacKinstrey manure heap, and surrounded by the wild herders of that ilk, longed with a mighty longing to kick the representative of all that he most abhorred. Tom was by no means a cowardly boy, though at the present time he was passing through the era of cruelty which physiologists tell us is almost inseparable from boys of his age and temperament.

'Who are you, and what business have you with our birds?' quoth Tom the undaunted buccaneer.

By this time he stood alone, save for the faithful Vic. The MacKinstreys had unobtrusively withdrawn themselves at the first sight of their unwonted visitor. They knew Hester's cavalier all too well, and though they hated him no less than Tom Torphichan, they understood that they had not only him to reckon with in any encounter, but the whole established order of things, as represented by gamekeepers, foresters, policemen — and, what was of more immediate weight with them — their father's waist-belt of stout bull's hide, inch-thick, black, and

polished, the shiny suppleness of which was wont to curl round their bare legs with a most convincing solidity of argument.

'I am the Master of Darroch, and these are my father's birds and rabbits,' said the lad at the pony's head, pointing with one hand to the spoil between Tom's feet, 'you killed them on my father's grounds this afternoon, and if you do not give them up I will have you arrested!'

Tom laughed loudly, perhaps more loudly than he would if he had been thoroughly comfortable in his mind.

'The Master of Darroch, indeed,' he sneered, 'well, at any rate, I'll precious soon show you that you are none of my master! If these are your father's property, why don't you come and take them?'

Holding thus by the elder law, Tom put himself into the position of defence approved by the most learned at his school, the Rankeillor Christian Institute — where, as there was no play-ground, pugilism as a branch of education was taught daily behind the playing-sheds.

'I have to take this young lady home to her people,' said the boy with the pony, 'or I should precious soon give you a dashed licking for cheek. But you'd better have all that stuff ready for me when I come back, or I shall have the police after you sharp tomorrow morning!'

'You can't prove it,' cried Tom, 'I defy you to prove we were ever on your old estate. There's nothing worth taking on it anyway. We got all these on my grandmother's property. So put that in your pipe and smoke it!'

Hester's cavalier did not take any notice of these

insults. He only led the pony down the edge of the wall which was furthest from the heaped litter of the farm-yard.

Seeing him (as it appeared) in retreat, Tom tried again to exasperate his enemy.

'If that little Brown Patch who is shamming lame told you, I'll do for her tomorrow morning!' he cried.

The Master of Darroch turned about instantly.

'You dirty little coward,' he cried, all his aristocratic propriety of language instantly gone, 'if you dare lay a finger on the girl, I swear I'll come over and lick you till you can't stand!'

'Cock-a-doodle-doo!' crowed Tom in the darkness, 'come back and do it, my lord-knows-who! Mister Master of mudheaps! Boo-oo-oo!'

It was so dark that Tom felt it was no use putting his thumb to his nose, thrusting out his tongue, or expressing contempt by any of these time-honoured means. But what he could do he did. He brayed like an ass. He gabbled like a goose. He crowed like a cock, and finally, standing on the highest midden heap, he yelled like a wild Indian.

'Come back and get jolly well licked. Mister Master of Darroch!'

CHAPTER FIVE

THE MASTER OF DARROCH

But at the front door of the white-washed mansion of Arioland the eldest son of Lord Darroch met with quite another reception. It was Megsy Tipperlin who opened the door — Megsy, not attired in the white cap of the maidservant — but Megsy in state, who would have boxed your ears if you had called her a maidservant — Megsy, in one of her mistress's cast-off black-lace 'keps,' with beads that glistened and tinkled like the burns which flash on the hills after thunder-rain.

'Preserve us a', what 's this, what's this? Hester, I thocht ye were wi' that ill-set 'hyule,' Tam Torphichan—what's come to my denty? And wha's this that has brocht ye hame? Speak oot, callant, and tell us whaur ye got the wee leddy?'

'I am the son of Lord Darroch,' said the boy, politely, yet all unconsciously speaking as to an inferior. 'I found the little girl behind the wall of our deer park. I think her foot is sprained, as well as hurt with a thorn. But I believe I have got everything out!'

'My lord's son — at this time o' the nicht, an' to bring her dearie back to auld Megsy! The Lord that lo'es the bairn bless ye and the blessing's o' twa auld dune women follow ye, bonny laddie! But what for am I standin' bletherin' here? Megsy Tepperlin, ye maun be gaun doited! Come ben! Come ben!'

A door opened in the hall and a sonorous and commanding voice was heard.

'Tipperlin,' it said, 'did you not hear Mrs. Torphichan ring the bell twice? Come here immediately! And be good enough to shut the outer door, and not waste your mistress's time gossiping there! Who is that you have with you?' Miss Hester, you say — Who is Miss Hester? Oh, yes, I remember, the reputed child of my wife's brother -'

'Reputed child, indeed,' said Megsy, shortly, turning full upon him. 'I wad hae ye ken, Doctor Torphichan, that the bairn is as lawfully begotten an' as weel vouched for as your ain —aye, or maybe better.'

'Hold your tongue, woman!' said Doctor Sylvanus, forgetting for once the suavity of his irreproachable bedside manner, 'you are inclined to be insolent. I will speak to my mother-in-law about dispensing with your services. And bid the youth go away at once. If he is waiting to be paid for bringing the girl home, tell him there is nothing for him!'

'This young gentleman —that there's no ane in a' the countryside to haud a candle to — is the Master o' Darroch, the sole and only son o' my Lord Darroch o' Darroch, Lord Lieutenant o' the County!'

Megsy rang out the boy's titles like a herald. And it was amusing and pitiful to see the instantaneous change that passed across the face of the fashionable physician.

'My dee-ar young gentleman,' he said, with his wife's subscription-collecting intonation, 'I beg ten thousand pardons! The uncertain light — my ignorance of the neighbourhood — the natural irritation of having to deal with a woman so stupid and impossible as Mrs. Stirling's maidservant, whom she will persist in retaining — these must be

my excuses! Permit me to conduct you within. The ladies are in the parlour. Nay, I will take no denial. Let me secure your pony.'

So saying the Doctor came to the door and, with his own large soft hands, he would have fastened the spirited little piebald to the pillar of the porch. But the boy had discovered the old 'loupin' on-ring' which stands close to many old Scottish houses of the bonnet-laird class.

At first the lad had intended to go home at once, but there was nothing at Darroch either to attract him, or to compel him to be home by any stated hour. Besides which he remembered that old Mrs. Stirling had often been kind to him when as a child he used to come across for a feed of the ripe Arioland gooseberries, the like of which were not to be found among all the gay parterres and glass-roofed hot-houses of Darroch.

'Ladies,' said Dr. Torphichan with even more than his usual purring suavity, 'I have the honour of presenting to you the Master of Darroch.'

The two young ladies who were sitting together at the end of the room furthest from the door, tossed their heads and giggled. It seemed so funny to them to hear a schoolboy called 'Master.' But their mother rose in stately fashion and bowed profoundly at the title, while the old lady simply held up her hands in surprise and cried, 'Wi' Carus — what's brocht ye to Arioland so late at e'en? Are ye hungrisome? Do ye want a piece?'

The boy laughed a laugh of remembrance as much at the sound of her voice as at her words.

'No, Mrs. Stirling,' he said, eagerly, 'I don't want a piece tonight, though I can taste the flavour of your

apple jelly yet.'

'Ye shall have a pot home wi' ye, Carus, lad!' broke in the old lady of Arioland.

'I brought home your granddaughter.'

'My Lord,' said Mrs. Torphichan, looking about her to see which of her children was absent, 'it was indeed most thoughtful of you. My poor Victoria is so headstrong and thoughtless. She has such spirits, and I have often warned her not to get lost in the woods. But then I understand that your father's woods are so extensive. I remember being taken over them when I was a young girl, full of life and energy, like my own dear girls now. My Lord, let me present to you my eldest daughter, Ethel — almost a young lady, as you see, and my youngest Claudia, my dear sly puss, as I call her. Dear, dear, how I seem to live my happy childhood over again in these young ones whom a kind Providence hath given me!'

At this Dr. Torphichan smiled and rubbed his hands slowly over each other, as if he had been professionally called in by Providence to assist, and had assumed his best bedside manner in honour of the occasion.

Ethel, who took after her father, gravely bowed, but said nothing, while Claudia, who had more of the nature of her mother, jerked out spitefully, 'Oh, it couldn't have been Vic he brought home. She was up at the dairy-steading with Tom, going over those horrid things they killed in the woods.'

'It was little Hester Stirling whom I found,' said the boy, standing perfectly unembarrassed in the lighted parlour; 'she had hurt her foot climbing the wall of the deer-park, and I brought her home on my pony.'

The old lady had approached silently and taken him by the hand, gazing earnestly into his face. At the boy's words she drew him to her and kissed him on the cheek, an operation to which the Master of Darroch submitted philosophically enough.

'Ye are a kind laddie to bring hame the bairn on your ain beast, Carus, like the Guid Samaritan. Ye dinna favour your faither — na, there's no muckle o' his present Lordship aboot ye. But your mither — aye, ye are a Niddisdale if ever there was ane. And (turn aboot a' wee mair to the licht, that I may see your face) I declare ye are the very moral o' your grandmither, her that is noo Her Grace o' Dalveen!'

'Do you hear, Ethel?' said Claudia, in a loud whisper, 'his father is a lord and his grandmother a duchess?'

And as the good old lady of Arioland moralised she gazed with her short-sighted eyes very near the boy's face, murmuring half aloud and half to herself, 'Aye, it will be a blessed day when he comes into Darroch — a blessed day — God send its speed — and bless his bonny face!'

Then suddenly she hurried away to a door on the opposite side from that by which the lad had been introduced by Dr. Torphichan.

'But what am I thinkin' aboot?' she said, lifting up her black silk skirt and fumbling in a swinging pocket for her gold-rimmed spectacles.

'Where left I my keys, think ye, Sarah? Did ony o' ye see my keys? They are on the gardevin in the dining-room, said ye? Rin an' fetch them, my dauties. What, ye daurna gang in the dark? Sic' silly feared hempies! Rin you then, Carus — ye mind fine where it stands. Often I hae opened it to gie ye a

drink o' currant wine. Ye were fell fond o' that, I weel mind!

'Oh, mother,' cried Mrs. Torphichan, 'do not send his young lordship on such a message. Let me ring for Tipperlin.'

'What, Megsy,' cried the old lady, 'faith, ye hae forgotten wi' a vengeance, Sarah lass! That comes o' bein' sae lang amang the grand folk o' Abercairn. I wad admire to see Megsy Tipperlin's face gin ye rang for her to fetch my iccys aff the garuevin! Rin you, Carus!'

'My mother spoils all her servants,' sighed Mrs. Torphichan, lifting her eyes to the ceiling, with a kind of silent appeal to the higher powers for resignation, as she saw the boy eagerly speed away to bring her mother what she desired.

In a moment he was back, taking the stairs three at a bound.

'I thank ye — I thank ye,' said the old lady, beaming upon Carus through large, round, benevolent glasses; 'noo ye shall see!'

And she walked lightly and daintily to the cupboard, flicked the keys about with a characteristic little flutter till the right one showed itself, and with it opened the door.

Carus involuntarily took a step nearer. He seemed to grow younger as the well-remembered scent came to his nostrils. He forgot the Torphichans. Once more he was a little kilted boy, hot and dusty, come in for a drink of currant wine liberally laced with water, or better still one of Mistress Stirling's 'pieces' of bread and 'jell.'

A cool scent came from the stiff-waisted swinging bunches of lavender and balm beneath which the

old lady's black bugles glittered, as her head shook with the little nervous quiver she had when excited. Within the great parlour cupboard there were shelves on shelves of preserves. Some of last year's candied fruits in wide-mouthed glass jars had still power to make the mouth of the Master of Darroch water. Beneath was honey, blond in comb and clear amber in glass. In the corner some of the latter was being slowly and luxuriously strained through a cloth to clear it of every particle of wax.

Mistress Stirling stood a moment regardant, her head a little to the side.

'Bring the lamp, Carus, that I may see the better,' she commanded. 'There's my guidman's saddle-bags that haena been pitten to ony use since he rade awa to the General Assembly in Edinburgh to gie his vote in the support o' Kirk and State as becam' an elder o' oor National Zion. Ye shall hae them filled to the brim this night, for the peety ye took on a bit lamb that has nane to richt her but twa doited auld women-folk! Na, na, ye shallna refuse Isobel Stirlin' that held the mither o' ye in her airms ten minutes after she was born. And a bonny bit lamb she was — thrown to the wolves — thrown to the ravening wolves — the puir lassie — the puir lassie!'

As the old lady thus meditated she stood with the ancient saddle-bags, which she had rescued from a recess, over her arm — for the store-pantry of the parlour of Arioland would in these degenerate times have made an ample sleeping-room. They said, indeed, that it had formerly been used in the bad old persecuting days as a hiding-place for the laird, its entrance being concealed by a vast sideboard with a sliding back, through which a former Stirling of

Arioland had crawled upon the slightest alarm,

'Reid currant jelly — an' some o' the black! And grosarts — aye, ye were aye fell fond o' grosarts, Carus! An' sugar plooms, that melt in the mooth like honey frae the kame! Will ye hae some o' them, too? Laddie, ye maun tak' tent to your beastie's feet this nicht, or a bonny-like stramash ye will mak' in my guidman's saddle-bags — there — and there!'

The hospitable old lady of Arioland topped oft' with a little parcel of 'dropped scones' which Megsy had made that afternoon on the girdle. Carus was as grateful as any other hungry schoolboy, in spite of his airs where Master Tom Torphichan was concerned.

'You are very good, Mrs. Stirling,' he said; 'the very sight of them makes me hungry. Yes, I am all alone at the Darroch. Only the housekeeper and some servants are with me. I don't often know where my father is. He comes and goes without telling us. But I go back to school in a week, and then it isn't so bad!'

He took the old lady's hand delicately, as his grandmother the Duchess had taught him how when he was little more than a baby, and dropping his bare head with its tight crop of curls, he kissed the old lady's fine fingers. He would have blushed crimson if any of his school-fellows had seen him, and have fought any number of pitched battles over an allusion to the affair. But, somehow, with his grandmother's old friend the ancient and pretty custom came back naturally.

Then he bowed ceremoniously to Mrs. Torphichan and the young ladies, Ethel and Claudia. Victoria was still absent. She had indeed silently opened the

door upon her return, and, seeing that she was observed by no one save her sisters, as silently had 'made a face,' and vanished again.

Dr. Torphichan accompanied the boy to the door with ceremonious politeness, and with a word of farewell Carus rode out into the night. By this time he had forgotten all about Tom's poached game, and did not even turn his pony's head in the direction of the MacKinstrey stronghold, but took the longer and easier road down the avenue.

Tom Torphichan, however, had not forgotten. For at an angle of the drive where the yew trees grow thickest a well-directed rat, some time deceased, and lately resurrected from an unsavoury grave, took Carus on the shoulder and dropped to the ground. He turned angrily, and Mrs. Stirling would not have recognised as his gentle mother's the face he directed towards the unseen Tom.

'You beastly doctor's cub,' he cried, 'wait till I catch you. I'll bang you till you can't stand, you dirty little drug-shop sweep!'

'Yah,' the answer came back, rudely, 'you said that before, and much came of it. You want your game — well — take it; here's some more if you like it!'

And if Felix Carus's piebald pony had not started away at that moment, a cat in a still more gamey condition than the rat might have been added to the varied contents of Mistress Stirling's saddle-bags.

CHAPTER SIX

THE FRONT DOOR BELL RINGS

'Have they truly gone?' was Hester's first question, two days later, as she awoke to find Megsy bending over her, holding her breath, lest she should rouse her too soon.

'Aye, dearie, they are gane. Never ye fret, my lamb — they will never vex ye mair. Megsy will keep ye safe. Foul fa' them that meddled ye — the taid and the ask keep watch on their graves!'

'Megsy, they are my cousins!'

'Aye, Megsy kens brawly, but that is nae faut of yours! Ye couldna help that, dearie! Sit up, then, and tak' bite an' sup o' this fine porridge — grund porridge they are!'

'I don't like porridge, Megsy!'

'Dinna say it, lamb! There never was a true Stirlin' yet that didna sup his porridge like a man. Look at thae crows (i.e.crippled or deformed persons) o' Torpheccans, as they caa' themsels. Deil tak' them for their impidence. No yin o' tham wad let a spunefu' o' guid porridge doon their throats! Wad my braw lamb grow up to be like them, ill-set gorbs o' the world that they are? Tak' the porridge and guid new milk, denty. And ye will grow up sae bonny that they will eat aff their fingers wi' fair spite and jealousy!'

At this, Hester, stung with great desire not to be like any of her cousins, sat up in bed, making only a little 'mouth' as the sore foot twinged, and fell to upon the great basin of porridge Megsy had brought

her. The faithful Megsy's anticipation of her future surpassing beauty did not at this time seem likely to be realised. For Hester Stirling was somewhat pale and 'shilpit' as Megsy expressed it. Her skin had not the whiteness of her cousin Ethel's, or her figure the vigorous robustness of Victoria's. She had not the large regular features and statuesque beauty which belonged to Claudia. But there was a witching something about her, at once wistful and confiding, that drew the hearts of good women to her. Her eyes were dark and brilliant, with the liquid depths of a well seen under trees in them, so that most men, even when passing hurriedly by, would for no reason in particular, turn and look back at the flitting pensive figure of this little girl.

'Noo let me see the bit scart on your foot, darlin', said Megsy, 'hoot-toot! It's juist doin' bonny. Nae mair than a flea-bite. It will never mar ye on your marriage morn, dawtie! There— there!'

So saying, she bound it up again, and began to dress Hester for the day, commenting freely all the while upon the hated Torphichans, with many hopeful anticipations of their evil fortune in this world and the certainty of worse in the next, mixed with comfortable reflections upon how much more beautiful, fortunate, and desirable should be the lot of her pet.

At the very moment when the finishing touches were being put to Hester Stirling's hair, the sound of a cracked bell tinkling forlornly far down in the bowels of the old mansion house was heard.

'Whatever's that?' cried Megsy, startled so that she dropped the comb, 'surely never yin o' thae ill-set blasties come back again? As sure as daith, I'll

look oot o' the wast chaumer window, and gin it should be onything o' the name o' Torpheechan, I'll never steer a bit. Praise to a guid Providence baith doors are lockit and the mistress that deaf, she'll never hear a whush!

'Megsy, you mustn't!' argued Hester, 'some accident may have happened!'

'Nae siccan guid luck,' retorted the implacable Megsy, tying a bow of ribbon under Hester's neck with a jerk.

'Oh, Megsy, you hurt!'

'Dearie, my dearie, let stupit auld Meg kiss it better — there, dawtie! It's better noo. For the moment I declare I thocht ye were a Torpheechan! Oh, but I wad like to hae them to dress and fondle. Wad I no rug the verra hair oot o' their heids — coorse as horse-hair it is — whirl them aboot by their lugs like burnin' teetotums, aye an' never a preen (pin) wad I put intil a band, but they should find the point o't first!'

The tinkle-tank of the cracked bell sounded again ere Megsy had ended her diatribes against all the clan of 'Torpheechan.'

'Plague on the richt hand that poo'ed it!' cried Megsy, 'what mean they by a' that din at nine o'clock in the mornin'? I'll hae to rin to the wast window, or they will wauken the mistress. But if it's a Torpheechan.'

Silence fell upon the little girl's room as the vengeful Megsy's footsteps died down the carpetless passage on her way to the 'wast' window.

Apparently the interrupter of the morning peace of Arioland had not proved to be one of the hated house of Torphichan, for Hester could hear Megsy's

decided tread quicken as she hastily closed the door of the 'wast chaumer' and hurried downstairs. We shall follow her and see who it was she found waiting in the crisp sunlight of that autumn morning.

It was with a tremulous heart and lip and a hasty hand that Megsy Tipperlin opened the great double-leafed front door of Arioland. At ordinary times and for ordinary people she only opened one half. And her procedure in shooting back all the bolts and opening both doors wide to the wall might well have warned those who knew Megsy Tipperlin that someone with remarkable claims to honour stood without.

At first sight it did not seem to be so. The man who faced round to meet the old servant of the Stirlings was about forty years of age. His hair showed early grey under a coarse straw hat such as harvesters wear. He had on a suit of rough tweed well polished by use. The skin of his cheeks and hands was tanned to the dry parchmenty hue which betokens long exposure to a tropical sun.

But all the same there was a set of the head upon the firm shoulders, an air about the way he had of tugging thoughtfully at his long grey moustache, and an assurance of manner in turning to face whoever should open to him, that betokened the man of courage and breeding. There was also a certain lurking irony about the mouth, an occasional downward twitch (as if a humorous reminiscence gave him a speedily checked occasion for mirth), which proved that this early morning visitor to the house of Arioland was a man who could be the best of company to himself.

But the effect of his appearance upon Megsy Tipperlin was remarkable. She flung up her arms and her hands upon his shoulders, all the while continuing to gaze into his face.

'Davvid — Maister Davvid!' she gasped, in the half-whisper which one uses in a chamber of the dead. 'What's this — what's this? Are ye risen frae your restin' grave — or are ye come back in the flesh to your ain wee lass?'

The grave man on the doorstep smiled strangely and wistfully, and his eyes were very like his daughter's when he answered:

'Neither one, nor, as yet, the other, Megsy!' he said, slowly, 'I am come to say a word to my mother!'

'Come in — come your ways in, my laddie. A' thing is as ye left it. Ye will ken never a differ! The chaumers and the parlour and the wee bit room wi' the cages that ye used to keep your birds in a' are the same. It was bonny to hear them sing in the simmer morns. The birdies are dead, but ye will find the cages. I hae keepit them a' snod and clean against your return. I aye said ye wad come back — I aye said it, Maister Davvid. Come ben! Come your ways ben!'

The man shook his head slowly and the humorous look went utterly out of his face.

'I cannot,' he said, 'it is a fine morning as you say, Megsy. I will wait for my mother in the garden, on the stone seat by the sun-dial!'

'Wae's me, Davvid, surely ye hae forgi'en in a' thae weary years! — Surely ye will forgie the dead gin ye wadna forgie the leevin'! Your faither is gane, and as God is my judge he speered for ye kindly afore he gaed awa' on his last journey.

'Have ye heard anything of David, my son?' he said, speakin' grand and slow in the way he had, that became so weel a pillar o' the Kirk.

'Nane but this puir wee bit lass that he gied me hame to keep when his wife was ta'en frae him!' said the mistress. Then he meditated a while, wi' the bridle thrown ower his airm, and me waitin' wi' the stiirup cup as was his custom. 'If it should happen that my son comes back when I am absent, do not turn him away!' quoth he, and sae mounted and rade!

'I am glad,' said the man in the straw hat, with his eyes on the ground, 'but it is not a matter of forgiveness, Megsy, it is the matter of the swearing of an oath. Here, on this doorstep, I stood with my young wife sick and ill on my arm. I was refused admittance by my father. I was cast out like a dog. And here in your hearing and before high heaven and my father's face, I swore never to cross this threshold — and neither on earth nor as it might chance in heaven or hell to change word or greeting with him or acknowledge that man as any kin of mine!'

'I mind — I mind the awesome words!' cried Megsy, 'but oh, Maister Davvid, forgie the dead. For your puir mither's sake. For the sake o' the wee lamb sitting in her bit chair up the stair yonder, dinna haud to a hasty word spoken in anger. Come ben and bless this hoose yince mair wi' the presence o' its only son!'

Again David Stirling shook his head. He had taken off his harvester's hat, and his hair, though still crisp and abundant, was streaked with white.

'You mean well, Megsy,' he said, quietly, still

looking at the dense green of the beech hedge curling its leaves a little edgewise in the northerly breeze, 'but I must keep my word. First be good enough to ask my mother to come to me in the garden, and then, after a while, let me see my little girl!'

CHAPTER SEVEN

HESTER'S FORTUNE

Megsy Tipperlin did not answer him, but turned to go within to her mistress. The visitor also strode away without speaking towards the arch cut in the thickset beech-and-privet hedge which shut off the garden from the gravelled drive by a twenty-foot wall of densest foliage. He lifted a small black bag of the shape accepted of bank clerks for collecting moneys. It was of shiny leather and had a stripe of red and white across it upon either side of the strong handle.

Megsy went up to the bed-chamber of the lady of Arioland. She found Mistress Stirling tying the strings of her black 'kep' with her usual care and circumspection.

'Weel, Megsy,' she began as she caught sight of her old servant in the glass, 'an' how is your bairn this mornin'? Brawly better, I'm in hopes.'

As Megsy did not answer at once her mistress turned about, surprised at her silence. She found her standing as it were fighting for the utterance of words that would not come at all.

'What is't, Megsy, are ye no weel?'

'Maister Davvid is below. Mistress,' the astonishing words came with a rush at last, 'and wad speak wi' ye in the gairden by the sun-dial!'

It seemed as if the old lady would have fallen, but her fifty years of habitual self-repression saved her. She looked Megsy up and down.

'Ye are no wise, Megsy, to speak that gate of yin that has gane to a better place!'

'I kenna about a better place,' said Megsy rallying to find her word doubted, 'but I saw him wi' thae auld e'en gang into the garden among the grosarts no twa minutes since!'

'Then, Megsy,' cried her mistress, 'ye hae seen a spirit!'

'Speerit here — speerit there — speerits dinna carry bags wi' railway tickets on them! Maister Davvid it was in the flesh and withooten ony fail. He wants the favour o' speech wi' you, mem, he says.'

Megsy was on her dignity, as was evident from the title of courtesy she gave her mistress. For Megsy Tipperlin was never polite save when her pride was hurt.

'My son— my only son,' murmured Isobel Stirling, sitting down quietly on the edge of a chair 'to compose herself,' as she would have said, 'can it be His wull that thae auld e'en should again look upon their desire? Shall I indeed see yince mair the laddie that I prayed for to be the well-beloved and the first born. Give Thy handmaiden strength, O Lord!'

At such a time she spoke easily in the manner if not in the language of Scripture, as indeed the worthy Scottish folk of her class and age still do. The next moment, dropping instantly into the vernacular and raising her voice, she turned upon Megsy.

'And if Maister Davvid it be, what were ye thinkin' on, Marget Tipperlin, no to ask him ben to the parlour? Is he no the eldest bairn o' the house, though heavy has been his portion and dulefu' his heritage?'

Megsy set her hands palm down upon her sturdy hips, fingers forward, thumbs behind.

'Hear till her,' she said, ironically (for she was far

past the stage of mere politeness), 'ask Maister Davvid to come ben intil his ain hoose! Ask him yince—ask him twice! Gin I askit him twenty times it is mair like it.

'Mistress Stirlin', I fleeched— I humbled mysel' to him — me that nursed him and brocht him up, me that skelpit him till my bare loof dirled mony an' mony a time, for his saul's guid. An' then ye say to me, 'What for no didna ye ask him ben?'

'Megsy,' said her mistress, 'give me your arm. I am strangely taken. It is as if I had done a sore day's work, and yet I have scarce stirred across the floor. Megsy, come with me to the garden gate. Flyte after, if ye like, but help me now. I am an old woman, and this is my son, my only son!'

And Megsy, easily pacified as well as easily irate, penitently gave her mistress the support of her strong arm. For her sixty years had not a whit abated her natural force, nor yet quelled the fiery temper which in her youth had sent many a suitor to the right about with a flushed cheek and a ringing ear.

'Ye shall come wi' me till I see his back,' said the mother, 'then ye will gang ahint the hedge and pray for your mistress. Oh, Megsy, be kindly wi' me — I am an auld dune woman—and ye kenna what it is to hae a bairn break your heart, for ye never had a bairn, Marget!'

'I'll never be withoot a bairn as lang as I hae you, mistress,' said Megsy, shortly. She had no intention of encouraging her mistress in any such melancholy reflections. 'Davvid is strong and hearty; and see you and fleech wi' him to stop stravagin' ower the earth and bide decently at hame. I'll gang and sort the

bairn. That is the best kind o' prayin' I can do!

Mistress Stirling looked nervously through her gold-rimmed spectacles towards the stone seat by the sundial, as she tottered rather than walked up the gravel between the thinning leaves of the gooseberry bushes.

The sun-dial of Arioland stood in the middle of a green plot. Round it and sheltered by tall trees ran a row of stone benches, and there were pedestals at the end of each for the reception of busts and statues. But probably none had ever occupied them, for the only marks upon the grey stone were those of the green mould from the winter tree-droppings, and the scratches and chippings inflicted by the knives of many generations of boyish Stirlings of Arioland.

When David heard his mother's foot he rose quickly and came to her. She had been leaning heavily upon her stick, partly owing to a faintness about her heart and partly from the loss of Megsy's arm. The action took her son by the throat. His mother was an old woman. He had not thought of that before. It was nearly seven years since he had looked her in the face — indeed, never since that day when, defying her husband for the only time in her life, she had arrived in time to take Hester to her breast out of the arms of her dead mother.

'David— David!' That was all she could say, and then again, after a pause and very tenderly, 'My wee Davie!'

And she bent her head on his breast.

'What for did ye no let your mither ken ye were in life? Was it kind, David?'

Very quietly and tenderly David Stirling led his mother to a seat. She sat down with difficulty, and

pressed her neatly-folded handkerchief to her forehead as if it ached.

'Mother,' he said, speaking very low, yet so that she could hear every word, 'I did not know that my father was dead till six months ago. Then I came home! I had my word to keep till then, you know, mother. I also am a Stirling!'

'I ken, I ken,' said his mother, 'but it's a terrible thing to pass a word in hot bluid and keep it through years cauld and mony. Ye were two headstrong men, your faither and you; and as ye say ye were Stirlings baith, but that is little to your credit. Yet since I married one of your name, I have had to make my reckoning with that. But had ye no pity for the bairn — the bairn ye left me to succour — to me and Megsy?'

She added the last clause that she might be just, for she also (though originally but a Waldron) had the Stirling sense of righteousness.

'That was just what kept me away, mother,' he said. 'I went to make a fortune. Not for myself, God knows — for my life is but a husk without the kernel — nor yet for you, for during your life you have the provision which ought to have gone down to me and my seed after me. But I have made Hester's fortune, mother — enough and to spare! And because there is a great danger before me, I come to put it in your hands. See, mother!'

He lifted the striped black bag from the ground and touched a spring somewhere. The top opened, and as he shifted it nearer to his mother, that she might look, the contents gave out a faint tinkling sound like the highest notes on some fairy piano.

At first the wide gold-rimmed glasses did not

quite get the focus of the contents, but presently, as David Stirling dipped his hand within, his mother saw a glittering array of red stones, a few set, most of them cut, but some, and those the largest, yet in the rough.

‘What are these, David, that ye hae gi'en your life for?’

‘Mother, they are rubies. I discovered, and for six years have worked, a mine among the mountains in North Burmah. It is a thing forbidden — a Government monopoly. But that which a man risks his life for I count his own. I brought these through, though the King had men upon my track. I had two partners, and this is my share, which I have brought to you to keep for me and my little girl.’

‘David, ye are never thinkin' o' gangin' away back to tak' your life in your hands?’

‘Mother, I must,’ he answered. ‘I have two partners who have stood by me like steel. They are there still facing the danger; now I must stand by them. I have put their shares upon the market, and arranged all as they wished it for those whom they left at home. For me I had none but you and this little girl. I do not want to sell at present. These are all pigeon-blood rubies, and will grow in value every year. Besides, with what I have sold on behalf of my partners, here and in Holland, there are more than enough already upon the market. I want you to keep them. Each one of them is inventoried and described. They will one day be my little girl's sufficient dowry. Tomorrow I must start out again. Hitherto we have worked as the old fellows in the Bible used to build their temple, a pick in one hand and a repeating rifle in the other. But now, at last,

there is a chance of a regular concession, and of the Indian Government taking hold. Meantime, my partners — one a Scot, like myself, and the other a Dutchman—are holding the fort, and if they are still living when I get back I expect they will have spent some cartridges!

‘Oh, David, David,’ said his mother, ‘if ye hae ony love for your auld mither dinna gang awi’ again into thae heathen ootland pairts.’

‘Mother, I have promised!’

The Lady of Arioland gave the little helpless gesture of the hands which with her meant finality. A criminal might do the same as he watched the judge lifting the black cap. She had lived too long with Stirlings to attempt to change her son's will when once the word had passed his lips. That she and her son were sitting there, two solitary figures within the high circular wall of the trees, was proof enough that she understood this.

‘And what am I to do wi’ siclike, David?’ she said, abandoning her appeal without another word; ‘they are surely available?’

‘Put them in a safe place, mother — give them to your banker if you like. The papers here’ — as he spoke he turned the bag up a little, so that the bottom showed, and then, moving aside one of the plain brass knobs upon which it rested, an oblong lid dropped on concealed hinges and several papers were seen in a recess.

‘Here,’ he continued, ‘you can show these to your lawyer or your banker. They are quite enough to prove title. My agreement with my partners and the Amsterdam cutter's certificate will be enough to establish pedigree for the cut stones. Then this is

my will, giving them and my share in the mine — if ever that be worth anything — to my little girl!

'David,' said his mother, with a quaver in her voice, 'I am an auld woman, and know not what a day may bring forth. How can I be easy in mind with jewels of price in the house? Give them into a banker's hand yourself, David!'

David Stirling smiled, and patted his mother's arm.

'I would rather trust you, and take the risks,' he said; 'I know no one here whom I could depend on as between man and man, and a corporation has no bowels. Donald Simpson, the lawyer, I know, and he is a righteous man, but he sided with my father, and denied me even the favour of his good word when last I called upon him. The stones are better here in the old house. 'What none kens of, none comes seeking,' as we used to say. Set the bag on a top shelf of your store cupboard in the parlour, mother, and keep the key in your work-basket among the bobbins of coloured silk.'

CHAPTER EIGHT

A MOTHER IN RAMAH

There was the sound of feet moving heavily on the gravelled walk, and the green gate under the arch in the beech hedge clicked sharply.

'Where is granny?' David Stirling heard a clear young voice say, a voice whose tones thrilled him sharply like the first prick of a surgeon's knife, making him bite his lips to keep down a cry.

He rose at the sound, and there, coming towards him up the walk, was Megsy carrying a little girl, who thus in the strong arms of her old nurse seemed much younger than seven years. And if the voice had pricked him, the eyes, dark and lustrous, with the innocent drawing attraction in them that he knew so well, pierced him to the heart.

'Megsy, set me down; I will not be carried like a baby, I can walk now quite well, or if I can't walk I can hirple. Megsy, do you hear?'

The listener smiled a little this time, for if the voice and eyes were another's the words and accent were undoubtedly those of his own race, and David Waldron Stirling, as by a curious back-spang or echo of memory, recognised his own way of addressing his Burmah labourers.

'Then haud up the sair fit, my denty,' said Megsy, lowering the little girl carefully to the ground, but keeping her arm still about hir. 'There noo—hap tentily, if ye will hirple, ye contrairy maisterfu' wee besom!'

Holding one foot crooked up, Hester hopped as

daintily as a robin redbreast to her grandmother's side, without, however, once taking her eyes off the unknown man. For Megsy, though sore tempted by the way, had loyally kept the secret. Her mistress could tell, if she liked, who the visitor was that had so quickly risen at their coming and now stood gazing so raptly at little Hester Stirling. As for herself, she shut her thin lips, and clicked the gate determinedly behind her as she went back to her kitchen.

Then, quite suddenly lifting his head, the stranger asked the little girl sharply, what was the matter with her foot.

'I hurt it climbing the wall of the deer-park, but Carus got the thorn out, and now it is nearly better.'

The tall grave man seemed to quiver anew at the sound of Hester's voice. The fresh, confiding tone of it laid hold of him. It minded him of one who had given up all for love. And it seemed that he looked along the same perilous way which this little one must tread.

'Hester, my bonny,' said her grandmother, 'ken ye wha this is?'

'He is not my father, at any rate!' was the quick, unexpected answer. 'I have prayed for him to come back to me every night.'

'And how do you know that it is not your father?' said David Stirling,

'Because my father is a beautiful young man, with golden hair, and oh, such a bright, glad look in his eyes! There is a portrait of him in the parlour. You can see it when you lift the big box, with 'A Present from Ceylon' on it in pink shells.'

'And am I not a beautiful young man, with a

bright look on my face, Hester?' queried David, quietly.

'No, indeed! You are quite old — your hair is grey quite grey, do you know? But I hope you don't mind, for I like you. Your name is not Torphichan, is it?'

'No,' said David, smiling, 'certainly my name is not Torphichan.'

'I thought not,' said Hester, brightly—still, however, holding her grandmother by the black silk of her apron; 'you look kind, and you wouldn't run away and leave me if I took you to see the bower and had hurt my foot — nor set a horrid dog at my dear Fluffy — nor...'

'Did the Torphichans do these things?' said David Stirling, the corners of his mouth losing their humorous look, and the likeness to the portrait of his father in the hall coming out more strongly on his face.

'Hoots — hoots,' said Hester's grandmother, 'dinna be speakin' nonsense. It was but some bairns' disagreement aniang themsel's. I'm sure baith Ethel and Claudia said what a guid kind bairn ye were. So dinna speak ony ill o' them that spak weel o' you!'

'I won't, granny. But all the same it is true.'

'Hester, this is your father!'

'No, no, he is not my father!'

'Why will you not have me for a father?' said David, gravely, to Hester.

'Because my real father is to come in a coach and six when all my cousins are here, and take granny and me and Megsy away right before them. He is to sit on the box and me beside him, and I will wave my hand and say, 'The grieve's cart will be round for you in half an hour! Sorry you can't come with us!'

Good-bye!’

‘Well,’ said David, ‘I am sorry that I did not come with a coach and six. But just the same, I am your father!’

Tears rose in Hester's eyes, and a little sob came into her throat.

‘What,’ he said, ‘are you disappointed? Do you not like me?’

‘Oh, it's not that,’ she answered. ‘I like you — yes, very much. But it's not the least like what I thought it would be.’

‘Then you expected me to come?’

‘Oh, yes,’ said Hester, drying her tears, and smiling up at him confidently. ‘Megsy would never let me say so without snapping me up. But I always knew you would come back!’

‘Well, now that I am here, will you come and give me a kiss?’

‘I can't come —'cause I have a sore foot. You must come and get it.’

‘It was well worth coming for, Hester!’ said David, after the operation was complete, ‘and indeed I have come a great deal farther than that for it.’

‘How far?’

‘Roughly, about seven thousand miles,’ said David.

‘That is farther than to Edinburgh, isn't it?’

‘Ever so much farther!’

‘And what did you bring me all that way?’ was Hester's next question.

‘This!’ said David, lifting the bag with the red and white stripes across it.

‘It isn't very pretty. How heavy it is! Can I have it to play with?’

'You can when you grow up. In the meanwhile your grandmother will keep it for you.'

'Let me see what is in it!'

Hester's eyes began to glow. She had a vision of marvels unspeakable, and she was definitely disappointed when she saw only what seemed rather smallish bits of red glass, and some not nearly so bright as glass. She was sure that if she could get a piece of the window through which the sun shone into the Kirk of St. John on Sunday mornings it would be far prettier. Still, Hester was a polite little girl and would not say so to hurt anyone's feelings.

'They are lovely, indeed!' she said, putting her hand within, and letting a handful trickle through between her fingers. 'How cool they are, and how they tickle as they drop!'

'Yes, Hester,' said her father, smiling. 'Many people have an itching palm for just such little bright things as these.'

'Can I have just one?'

Her father took a large bright ruby and gave it to Hester. It was set in a kind of clasp or necklace of gold, very curious in workmanship.

'David, ye mauna, the bairn will lose it!' cried his mother.

'Well, let her!' said her father, 'there are all the others.'

'Are those in the bag red beads?' queried Hester, selecting two or three and looking for the holes. 'I would like to string them.'

'They are not for stringing,' said her father. 'You must grow up, I am afraid, before you understand what they are good for.'

Very reluctantly, Hester let the stones trickle back

into the bag and withdrew her hand. David shut the catch with a snap.

'It is very heavy,' said Hester, trying valiantly to lift it.

'That is the bag, not the pretty stones,' said her father. 'It is made of steel and covered with leather. Would you like to see how it opens?'

So, sitting there on the stone seat with the old lady's cap keeping up a constant stir of tremulousness and the precious stones tinkling pleasantly between them, David Stirling showed his heiress how to unfasten the secret catch which allowed the key to work, and (what took much longer) how with a peculiar circular movement to cause the false bottom to turn back upon its hinges. The papers fell out, and Hester stooped to pick them up.

'These are not so pretty as the stones,' she said to her father. 'Why do you keep them together?'

'Because they belong to each other,' said her father.

'Yes, I know,' said Hester, brightly, for her success with the movements of the bag had raised her spirits; 'like you belong to me and I belong to grandmother — and Megsy!'

So they sat there hour after hour till the sun had mounted to the zenith, and Megsy Tipperlin, with a strange look on her face, brought out a tray of silver, old-fashioned in pattern, but with the silversmith's polish yet upon it. It was covered with bread, sandwiches, scones, butter, and cheese. Next she set a decanter down with a flourish.

She deposited them beside David Stirling respectfully, and drew back a little. He began to

shake his head.

'They are my ain,' said the old maid with a certain dignity; 'they were bocht for the plenishin' o' Margaret Tipperlin's hoose. And they were set aside when — that happened which happened. They hae never been used since, neither silver nor glass. Nae hands hae touched them but mine. Will you deign to taste, Davvid Stirling?'

'Since you dare me like that, Megsy,' said Hester's father, filling a glass, 'I have no choice. I drink your health, Megsy—and yours, mother — and yours, little one. Grow up quickly and get ready to play with your pretty red stones.'

In this fashion David Stirling ate and drank outside his father's house, over the threshold of which he had sworn never to set his foot. His mother laid a shaking hand a little furtively on the back of his as it rested on his knee, and Hester looked at them both with curious eyes.

In after years she never forgot how the sunlight lay on the grass, and how towards noon the image of the tall sun-dial shortened till it seemed no more than a blue-black splash on the grass, as if somebody had spilled ink there and forgotten to wipe it up.

At last David Stirling stood ready to depart. He looked about for his straw hat. It lay some distance away, where it had fallen when he went forward to greet his mother. Hester's quick eye caught his desire.

'I can fetch it!' she cried; 'see me hop!'

And sure enough she was back in a moment with the hat in her hand. She put it on his head, as he bent his body to receive it.

'I think you are my father now,' she said; 'you have a nice-shaped head!'

'Good-bye for the present, little one!' he said, kissing her tenderly.

'You are going?' she cried. 'But you will come back again tomorrow.'

'It may not be quite tomorrow,' said David Stirling, smiling gravely upon her; 'but some day I will come back!'

He turned to his mother, who had also risen.

'My son — my only son!' she said, as she put down her head on his shoulder.

'Mother!' said David.

'Dinna gang and leave this auld hoose desolate, David. Bide—bide a wee.'

'I cannot, mother; my word — the word of a Stirling.'

'Bide for the bairn's sake — for the sake o' —ye mind wha!'

'I know, mother, but now at least I cannot remain in the land where she died for the lack of that which was denied her. I must go! Give me your blessing, mother!'

Then the 'auld leddy' of Arioland lifted up her voice and wept, like one of those mothers in Ramah, who would not be comforted, because their children were not. And this was her firstborn son.

Little Hester, forgetting her lame foot, stood up and tugged at her grandmother's gown.

'Grandma — grandma, what for do ye greet?' she cried, breaking into dialect at the sound of her friend's distress. 'I'll gie ye my dolly, my best dolly, if ye winna greet. I'll gie ye Fluffy. I'll never play at mud pies on Sabbaths, but sit in a chair an' read a

book. Only dinna greet, granny, I canna bear ye to greet. If ye greet Hester will greet too! How will ye like that?’

But the old woman did not hear her. She only lifted up her head, and with her hands upon her son's shoulders, and looking into his face, she gave him the benediction Aaronic, sanctified by generations of use in Scottish homes, whence sons and daughters go forth alone into the world of unknown things.

‘The Lord bless thee and keep thee. The Lord make His face shine upon thee and be gracious unto thee. The Lord lift up His countenance upon thee, and give thee peace.’

Thus departed, with a mother's blessing on his head, the son who had last gone forth from Arioland bearing the weight of a father's curse.

CHAPTER NINE

MEGSY'S ROMANCE

It was in Megsy's clean-scoured kitchen, and that lady was washing her dishes and polishing her private store of silver. She had just begun to give a wholly superfluous rub to the salver on which she had taken out refreshments to the Stirling who would not so much as enter the house of his fathers, when a knock came to the back door. Megsy had heard the step upon the brae which heralded the summons. She breathed upon a doubtful spot before she replied, without moving or looking up, 'Come in, Anders! If ye hae brocht ony mair o' your nesty fish wi' ye, ye can e'en clean them yoursel!' For Megsy Tipperlin has as muckle as she can do without thumbing a' the afternoon at slaistery fish!

'They're guid loch trout, Megsy,' said a voice at the door, 'and my feet are clean. Can I no come ben?'

'Let me see!' quoth, uncompromisingly, the mistress of the lower parts of the house of Arioland. 'Ow aye, I daresay ye can come ben; but tak' your great wheelbarrows o' boots aff, and leave them oot there by at the door cheek. Ye'll no be nair the waur o' sittin' a while in your stockin' soles, at a decent woman's fireside!'

'Ah, Megsy, gin I had my will o't ye should be sittin' caigily at mine!'

There was an interval filled with external sounds of struggle and stress. Then a ruddy-faced grey-headed man entered, walking softly on his stocking

feet like one who takes heed to his going. This was Anders MacQuaker, fisherman, authority on sport, busker of flies, general gossip and 'everybody's body'—throughout all the Strath of Ken, and even unto Luce Bay, and the uttermost parts of Minnigaff.

'What's that ye say, Anders?' cried Megsy from the depths of the cheese-room. She had by no means waited to receive her guest, but went on with her work without so much as lifting an eye in the direction of the door.

'I was sayin,' Megsy, that my heart was set on ye to siccan a degree that.'

'Then if it's no frettin' ye — ye can juist keep it set for five meenites mair till I feed the hens!' said Megsy, unfeelingly, as she passed out with a great bowl of 'daich' or freshly-stirred meal and water, for her beloved fowls. They were well-bred hens, too, and never attempted to cross the clean-scoured step of Arioland back door. And the fear of Megsy's dishclout even kept them on the other side of a certain unmarked but faithfully observed boundary-line, which was drawn from the corner of the front door gravel about the flower-beds, concluding at the kitchen window. Beyond this scientific frontier Megsy's happy flock had scope and freedom limitless, and they were duly fed twice a day to teach them to bide at hame, and never lay away, like common uncovenanted chuckies.

'And ye were remarkin', Anders, when I gaed oot?'

Upon her return Megsy thus encouraged her visitor to proceed so soon as she had dusted the 'daich' from her hands, and got down the bake-board in order to begin the yet more important operation of 'baking the cake.'

Now there is no prettier sight than this to be seen in Galloway, hardly even a blanket washing when coats are kilted for the tramping, when the sun deepens the colour on rosy cheeks, and well-shaped ankles shine white as the flashing heels of Mercury himself.

Many promising courtships begin this way. And a pretty girl certainly looks her prettiest with arms bared well-nigh to the shoulder, while the to-and-fro movement of the roller on the bake-board brings out all the most fascinating graces of movement and play of dimpled elbow.

'Rap! Rap! Rap! Rap!' It comes to the ear in varied keys of sound, dull and sharp, according to the thickness of the dough beneath. At intervals a hand showers a delicate top-dressing of flour with a twist of the wrist much admired by connoisseurs, and indeed worthy of being noted by all. This is generally accompanied by a smile at the attendant youth, so he be a worthy one and deserving of having trouble taken with him. Immediately after this the cakes need attending to. They have already been removed from the round iron girdle which hangs over the clear fire, a fire gentle, mild, and insinuating, no roisterous flame, but a 'griesoch' rather, mellow and mellowing all about it.

The same pretty hands, the flour being touched away with the corner of snowy apron, now take the oaten cakes and turn them at the side of the fire, setting each at the proper angle to get the best of the heat, so that it may come forth a worthy cake, light in the mouth, crisp to the tooth, and much to be desired as fare fit for the gods! After this, such knitting of brows — such poisonings of head to decide

whether the fortunate cake be ready or not! Then — almost as if it were a theft, sweet and pardonable as that other which (in intent) has been in the young man's head for the last quarter of an hour, the least crumb is broken off the corner — follows a flash of white teeth as it is tested, and the rest offered to the worthy observer.

At this point the youth, if he have in him any manhood, or the adventurous spirit which makes its way with maids even in staid Galloway, slides off the corner of the table, and — but let all those who have assisted at such bakings of the cake recall to themselves what happens then. There be heads grey and heads white and heads (alas, that ever it should be so!) already growing thin or shiny a-top whose locks were once like the raven. There be hearts which once bounded fiery as barbs under the snowy baking-apron, that are now covered by the staid dove's grey of the 'old maid,' or oftener still by the widow's plain black—yet neither head nor heart hath ever forgotten the baking of the cake, nor yet that tell-tale print of a small floury hand upon a shoulder, on account of which, issuing forth, the favoured swain endured not all unwillingly his comrades' envious laughter.

Not thus, however, but quite otherwise was the baking of Megsy, and if that resourceful lady called to mind other bakings across the years, nothing of the remembrance showed on her large and steadfast face.

Anders the fisherman set him purposefully down by a large basin, which he brought softly from a little pantry, whose shelves were of the purple Parton slate, beautifully spotted and splashed with

green. Into this he proceeded to 'clean' the fish he had brought. Large and fine loch trout they were, even as he had said, speckled and freckled with orange and saffron, and their sleek firm sides yet shining from the wet bracken in which they had been wrapped.

Anders MacQuaker cleaned awhile in silence, while the purposeful dunt-dunt of Megsy's roller of wood on the bake-board alone broke the silence.

'Ye had better oot wi' it, and get it by for the nicht, Anders!' said the baker of cakes, presently; 'ye hae come to do it, I can see!'

'Ye are richt, Megsy, it wad maybe be as weel!' responded, with equal sobriety, the cleaner of fish, sticking to his task.

'Weel than!' said Megsy, like one definitely expectant, lifting her roller so that it stood up on end, in order with short taps to shake off the superfluous meal.

'Hae ye thocht ower what I said to ye the last time I was here, Megsy?' said Anders, swiftly and scientifically running his sharp and crooked knife along the trout's white under-edge.

'And what was that?'

Megsy's question came out sharp as a warning whip cracked close to the ear of a misbehaving horse.

'Margaret Tipperlin,' said the fisherman, solemnly, 'maybes ye think because I am a bit o' a sportin' character, and no juist what ye wad caa' a tradesman brocht up to ony particular trade, that ye can lichtly me! I'm no reminding ye that ye didna think sae yince. We'll let that flea stick to the wa!'

'Ye had better!' put in Megsy, warningly, her

elbows working over the bake-board like the cylinders of twin-engines, 'your health is no that guid, that I ken o'!

'But, Megsy,' said Anders, ignoring her warning, or, rather, dodging about it like a boy playing at 'tig' with his fellows, 'ye maun mind that though I hae been a kind o' sportin' character a' my life, nae man, landlord, nor magistrate, has ever had a word to say against me. And that's a deal to claim for a man that is as fond o' the tin and the fur and the feather as Anders MacQuaker o' the Clachan o' Sant John!

'Mair nor that, Megsy. I may tak' a dram — but what the waur am I? Did ony man ever see Anders mistak' the breadth o' the road for the length o't? And if I be no tradesman o' ony ae trade, I can put my hand to mair trades than ony man in the country

"Maister o' nane," says you. Maybe, Megsy — but they hae keepit me weel pit on and weel provided wi' stieve belly-timber for mair years than I like to mention when I am on this errant. (Hae ye a muckle plate to pit this next half dizzen troots on, Megsy? Thank ye!) Thae half-trades o' mine hae biggit me a hoose, and I might say, if that were the maitter o' a boast, that they hae made me an officer o' the kirk. Was there ever sic a thing kenned as that a man like me, a watcher by waters ta stop the black fishin', an orra man at a' jobs, a bee-skep maker, a mender o' auld pots and pans, should yet hae a slated hoose o' his ain and be made officer o' the kirk? And a' that, Megsy, I hae dune for your sake. But the hoose is juist terrible lonesome, Megsy, wantin' you. And even buskin' salmon huiks is no to be caa'ed ony real compensation to a thin kin' man!

'Sae for the last time I ask ye, Megsy, will ye no gie the auld leddy in your warnin'? I need ye mair nor her! She has gotten a dochter to gang to, and they say she 's failin', that she 's no lang for this warl' ony way!'

There was silence again as Megsv put the finishing touches to her hatch. Then, without the least sign that she had heard, she erected the roller again, and with a flexible knife kept for the purpose she striped the firmly adherent dough from the smooth rotundity of her pin. This being done to her satisfaction she turned upon her suitor.

'Hae ye dune?' she asked.

'Aye!' said Anders, selecting a fresh trout with a mournful countenance, as if he had spoken indeed to relieve his mind, but without any real hope of success.

'Is a' said that ye cam' to say?'

'A' is said, Megsy.'

'Then, listen!'

For the first time Megsy Tipperlin turned fairly round towards Anders, who, however, went on slitting up his trout and disembowelling them with the same indescribably technical motion of the thumb he had been using. 'First and foremost, it is gi'en to me to say that it wad far better become a man o' your years and an officer o' the kirk to be thinkin' on your latter end, and, as it were, makin' your peace wi' your Maker for being sae conceited about yoursel'! Did you no hear the minister say, last Sabbath nae farther gane, that sinful pride was the unpardonable sin. Aweel, he said sae, whether ye heard it or no. I ken noo what for the kirk officer's seat is higher in the back than a' the rest!'

'I wasna sleepin', Megsy,' Anders answered without heat, 'it micht hae been, but as a maitter o' fact it wasna!'

'Weel, in the second place (fegs, I think I could preach no that ill a sermon mysel'), let me bring to your remembrance that yince near on to forty year since, ye speered Marget Tipperlin afore. She was Marget Tipperlin then and she is Marget Tipperlin noo. But she was young and foolish then. She is neither yin nor yet the ither noo. And the silly hizzy promised to be your wife, and there was a copybook lang burnt to ash wi' a page in it a' scrawled ower wi' the words, 'Margaret MacQuaker, her book!' For the foolish lass wanted to see hoo the name wad look. She was young, though, in thae auld days, but she had a lovin' heart, though the lass was never what ye wad caa' bonny. For though mony a time ye telled her that she was, Anders, she never fairly believed ye. And that maybe was the savin' o' the bit lass.

'Be that as it may, there cam' a bonnier in your road. Aye, Anders MacQuaker — aye, I do her that justice! She was far bonnier nor me. I name no her name. I speak nae ill o' the dead. She was a woman bonny to look upon! God rest her soul!'

'Amen!' said Anders, and the tear was in his eye, though that did not prevent him squinting as critically as ever a-long the belly of the next fish.

'Yet a' the time ye were trysted to me, and ye cam' to see me — first every second nicht, then every third, and then yince a week, slower and slower like a mill-wheel stoppin', till last o' a' the countryside I heard where it was ye spent the rest o' your forenichts. Then I heard that names were to be cried in the kirk on Sabbath, and they telled me to bide

awa'. But I gaed, for I trusted ye, Anders, and I kenned nae ill that I had dune ye! Then I heard the name that I wrote on the copy book, the name that should hae been my ain, cried wi' purpose o' marriage to anither lass.'

'Oh, Marget, woman, woman,' groaned Anders, now cut to the quick, 'is forty year no lang enough? Will ye no let that suffice?'

'For a man — aye,' said Megsy, sternly, standing her ground, and looking steadily at the suitor before her. At last Anders dropped fish and knife together, letting the latter fall on the floor with a ringing clatter — 'it is ower lang for a man — forty months, aye, or forty weeks serve a man to forget in. But never a woman that has been slighted and lichtlied as Marget Tipperlin was slighted and made licht o' before a' the parish o' Sant John!'

'Then ye winna come, Megsy? The slated hoose is to stand lonely yet?'

'Neither now nor ever, Anders. Ye shall never hae the chance to serve the auld woman as ye served the young! The copy-book is gane to the winds and sae is the silly young lass that yince on a day wrote doon 'Marget MacQuaker' in it! Gang your ways, Anders. Ye come on a fule's errand! Never let me hear the like oot o' your mouth again!'

The fisherman rose without a word, and went out upon his stocking feet to where he had left his boots. The trout were neatly arranged on the table, laid out upon a couple of clean platters.

From the window, Megsy watched his retreating figure down the avenue, till it grew faint and fainter, and then vanished. There was a smile upon her lips. That was obvious to all. And if you had looked

closer, you might have seen something like a tear in her eye.

'I hae settled Anders this time, for guid an' a', I'm thinkin'!' she was saying to herself as she clinked the platters of speckled beauties down upon the clean purple coolness of the Parton slate.

All the same, Megsy would have been greatly disappointed if he had not been back within a month with the self-same tale. And so it had been between them for over thirty years.

For Megsy Tipperlin and Anders MacQuaker were in their hearts very good friends, neither bearing any grudge for the things that had been, nor the things that might have been, but were not.

CHAPTER TEN

A HOUSE LEFT DESOLATE

The shiny black bag, with the red and white bands about it, sat for many days among the accumulating products of the Arioland orchard and garden — the neat white pots of red currant jelly, beloved by Carus, the larger dishes of gooseberry preserve, the marmalade, with long amber straws lying across it, accurately cut into lengths, and the more plastic parts deep and rich like cairngorms. After a while it got shoved a little farther back upon the ample shelves, as the autumnal days crept in shorter, and the honeycomb began to arrive. There were no 'sections' in those days — no hives scientifically contrived. The poor bees had perforce to be content with their straw-built tenement, labouring late and early to fill it to the utmost peak.

This would have pleased them well enough, but alas, one autumn night when the winds were still, or only blew up the strath with a kind of sucking breath, there came Anders MacQuaker with reek of burning sulphur. And the next day, lo! the black bag with the bands was pushed yet farther back, as combs of rich honey, ridged and shaped to the convolutions of the 'skep,' were laid upon each other like huge piled toadstools. The whole house was scented with the 'straining' of amber honey as the nets of gauze, swung between the backs of chairs dripped their slow-running silent-falling freight into the appointed jars of clear glass.

The farthest back, and the nearest to the striped

bag were the 'firstings,' the combs of the springtime, delicately green, as if the bees had extracted some of the mounting sap. These pots seemed to be fragrant with a faint, far-away wild-wood breath of crocus and wind flower, and the blowing heads of Lent lilies. The next were of fuller flavour — alternately amber and tawny, from the clover of pasture-fields, over which the soft winds of June had blown through the short and merciful nights. Then, golden-brown as the pools where the salmon sulk waiting for the floods that they may leap upward, arrived the first heather honey, product of the purple ling, which clothed the sides of the Bennan and gleamed afar upon Ben Gairn.

Last of all, keen-scented as wood smoke, yet with a tang to it like nothing else in the world, most precious conserve of leagues of the true heather, wine-red and glorious, were Hester's favourite dark-brown combs, through which the knife cuts clean and luscious, revealing the scented essence which the bees carried while the shots were cracking and the grouse falling over the leagues of moorland. There was most of this, for that was the best vintage which the Master of the Bees had kept to the last. The hives for the heather-honey had been carried in jolting carts up to the purple sides of the Black Craig, and there left — a busy little colony — to their own resources, till the heather browned and grew dry and rustling as silver-shakers in the keen winds of the moorland.

And ever the striped bag was pushed farther and farther back, till none remembered it save the mistress of the house of Arioland, and she only occasionally, and that she might put the thought of

it from her for a season.

For it lay upon her like a weight that she should be required to drive down the long valley to the station, wait till the bustling train came snorting over the Stroan viaduct, soughing out of the Big Cutting and silently approaching over the padded levels of Mossdale, till at last the engine shoved a black inquisitive forehead under the high arched bridge and, with a hush and creaking of brakes, the train slid alongside the little flower-girt platform.

Good Mistress Stirling did not like the railway, or indeed anything that went at one particular time. She resented the haste with which the train passes spots desirable to be looked upon, farms that ought to be leisurely gossiped about. What right had its snorting fussiness to intrude upon the cud-chewing kine and send them flying with tails in the air? It was bound to be bad for the milk, and might one day bring a judgment upon the country.

'It wasna sae in my young days,' she would object, 'there were nane o' thae nasty scraichin' (screeching) machines raging through God's bonny land, startin' ye wi' a tug like pooin' your teeth, and stoppin' ye wi' a dunt-dunt that is like to shake the verra inside oot o' ye! Na, there was but a pillion set across a guid grey horse, and the lad's sturdy waist that ye likit best, and awa' ye set as canty as if a' the warl' was but yae graund Rood Fair!'

'Some folk had nae graund young man's waist to clip their airm about,' Megsy would rejoin, as she snipped out a cover for the next jar with swift-running scissors. 'Na, mistress, in my opeenion the railway is no only a great convenience but an offset to the country. And langsyne some had neither grey

horse nor young man to lippen to for a lift. What did they do?’

‘Do,’ cried her mistress, covering the under surface of the white circle with whiskey and white of egg, to keep the conserve from moulding, ‘what did they do that had nae horse, say ye? Faith, brawly do ye ken what they did, Marget Tipperlin. I mind mysel’ mony a day seeing ye tripping it ower the heather and alang the roads that shone sae green across the muir, bare-fit and bare-leggit, your Sunday coaties kilted to the knee, nane thinking ill o’t! And a lad carrying your single-soled shune that ye were to pit on when ye cam’ to the burn aneath the kirk-yaird wa’! That’s what ye did, Marget, when ye had never a horse to ride on. And I leave it to yersel’, Megsy, to say if ye are ony mair happy wi’ your railways and eengines and trucks, where fowk are penned up like sheep in a ree, then ye were when ye legged it lichtfit ower the heather and dabbled your taes in the Darroch water before ye drew on your stockin’s, wi’ a gleg young lad standin’ ready to buckle your shoon when ye had dune!’

‘Aye, aye, mistress,’ Megsy would take up the running, ‘that as may be, and the days o’ yin’s youth wha can recall? Him-up-yonder (she indicated the Deity with a large and reverent gesture) yince on a time turned back the shadow ten degrees on the sun-dial of Ahaz for the sake o’ guid king Hezekiah. But we dinna read that He ever made a practice o’t! Na, na, mistress, tak’ what we hae and mourn not. For the days o’ yin’s youth wha can recall?’

The last phrase was an overword to Megsy, and with it she pointed many morals.

For all that the Mistress of Arioland cordially

hated going even to the neighbouring town of Drumfern. She put the evil day as far from her as possible. She would go, she had said at first, 'when the berry-time was past,' then 'when she had made the apple jelly,' then 'when a' the honey was strained and a' the libels on the jars.'

Meanwhile, Hester alternately helped and played, happy and content in the high summer days. The foot did not long trouble her, healing, as all sweet child's flesh will, by the first intention—thanks, perhaps most of all to Carus for extracting the thorn and sucking the wound clean.

She played sometimes with the red stone buckle her father had given her. She liked to cover it up among a heap of pebbles and scatter them with her hand till the strange eye looked through. But one day Megsy discovered it built into the wall of a square enclosure of rough stones in which Hester had been playing 'house.' So after that it was kept in Megsy's kist, in the little open locker at the top, along with certain, curiously musty old letters, spools of coloured thread Megsy's Bible (diamond type, bound in red leather, none other of any authority) and the thousand odds and ends that the faithful and cross-grained servitor of Arioland had picked up during her long life.

Then there arrived a black day to that house.

Hester came flying downstairs one morning to find Megsy in the kitchen emptying out the tea-leaves by the side of the old well.

'Oh, Megsy, Megsy, grandmother will not speak to me this morning! Come quick, Megsy!'

And very swiftly and with a fluttering heart Megsy went and found her mistress turned on her side,

and the red light of the winter sun shining full upon her. Her eyes were open and her colour bright. She seemed about to speak, and from the gladness on her face it seemed to be of something that pleased her well.

‘Come awa', bairn,’ said Marget, ‘all is weel wi' the mistress. She has seen the Vision! But, oh, what's to come o' us.’

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE MOURNING OF THE TORPHICHANS

After that fell the days of darkness, and they were many. For the Torphichans filled the house. Black silk rustled, hammers tick-tacked, and the whole world seemed swathed in crape. Mrs. Sylvanus Torphichan in especial, being next of kin to the dead and chief mourner, fairly scraped like a file. She intruded her discontented, peevish face, with eyes devoutly upturned, and mouth pursed to indicate emotion, into every room in the house, a handkerchief set alternately to either eye, and her whole figure radiating grief as she went.

But occasionally she would turn the handle of the room where Dr. Sylvanus was supposed to be overcome by his emotions. Here she would pause a little, with her hand on the brass knob before opening cautiously. Her whole attitude suggested a resigned sorrow, anxious that a still deeper grief should not be disturbed.

What she really said was, 'Have you found anything yet?'

And as soon as she had received the doctor's low-spoken negative she would softly close the door again, and resume her mournful peregrinations.

It chanced that little Hester, who in those days found a refuge with Megsy below stairs, and during the nights slept in Megsy's room, while Tom Torphichan occupied her little white chamber under the eaves, came hastily along on a message from Megsy to the store-cupboard in the parlour. Her

light tread did not bring the crape-cumbered sentinel to the spot in time. So Hester had a glimpse of her uncle standing by the table, with the red-striped bag open before him. He had his back toward her, and was pouring through his fingers a tinkling stream of red stones that glittered in the firelight. They were like the one in her buckle—she remembered that long after.

The next moment she was pulled violently away, shaken as a terrier shakes a rat, and pushed along the passage by her aunt.

‘You wretched little good-for-nothing minx,’ she hissed, ‘what do you mean by spying and prying about this house? Get downstairs with you till we decide what is to be done with you. You are nothing but a drag on respectable people — as your father was before you. Yes, a drag and a disgrace.’

‘You shall not speak against my father—he was your own brother, and better than any one of you — kinder too. And this house ought to be his, Megsy says so!’

With a farewell cuff Mrs. Torphichan was about to let the slim little figure go. But she lifted up her hands at the desecration of Hester's words.

‘She must be taken away immediately; I will not have such a wicked girl in the house. Ethel, my salts! Quick, Ethel!’

And the chief mourner staggered to a chair.

Thinking that her aunt was really ill, Hester's eager little heart was touched with remorse, and, having seen the red bottle with the great cut-glass stopper lying on one of the settles in the hall, she ran and brought it to her aunt.

That afflicted lady had sunk back into an easy-

chair, and now lay with eyes shut.

'I am sorry I was rude, aunt,' said Hester; 'please forgive me! Here is the smelling bottle!'

The lady kicked out her heels rigidly, knocking them on the floor with a smart rataplan.

'Oh,' she cried, in a high falsetto shriek, 'I am going to be taken, I know I am, if someone does not send that dreadful little child away. This very moment she flew at me in a fury — the ungrateful asp, the snake I warmed in my bosom! Quick, I am going to be ill, I know it! Ethel! Ethel!'

Now when Mrs. Sylvanus Torphichan was 'taken' the house also knew it. So when at last the eldest daughter came at her call she began to run as soon as she heard the heels of her mother's shoes tap-tapping on the wax-cloth.

'What is it, mamma?' she cried. 'Do stop it this instant! You can if you like!'

The afflicted lady could only point venomously at Hester, who still stood mutely by with the scent-bottle in her hand. Ethel snatched it from her and gave it to her mother. Then she caught Hester's arm, and pushed her towards the head of the stairs which came up from the kitchen, scolding her all the time, and administering such corrective slaps as pleased her to the little girl's cheeks and ears.

'Look here, you get away! Stay in the coal-hole or anywhere. If you come up here where you are not wanted, making mamma ill and upsetting everybody — there that's what I'll do, only far worse!'

And the spiteful Ethel pinched Hester's arm till she gave a sharp little pitiful cry which brought Tom Torphichan out of his room upon the scene. He had something alive in a bag under his arm, something

that struggled actively to escape. He was holding what was apparently the nose of the animal inside with one hand.

'Look here, Eth,' he said, 'you let that small kid alone! I'm not a beast, and I'm not going to let you be, if you are older than me. Now, you mind me!'

With a final shove of disdain Ethel pushed the little girl along the passage and turned to go back to her mother.

'You are only a charity child, anyway, if Tom does stick up for you. Aha, Master Tom, I heard papa say that every penny she gets will come off you! How will you like that?'

'Never you mind how I shall like it. I shan't come to you for pity. Quiet, Dick! Don't you touch her, that 's all, or I'll make it jolly hot for you. I can, you know— oh, beastly hot!'

Meanwhile, Hester was quietly crying, for Ethel had hurt her arm very much.

'Look here, old chap,' said Tom, 'don't whimper — that 's a good fellow. Don't you mind her. It will soon be better. I bet, though, Eth pinched you. She's a beast for that. She pinches with her nails. Let's see! Yes, that's just like Eth. But I say, we'll put a rat in her bedroom tonight, behind the door of her wardrobe. I've got a lovely one, all jump and teeth; oh, my! Then when she opens it — bouff! Out his ratship will hop! And then won't old Eth holler? Oh, no! Not at all! (Be quiet, Dick, there's a good dog. Oh, you beast! Be quiet, I say, or the mater will hear you, and then you can't go ratting.) I say, Hester — isn't your name Hester? Rummy name that. Come down to the barn. Vic is there, and Kip MacKinstrey has four lov-v-v-ly rats in a cage. We are just going

to set Dick on to them. I've been keeping him hungry in my room on purpose, till he's just whoppin' mad. Come on and see him scat' 'em! It's a blessed swot having to be down here anyway, while the old man hunts up what everyone is to get. You don't want to come, eh? Well, not many girls are such trumps about ratting as Vic. But you'll do. I say, I'm sorry about being such a beast last summer. That's all right. Well, so long, Hester!

And Tom was gone, stealing out on tip-toe by the kitchen stairs, then making a dart for it, and scuttling through the thickest of the shrubbery for the shelter of the barn where Vic awaited him with the faithful 'Play-the-Kip,' or as he was generally designated more simply 'Kip' Kinstrey, while at last Hester forgot her troubles with her head on the faithful breast of Megsy Tipperlin.

It may be as well (though it is to some extent anticipating), in order to show that sometimes Nemesis works by humble if very immediate agencies, to record what befell Miss Ethel Torphichan that very night. Claudia, who was her elder sister's slave, had departed after looking out all her 'things' for the great day of the funeral, brushing dresses, and being scolded for her clumsiness all the time. Then with brush in hand Ethel Torphichan tried a few poses, to see how her hair would look done this way and that, now low on her neck, then on the top of her head — the effect of the latter being slightly marred by the holding two hairpins in her mouth. Next she really must try that pale blue neckerchief she had bought before leaving town. Such a pity that now she could not wear it for ever so long! Where was it? Oh, in the wardrobe, she

remembered

Shriek on shriek pealed through the silent house, for it had grown late with all this rehearsing. Hester heard far away up under the eaves, and being frightened at the thought of her grandmother lying so still, she stretched up a hand from the little truckle bed where she lay to feel for Megsy. Tom in the chamber that had been Hester's under the easterly slates, also heard, and fairly hugged himself with delight. He sat up on his elbow to listen.

'He was a nice lively one!' he said to himself. 'It was something like unselfishness, but Thomas Torphichan isn't going to be mean in a little thing like that. I saved the pick of the bunch for Ethel!'

And so it proved. The rat rushed about the room, and tried to climb the curtains of the bed. It went under the bed and out again at the other side so quickly that it seemed to Ethel as she stood on a chair, that there must be a complete living chain of wild rats with gleaming teeth flying round the room at a speed of at least fifty miles an hour.

Then presently at the door holding a candle in his hand, and exceedingly short in the temper at being disturbed, stood Dr. Sylvanus Torphichan.

'Ethel, what is the matter that you disturb the house of mourning with such unseemly noises. 'Hold your tongue, girl!'

The rat — the horrid rat! It flew at me — oh, I shall die! I know I shall!'

'I see no rat! You have been dreaming! I know you have!' said the Doctor. 'Oh, I have some medicine in my trunk. What have you been having for supper? Have you been eating anything in your room?'

'But I saw it, papa! No, I shan't come down till it

is killed. Do look under the bed, papa! I shall not sleep a wink if you don't. Oh, it was all that horrid little wretch, Hester Stirling, and Tom, who took her side. I know it was Tom. He said he would serve me out!

'Nonsense—nonsense! Come down at once, or I will make you! Do you hear? I tell you I have looked everywhere, and there is no rat. There never was a rat!

Dr. Sylvanus was very angry. He had placed himself, attired in the garb of night, in several postures unbecoming to a physician in a large and high-class practice. His temper as well as his hair was ruffled by poking under the bed, and discovering only paper-covered boxes of linen and 'keps.' What he affirmed was also true. There was no rat, for that astute animal had bolted past him at the first opening of the door, while the Doctor stood petrified by the sight of his eldest daughter with her skirts clutched about her ankles, screaming on the highest chair in the room.

But as the Doctor returned to his chamber to quiet his wife's apprehensions a sudden thought struck him to take a look into Tom's room. But if ever there was a boy asleep — soundly and innocently asleep — it was Thomas Alistair Torphichan. The girl had certainly been dreaming. Of that there was no doubt. The medicine — yes, he had forgotten. She must have been stuffing some rubbish privately. Girls always did.

'I will administer a little bromide of potassium. And — ahem — add a few drops of another drug, innocuous but unpleasant to the palate. It will teach her not to do it again!

The veil may safely be drawn in this place. Ethel hated nasty medicine worse than poor relations, and she emerged from the trial more than ever convinced of the truth of the verse which says that a man's foes are those of his own house.

CHAPTER TWELVE

DR. SYLVANUS DANCES A BREAKDOWN

Dr Sylvanus had prospered in his search beyond belief or expectation. He had found his mother-in-law's keys in her black reticule basket, just where his wife told him to look for them. Armed with these he went systematically about his task, quartering the ground and searching every likely and unlikely place for papers and for the innocent little hoards which Mistress Stirling had been in the habit of making, and then forthwith forgetting all about.

So that when for the fourth time his wife came quietly to the guarded door with her question he was able to reply in the same low tone. 'All is left to us except a legacy of £2,000 to little Hester Stirling on her twenty-first birthday, and an annuity of twenty-five pounds a year to Margaret Tipperlin in recognition of her long service — not unreasonable I must say!'

But the chief mourner stamped her foot in a fury of anger.

'Two thousand pounds to a beggar's brat, whom my mother kept out of a foolish charity all these years! I declare I will not submit to it. I will take it before the courts!'

'Gently, gently, Sarah,' said her husband; 'there is over twenty thousand in stocks and securities, every penny of which your mother might have left past us and our dear children. Things are very well as they are. It is not for us to stir up any questions!'

And indeed he had good reason to be content. For

he had found something which made all other items of little account — even the twenty thousand pounds in stocks. For after glancing casually into the store cupboard in the parlour, thrusting his linger into the pots of preserves in search of concealed bank-notes, and weighing the dripped-honey jars in his palm for hoarded sovereigns, he had spied the bag with the red stripes pushed well to the back. He tried casually to lift it over the white jampots by the leathern handle, but it proved unexpectedly heavy. So he cleared a way to slide it to the front, and as he lifted it down to the table it rattled with a curious tinkle which his trained ear told him was not metallic. A key found in his mother-in-law's purse opened the bag. Sylvanus gasped, and saw the day of his retirement to a country estate immediately before him. It had been the dream of his life, and here it was.

But a slip of paper lying on the top caught his attention. It was blue and oblong, and the writing upon it was in Mrs. Stirling's well-known small Italian hand.

'These precious stones were given me this 2nd of August 18 — by my dear son David Waldron Stirling in trust for his little daughter Hester Sybilla Stirling before his return to Burmah' — Isobel Stirling.

Sylvanus Torphichan had hitherto been a man neither conspicuously honourable nor yet consciously dishonest. No great temptation had ever come his way, and in all money matters he had, on the whole, acquitted himself to his own satisfaction. But this great testing of what manner of man underlay the smooth exterior and the bedside manner sprang upon him like a lion out of a bush in

that little familiar parlour where in other days he had courted his wife. He was already considering the possibilities when he heard the slam of the door as his wife caught Hester in the act of watching him. Sylvanus started with a quick strong shudder and shut up the bag again. He must not tell his wife. If these jewels had to be given up to the little girl, the less his wife knew of the matter the better it would be for the peace of all within the household of Dr. Torphichan.

'In the other event' (Sylvanus put it thus to himself) 'well, he must have a free hand to make his dispositions without criticism or cavil. No; very decidedly it would never do to tell Mrs. Torphichan.'

So he pulled out the sideboard and pushed the bag into a recess at the back, between the panel and the skirting-board, where it would remain safely enough, till night and sleep would leave him at liberty still better to dispose of it.

Next, drawing a chair before the fire, for the sudden excitement had sent the blood to his head and his feet were cold, he began to consider his difficulties. What was there to prove that the rubies belonged to his little niece? For the present, only this scrap of paper in his hand. It was most unlikely that the girl herself knew anything, or that Mrs. Stirling had mentioned the fact of the trust to her servant. The date was very recent, and if she had done so, Megsy would certainly have insisted upon a more secure place of bestowal for so much treasure. No, the secret so far as this country was concerned had died with the dead woman in the great bedroom upstairs.

And the blue paper? He flipped it a moment

thoughtfully between his finger and thumb. Then, as calmly as if burning a prescription which had served its turn, Sylvanus Torphichan leaned forward, and threw it upon the fire, watching it flame up and then die down into a black and curdled scroll in which a few sparks of fire wandered like so many live things.

But, he must not forget, there was David Stirling, the outcast, the disinherited—now clearly, by fraud or honest gain, a rich man—probably a very rich man, certainly a very able and unscrupulous one. Yet it was not likely that even he had taken any receipt from his mother for the bag of jewels left in her possession, or if for the bag, certainly not for these hundreds of individual stones! Moreover, the man had gone back to Burmah. That was a country in a state of constant unrest — foreigners massacred, the king a debauchee, the queen a bloodthirsty monster. It was more than doubtful if the man would ever come back. Or if he did, would he be able to prove his right? Why not a gift to his mother? And if so, clearly Dr. Sylvanus's own, or at least his wife's, as residuary legatee.

Thus arguing, Dr. Torphichan rose and paced the floor, looking again and again at the sideboard behind which he had hidden the striped bag. He knew little of precious stones, yet there was enough there, he calculated, whatever the value of particular rubies might be, to purchase a very considerable 'stake in the country,' as it was called. For that was the one bait which Sylvanus could not resist. It appealed to every fibre of his large, coarse, naturally fawning, outwardly pompous self.

'The girl? She would be better without them! He would take care that she did not suffer.'

At this point his wife came in. Sylvanus cast one glance at the massive sideboard, to make sure that his secret was safe. He felt as if a murdered body were behind that solid mahogany, instead of a harmless bag covered with patent leather. The huge piece of furniture seemed to him slightly awry. He wished that he could get up on the spot and set it straight.

‘Sylvanus,’ began his wife, ‘there are two things I wanted to speak to you about. That two thousand pounds troubles me. It seems so useless a waste! Can the bequest not be proved to be against my father’s express wish? He disinherited David, and that surely includes his daughter? There is manifest justice in that?’

Sylvanus shook his head smilingly, as he did at an impossible request from a rich patient.

‘Sarah,’ he said, ‘your father left the land and houses to you — only life-renting them to your mother. But he devised all his stocks and securities, with such moneys as he died possessed of, to his wife without any condition. You know it, for you have seen the will as often as I have!’

‘But the rights of it, Sylvanus,’ said his wife, pressing the point with the fretful pertinacity of a weak woman, ‘surely the judges of the land would not refuse to do what is right.’

‘Be content, Sarah,’ said her husband, soothingly, ‘no doubt it is distressing. But it only shows how Providence ordains His people many trials in this life! But there are compensations — oh, yes, there are compensations!’

He looked casually at the sideboard. It seemed more awry than ever. Then he recollected himself.

That particular consolation he must keep to himself, if he were to profit by it fully.

I don't see any consolation in having two thousand pounds left away from one of the poor dear innocent lambs. You know they will need it all, for Tom is so careless and dear Ethel so extravagant in dress. Of course she is pretty, but Claudia has a temper, and Vic— well, Vic is hopeless!

Dr. Sylvanus went on: 'Speaking of consolation, Sarah, there is consolation in the fact that you and I are the trustees, and that we do not need to pay over the money till Hester Stirling is twenty-one years of age. Much may happen before then! Ah, here is the post-bag — mostly for me, of course! But one letter for you, my dear! No, it is for Ethel; it looks like a love-letter. That young lady must surely have begun early. You will have to look after her, Sarah; we cannot be too careful in the choice of companions for three such girls! Would you like to see The Thistle dearest? It is yesterday's paper, of course. But what can you expect up here in these wilds?'

Dr. Sylvanus began to read his correspondence, mumbling a stray word here and there, as many doctors do when they read letters, mingling his speech with the low professional 'Ah!' of the consulting room, something after this fashion:

'From Rogers — ah! Old Mr. Riach very obstinate — says he will not pay you for sending an apothecary's apprentice to see him. (I must see Riach tomorrow night or early next morning. No, hang Riach, if these rubies are all right, what does it matter whether I see Riach or not?)'

'My dear,' cried his wife, suddenly, 'have you read this? It is about David, about my brother!'

‘What — what — what is it?’ cried her husband, letting fall the letter he was reading, and starting so violently to his feet that he upset a writing table with all its ink bottles and accoutrements upon the floor.

His wife looked curiously at his suddenly whitened face.

‘I did not know that you cared one way or the other about David,’ she said.

‘I do!’ said Sylvanus, with strong feeling. ‘I care very much.’

His wife put out her hand admiringly.

‘You are a kind-hearted man, Sylvanus. But do not let the feeling cause you to be unjust to your own flesh and blood.’

‘I will not. There is no fear of that!’ he replied, with perfect truth.

Then his wife gave Dr. Torphichan the paper for which he had been reaching out his hand as he spoke. He read this paragraph first with a single eye-shot, and then more carefully.

MURDER OF ANOTHER ENGLISHMAN IN BURMAH

A despatch of yesterday from Rangoon states that an Englishman named David Waldron Stirling, or Sterling, had been executed at Mandalay in the last holocaust of victims, of which details are just to hand. He had but recently returned to that country after a visit home. It is reported that Mr. Stirling had discovered a new and very rich ruby mine in unexplored territory to the north-west, and that he was murdered in order that the Queen might take possession of this rich find. Mr. Stirling is believed to have had two white companions, but as to their fate nothing is yet known. Mr. Stirling, it is said,

was respectably connected, and was a man of great enterprise and ability.

When he had finished reading Sylvanus rested his head on his hand and covered his eyes. He did not wish to let his wife see the greatness of his relief. She came over to him, however, and laid her hand on his shoulder.

'If I do not grieve for my own brother I do not see why you should, Sylvanus! But you were always so soft-hearted. And I think mother's death has made us all a little hysterical. I suppose now we shall have to put that chit into mourning? What, are you going out, Sylvanus? Don't you feel well? You are pale. Can I get you anything?'

But Sylvanus hurried down the stairs without answering. He felt that if he did not laugh or weep, he would burst. So he went through the plantations towards the Darroch woods, and as soon as he reached a quiet spot he flung himself down on the pine needles and laughed aloud.

'Now at last I have it,' he said; 'no one can touch me. I was born poor and I worked my way, but I thought it would never come. Now I shall buy half the county. I shall stand for Parliament. I may get a peerage. Lord Arioland — that is a good name, and to think that I once stood behind an apothecary's counter — on Sundays, too! Lord, how well I remember it! 'A pennyworth o' brandy-balls!' 'A ha'penny worth o' lemon kali!' Bah, it is within my grasp at last! And the lemon kali gives a flavour to it!'

He rose to his feet, and, more in the manner of the youngest apothecary's apprentice when he finishes putting up the shutters than in that of a

peer-prospective of the realm, Sylvanus danced a breakdown on the springy turf of the pine wood.

From behind a great tree trunk two sharp pairs of eyes watched him.

'My wig, Vic,' whispered Tom, anxiously, 'the gov'nor's gone cracky! Say, what has the old fellow been havin'? I always thought he kept something besides jalap in that whopping medicine trunk of his! Trust Silvy for being a downy one!'

'Tom,' said Vic, with sudden piety, 'remember the Fifth Commandment.'

'I don't know which is the Fifth Commandment. But if it tells you not to laugh when you see your father behaving like a monkey climbing on a yellow stick — well, Tom Torphichan ain't going to worry about any Fifth Commandment!'

And with that the dutiful children betook them deeper into the wood, while their father sat down to arrange in what manner he was to carve out his way to a seat in the hereditary chamber of Her Majesty's Legislature.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

MEGSY TIPPERLIN BEARDS THE LION IN HIS DEN

On the morning of the funeral the only two real mourners in the Great House of Arioland waked early. Hester lay in her little truckle bed beside Megsy's larger one, in the garret where the dormer window stuck a peaked forehead through the roof. This looked out, Dutch fashion, on tree tops, in which the rooks were already cawing and making their morning toilet. Megsy Tipperlin was explaining the mysteries of Providence to a small and very puzzled inquirer, as best she could.

'You see,' said Megsy, 'it's this way. Ye mind when we asked Her-that's-awa' for her shears and needle-case. And to quiet ye she gied ye them. Then, in five minutes ye had cuttit your finger and stickit a needle intil your leg and gotten a cuff on the lug for slittin' the linin' o' a chair! That's juist exactly like Providence! We want something as sair as ye wanted your granny's auld workbasket, an' if we get it, nine times oot o' ten we are juist cuttit an' jaggit an' cuffit for our pains till we roar!'

'Aye, Megsy,' objected Hester, 'but that's asking for a thing you want, (grandmother's dying was taking away a thing that I had already and wanted to keep!'

'An' that's only anither way o't, bairnie,' said Megsy, still holding the child's hand in hers over the edge of the bedstead from which she had not yet risen. 'Did ye never hear a lammie that had been

speaned frae its mither maa-in as if its very heart wad break? But the herd juist drives an' drives an' aye the louder is the lammie's maa-in . Does the herd no care? Aye, he cares. His heart is wae — that is, if he be a true herd and nae hireling. But he disna stop for that. The lammies maun learn to gang their lane. They maun drink nae mair their mither's milk. They maun put awa' childish things, and learn to seek for themsel's the wat clover o' the meadow, and the sweet young grass that grows in the lirks o' the heather when the dew is still upon it.'

'And is that what he took awa' my granny for?' said Hester, after a long pause, during which she had watched the grey wispy cloudlets high up through the garret window tinged with the faintest rose of dawn.

'I doot it na,' said Megsy, in cautious affirmative; 'forbye, she is happier where she is!'

'But she was happy here, too!' returned the voice from the truckle-bed beneath, putting her finger on the weak place of Megsy's argument with the ruthless fidelity of childhood.

For a moment Megsy was nonplussed, as many more learned have been, by the dealings and judgments of the Court of Final Appeal. But she quickly rallied.

'Aye, Hester Sybilla,' confessed Megsy, 'that is what I thocht mysel', in my haste and in my blindness. Said I to mysel', she wad hae wushed to hae seen how the new grosart bushes throve in the hollow o' the orchard, and what like were the young beds of strawberries next year. For she chose the runners hersel'! And what sort o' brew the elderfloo'er wine turned oot to be, and if the chuckie

hens laid weel through the winter! For her heart was aye set on thae things. And she wanted sair to see ye a big braw lass wi' a hame o' your ain and douce guidman!

'I did not want ever to be married, Megsy,' said the little girl, 'but only to be with you and grandmother!'

'I daresay no the noo, bairnie;' the voice from the higher bed was breathing out graciously the wisdom and the power of God. (You would never have thought it in the daytime, to look at Megsy's grim face with the mouth set, and the clear irascible eyes of the woman who had made a life for herself apart, and so seen the matter through.) 'I daresay no. The lamb doesna want to leave its minnie. It wad like to rin by her side up the hill and doon the brae, by burnside and clint and scaur. But that canna be. It wad be guid for neither ewe nor yet for lamb. And sae ye maun learn to gang oot in the warl', my wee lammie, a' your lane. For on every hillside there is heard the bleatin' o' the speaned lambs, and by every fireside the sab o' the mourner mournin' for them that never shall return!'

It was Megsy's poetry—or her religion, which you will! for the deepest kind of religion is just poetry, even as the best poetry is religion. Whatever keeps a man's nature soft is religion, and these were the thoughts that had kept the kernel of Megsy's heart rich and loving and soft within the tough husk and horny shell of her outer life.

Hester thought for a little, and then determined to ask the question which, of all others, was most important to her now. She had not dared to put the terrible thought into words hitherto.

‘Will I have to go with them?’

There was a whole world of pain, and fear, and aversion in the accentuation of the final pronoun. Yet there was also the beating of a brave little heart, and the application of Megsy's sermon in the courage which was enabling Hester to dare even that terrible possibility.

Megsy's voice trembled as she answered. She realised well what it meant to the child, and she crushed down what it would mean to herself.

‘Dootless they hae the richt to tak' ye wi' them,’ she said. ‘Oh, I wad never deny that! But will they? The Lord can put even into their hearts the thing He will—yes, even in their hearts.’ (Dr. Sylvanus and his wife, eminent lights in a dark and sinful world, would have been surprised at the ‘even’). ‘And we maun juist submit, you and me, Hester. This day will declare it.’

‘Suppose that we say a prayer, Megsy?’

‘It wad do no hairm, lassie!’

Hester was out of bed in a minute and kneeling by a chair.

‘Will you not rise and pray too, Megsy?’

‘I will pray, bairnie, but I will not rise!’

For in her heart Megsy was shy and reticent even with her Maker. And it seemed a thing too presumptuous that she should call the Almighty's attention by such a signal. In a servant's bedroom when she was a young girl (during the religious excitement which preceded the Disruption) she had been known as ‘Meg the Heathen,’ or shortly ‘Heathenie,’ because she alone did not say her prayers at her kist-lid before she went to bed. And yet that same Meg the Heathen would have let

herself be torn to pieces before she would have owned to those who taunted her that she often hid in the peathouse, in order that she might say them where none but One could see or hear.

So there and then the erstwhile Heathenie and the little maid prayed their prayers.

The funeral was over at last, the dead woman laid in her quiet resting-grave in the little sheltered kirkyard beneath the Clachan Kirk, where, if they can listen, the Folk of the Long Rest may hear for ever and ever the sough of the Darroch water running soft over its pebbles and the dry rustle as the yew-twigs talk together overhead.

Dr. Sylvanus Torphichan, that eminent Christian, had been more than usually eminent that day. At the head of the grave he had stood bareheaded, majestic, the observed of all. He had even patronised the minister, the Reverend Anthony Borrowman of the parish of St. John's, till that shrewd cleric had given Sylvanus one single glance, a regard dry and east-windy enough to shrivel up his reasonable soul within him.

Failing with the minister he had next patronised the local undertaker. Even at the grave-head, and with the lowering cord in his hand, Sylvanus had instructed the grave-digger, a thing which none had ever done before and lived to tell the tale. With his hat in his hand and in the full consciousness of the impressive figure he made, he patronised God — a feat which is more common than many suppose.

As he stood there he was thinking of what his wife had proposed, that in view of the acquisition of the family property, the name should be changed to Torphichan-Stirling. At first he had been greatly

averse from this, but something — it is not necessary to say what — had induced him to change his mind. Now it struck him forcibly that, with the new financial possibilities before him, he might very well drop his practice, and even the title of Doctor, which he had once been so proud of. It now began to appear common and undignified, associated as it was with red lamps, guinea fees, and a hired carriage with yellow wheels.

But all the while Sylvanus was thinking these things his head was reverently bowed. His lips moved automatically in silent prayer, and all the folk (save the minister) stood afar off and said to each other what an honour it was for religion that a man so great should yet show himself so surpassingly devout.

But Tom Torphichan, a brand as yet entirely unplucked, walked sulkily behind because they would not let Dick accompany him to the funeral. However, even as it was he did not waste his time. He looked about him during the long, slow progress from the house of Arioland to the little graveyard, noting likely rabbit-holes on sandy brae-faces and watching the hedges for hare runs, so that he could come over under cloud of night and set 'grins.' He wished he had a chance to kick the young Master of Darroch, who had come to the funeral of his old friend and benefactor, and whom Sylvanus, that excellent and approven Pharisee, had at once called up to the highest seats of the synagogue. Indeed, he had compelled Carus, much against his will, to walk beside him all the way, and to him was assigned the cord at the bottom of the coffin, even as Sylvanus held that at the top. When all was ready Sylvanus

nodded to Carus, as much as to say, 'When you are ready.' For Carus was the son of a lord, and that was Sylvanus's religion. He also hoped to be a lord someday, and it was well to inculcate respect for his own future position.

In the great house of Arioland Mrs. Sylvanus drew a breath as soon as she saw her mother's coffin well down the avenue. She rang the bell and called Megsy up to her from the whitewashed kitchen, where she was stilling the sobs of the little girl Hester.

'Take all these clothes down and clear away everything before they come back. I am going to my own room!'

And so, like a moving pyramid of crape, Mrs. Torphichan rustled and rasped herself away. It was true she did go to her own room, but instead of sitting down to mourn in the hopelessness of grief, as she hoped all would understand that she was doing, she did something infinitely more practical. She took pencil and paper, and began to design a new crest and motto to be put upon the black-edged note-paper. 'For,' she said, 'it was not fitting that those who had been 'called' to high position should write on paper stamped plainly 24, Eglinton Square, Abercairn. That was well enough for Torphichans, but for the landed family of Torphichan-Stirling of Arioland an engraved crest was a necessity.'

It was evening before Hester knew her fate. And she would not have known it then, had it not been that Megsy Tipperlin precipitated events by requesting the honour of an interview with Dr. Sylvanus himself.

That great and good man was sitting in the

dining-room with his fingers netted evenly in front of him, those soft padded fingers which were like a benediction to so many of his lady patients?' There is something almost hallowed about Dr. Torphichan, you know, my dear!' He was twirling his thumbs round each other like a Tibetan prayer-wheel. He did not turn in his chair when Megsy in a clean white 'mutch' and black silk apron stood in the doorway. He did afterwards, though, long before she betook herself out. His wife sat at the table, the weepers of her mourning cap trailing down on either side of her long horselike face. She had a pencil in her hand, and with a melancholy air was trying to think of a suitable motto for the new coat of arms.

'Well, Tipperlin?' said Dr. Sylvanus, briefly, with a rising inflection.

'I hae come to ken your intentions,' said Megsy. Her tone caused Sylvanus to turn his head slightly.

'I suppose you want to know if you have been left anything in the will?' he said, with a curious look on his face.

'Na, I dinna!' said Megsy.

'What, then, do you want at such a time?'

'To ken what is to come o' the bairn?'

'You mean the child my mother has supported for so long?' put in Mrs. Torphichan from the table. Sylvanus made a sign, well understood by his wife, that she was to leave him to deal with the matter alone.

'Aye, mem, juist Hester Stirling, the only child o' your ain elder brother,' said Megsy, pertinently.

'I have not yet made any plans, Tipperlin,' said Sylvanus, willing to pacify the woman; 'this great sorrow has come so unexpectedly and been so

crushing upon us all.'

'Aye?' said Megsy, with interrogation in her voice.

'So terribly sudden,' repeated Sylvanus, who was professionally adept at such expressions, 'but so far as Mrs. Torphichan is concerned,' ('Torphichan-Stirling!' put in his wife in an undertone, shaking her head as if engaged in composing a new meditation among the tombs.)

'As far as I have consulted my wife, we had thought of putting Hester Stirling into some respectable family, or under the care of some responsible person, with a view to her education according to her position. Of course, as we should have to pay for this ourselves, it would be quite in a plain way. The child does not seem to be of such a nature that one could venture to bring her up with one's own children. They must ever be our first consideration. But she is young—she is young! She may improve!'

'She may, sir!' said Megsy, 'but as there is twa thousand pounds due her on the day she is twenty-wan, it might be as weel to tak' some sma' trouble wi' her eddication!'

Sylvanus turned right round in his chair.

'How do you know that?' he cried, bending his brows upon her as he did at meetings of the medical council when an enterprising junior ventured to dispute his dictum.

'Because my mistress let me see the will,' said Megsy, quite unintimidated, adding as if by afterthought, 'on her road up frae the minister's.'

'And is the minister also acquainted with the terms of my mother-in-law's bequests?'

'He is that!' affirmed Megsy.

'Ah!' said Sylvanus, deep in thought. This had not previously occurred to him. He must walk circumspectly, for there were serious matters involved here. If Mrs. Stirling had told the minister of her own bequests, she might also have confided to him the trust her son had committed to her.

'Did Mrs. Stirling frequently consult this Mr. — ah— Borrowman?'

'Oh,' said Megsy, diplomatically, 'as it might happen— whiles aye and whiles no!'

Clearly Sylvanus must proceed cautiously. Why this woman might know more than he thought. It would not do to quarrel with her.

'Weel, aboot the bairn,' she went on, 'what objections hae ye to commit her to me till sic time as her faither comes hame to claim her?'

Dr. Sylvanus lifted a newspaper, rustled the pages, and pointed with his thumb to the place he had so frequently referred to during these last twenty-four hours.

Megsy took a pair of steel-bowed spectacles from her pocket, adjusted them upon the bridge of her nose, gave them a little sidelong hitch to get the focus of her best eye, and slowly read the paragraph.

'Sirce — sirce — oh, sirce — the puir bairn! Without faither or mither — thrown to the — ochanee,' she murmured as she read, the sheets shaking audibly in her hand.

Then very quietly she laid the paper down on the table, drew off her spectacles, and calmly wiped both glasses on her apron.

When next she spoke it was in a firm voice. 'If this be so, what objection hae ye that I should tak' the bairn mysel'? I hae near forty years' character. The

minister or ony yin in the parish will speak for Margaret Tipperlin. I will gang to Cairn Edward, where there are good schools and kindly folk. And as I hae tried to be a mither to her in her helpless bairn-time, so will I be in her youth. What say ye?’

Sylvanus looked at his wife to signal still further silence. ‘Tipperlin,’ he said, slowly weighing his words as he went, ‘this proposal is certainly unexpected. But it does you credit, and I am not sure that it is not in the meantime as good a solution of the difficulty as any. But let us clearly understand each other before we go further. I am, as I understand you are aware, sole trustee under the will, but I am prevented by the terms of the deed from paying over Hester Stirling’s bequest till she shall have reached the age of twenty-one years. Whatever is done, then, must come out of my own pocket as a charity, Understand that there is no legal claim upon me to do anything whatsoever!’

‘Sir,’ said Megsy Tipperlin, ‘claim here or claim there — if ye will lippen me wi’ the bairn, by the grace of God I will see that Hester Stirlin’ is brocht up as her faither’s daughter ocht to be brocht up!’

‘But how can you afford to undertake such a thing?’ cried Mrs. Sylvanus, no longer able to keep silence.

‘Weel,’ said Megsy, with a queer shrewd look at the questioner, ‘there’s a pickle siller lyin’ in the bank in my name, and a bit hoose and garden that the minister bocht for me real reasonable doon at Cairn Edward—I hae been a plain woman a’ my days, and a decent bonnet and a bettermost frock every year or twa hae been the maist o’ my ootlays. Forbye there’s the twunty-five pound that ye are

obligated to pay me ilka Whitsunday term!’

Dr. Sylvanus Torphichan was taken with a little twinge like sudden toothache. It was not so much the payment of the money, though that was bad enough, but his uncertainty as to the extent of Megsy's knowledge that affected him. But he only gravely nodded his head.

‘So,’ he said, approvingly, ‘you seem to have done very well, Tipperlin, out of this family. And I must say it shows an exceedingly proper spirit that you should be willing to adopt this child who, by force of circumstances, bears its name. I repeat’—this with great condescension— ‘that the wish does you every credit.’

‘Dinna ye fash yoursel' about that!’ said Megsy, with some hauteur.

‘And without committing my dear wife and myself to anything,’ Sylvanus went on, ‘ I may say that we will second you in this to the best of our ability — in so far, that is, as we can do so with justice to our own family. We will send you down once a year a box, or at least a parcel of suitable clothing, to make down for the child.’

‘Thank ye kindly, sir,’ said Megsy, curtseying as she retired; ‘they will come in handy for dishclouts!’

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE MINISTER'S FORTIETH HOUSEKEEPER

It was to the study of the minister of the Parish of St. John's that Megsy took her troubles and her beloved's future the night after Dr. Sylvanus had departed for Eglinton Square, along with a very sullen Tom, who was returning most unwillingly to school. She had put Hester to bed, wrapping her well up in the bed-clothes, and charging her not to throw them all off in her sleep, as she had a trick of doing.

The study of Mr, Anthony Borrowman was a sight which, being once seen, was not easily forgotten. It impressed even non-literary and Batavian visitors, who, with intent of marriage or satisfaction of scandal upon their minds, found themselves seated on the edge of a chair, the rear works of which were piled as high as the back would allow with dusty books and dustier pamphlets. Relatives of Mr. Borrowman, many and various, peered with the lifted hands of wonderment into the mysterious depths of the room that had once been a best parlour of a mistress of the manse in reasonable and pre-Borrowmanian times. The walls were lined with shelves which it was the rankest flattery to call 'plain deal.' There was not a plain inch in them. Mr. Borrowman had simply waited till the floor became utterly impassable, and then with the material nearest to his hand — generally rough planks brought upon his shoulder from the saw-mill—he had nailed and coopered up something which if

nobody leaned against it, or kicked away the shores with which the erection was buttressed on similar ones below, would support as many books as could be coaxed and wedged, upon, above, beneath, and around it.

The literary reader gazed with amazement at what he considered the disorder of the whole. The novel of yesterday lay next the editio princeps of Tacitus his Annals, or the little red-bound cropped Oxford octavo of wise old Burton— most cheerful of melancholy men — elbowed some disreputable yellow-papered Frenchman or stone-coloured German.

But the confusion existed only in the minds of such as possessed not the key to this admired disorder. For it was a fixed idea with Mr. Borrowman that there exists no book so dull, so crassly stupid, so utterly superfluous that it could not bring to the seeing eye something of personal or historical value, if only pathological, or even criminal. He maintained this even of local poetry.

To the intimate who objected that the only explanation of the confusion worse confounded of the house (for every room was equally full of books) must be that Mr. Borrowman took all his exercise wandering from room to passage and from garret to cellar looking for the volumes he wanted, the minister had this unanswerable retort:

‘What you say, sir, shows only once more the lack of clearness in your own thinking, which I have had so often reason to animadvert upon. I presume, sir, that you have at least heard of the science of geology, recently so much acclaimed among us. Well, sir, when a geologist opens out a new stratum

he finds fossils of fish, shells, leaves of plants, and a thousand other things all huddled together. He does not find these arranged according to their sizes, or even according to their characteristics, anatomical or otherwise. Yet is that what you are pleased to call confusion? No, my dear sir, to the mind of the geologist that apparent disorder is fuller of instruction than any cut-and-dried so-called order. For all these unrelated particles lived and had their being together. The mammoth and the cave-bear were drowned in the same flood which swept the limpet from his rock and buried the sturgeon alive in his coffin of plate armour.'

'But, Mr. Borrowman,' urged a clerical brother, unwise even to temerity, 'surely books are not geologic strata, even when fossils write them!'

'Sir,' was the instant retort, 'if you would do me the favour to follow my argument. I assure you I am making it specially simple in order to suit your capacity. In the same manner, if I were to open up one of these collocations of volumes, which seem to you so absurd and fortuitous, I should discover the whole history of the formation of my mind upon a certain subject. There, for instance, is a pile which refers wholly to the influence of the Genevan English Bible of 1560 upon the mind and style of Shakespeare. Here, again, under my hand, you will find all the books, which I used in writing my reply to Mr. Headly Granger's vituperative pamphlet, 'Is Scotch a dialect or a language?'

But meantime we are keeping Megsy Tipperlin waiting, which is worse manners than those shown by Mr. Borrowman himself; for that worthy, if somewhat unkempt, divine opened the door for his

visitor less than a minute after she had rung the cracked manse bell.

'Come your ways in, Margaret, ye are welcome indeed,' said Mr. Borrowman, who had two styles of conversation, one for the simple and the other for those whom (often on insufficient data as he agreed with himself) he was content to consider the learned. 'Come your ways ben, Margaret, and I will see if I can find you a chair, always a difficult matter at this time of the year, after my foreign book-box comes in from Berlin. Moreover, I have just parted with Mary. That makes my thirty-ninth. I keep a register of them. Nineteen have been dismissed because they were discovered dusting elsewhere than in the kitchen, the bedroom in which strangers sleep, and the chamber where I take my simple meals. It is a most terrible thing that women are so constituted that they cannot keep their fingers from dusters! Some of these females were outwardly respectable, too! Eight of the remainder greased or polished or oiled or blacked my shoes, so that after putting them on, my fingers made upon various folios and octavos marks and stains such as no fuller could whiten.'

'And what came o' the rest o' your housekeepers?' said Megsy, with a certain contempt in her smile. She was perfectly assured that no minister that lived would have served Marget Tipperlin thus.

'Oh, the other twelve were most of them light-minded hizzies, with well-fa'red faces, who left to get married, or, at all events, evaded upon some suchlike frivolous pretext as that! But what can I do for you, Margaret?'

'Mr. Borrowman,' said Megsy, sitting on the edge

of a chair and leaning forward, 'I have come to you for your advice about the lassie-bairn, Hester Stirling. I hae this nicht taken it upon me to bring her up, and I hae sair doots about my capacity—though, the Lord kens, no about my guid-will.'

'Margaret,' said the minister with his shrewdest look, 'what hae auld dried stocks like you and me to do wi' lassie-bairns — you wi' your hens and me wi' my books?'

'Minister, ye are pleased to speak the word that ye little mean,' answered Megsy, 'but gin ye gie me your advice therewith, I shall be the more content. I couldna sleep in my naked bed if I thought that the young lamb was to be left to the wolves.'

'In sheep's clothing!' murmured the minister, softly, as if to himself.

'Often hae I hinted it to Her-that's-gane that she should make some ither arrangement. But what mither can see ony faut in her ain? She aye howpit that David wad come back and settle, frae oot that cruel heathen land o' Burmah. And as to her dochter Sarah, that is wife to Doctor Torphichan o' Abercairn, she thocht her sic a wonder that the showers o' heaven shouldna licht on her.'

'And am I to understand, Margaret Tipperlin,' said the minister, with apparent severity, 'that you regard so eminently pious a vessel as Mrs. Sylvanus Torphichan with aversion?'

'Na, Maister Borrowman, na, I dinna regard her ava,' said Megsy; 'she is to me as the adder or the asp!'

'Margaret, Margaret!' cried the minister, 'this is un-Christian—most un-Christian. And I do not know but that I shall have to take notice of it when

ye come forrit for your token at the next communion! But in the meantime, what is your difficulty?’

Then, as Mr. Borrowman trimmed his evening lamp, rubbing the black off the wick with the sleeve of his coat (Megsy's hands twitching all the time with desire to do it herself), the old servant of the house of Arioland told her tale— how she had saved ‘a wee pickle’ and now by the death of her mistress come into another ‘wee pickle.’ How, as he knew, she had a ‘bit cottage’ of her own in Cairn Edward, and so on at much greater length. How it was her fixed purpose to give Hester such a schooling as would fit her for her father's place and rank in life. The minister, when he had finished settling the globe in its place, sat down and listened. He did not once interrupt the tale, but only kept slowly muttering to himself, ‘Oh aye! Aye-ow-aye! Unchal!’ without ever ceasing for a moment.

After Megsy had ended, Anthony Borrowman sat awhile silent, watching the flicker of the peat fire seeking its way up through the oval opening in the little register grate.

At last he asked a question. ‘How long does your engagement at Arioland last?’

‘Nae engagement hae I!’ said the old woman, with swift vehemence, ‘my engagement ended when my mistress lifted her lines frae the kirk veesible to hand them in to the Kirk Inveesible.’

‘And you are sure they would not object to your removing the child?’

‘Deed no — object! They wad be blythe to see the last o' baith her and me. And that braw madam o' a servant lass they brocht frae Abercairn will be the

better o' puttin' her hand to the scrubbin' o' a pot or twa and the readyin' o' a supper.'

'Then, Megsy,' said the minister, looking up at her, 'I am a lonely man, and counted a cross-grained—but, till ye are ready to flit into your own house, what say ye to bringing your kist down here, and trying to keep mine for a space till I look about me!'

Megsy Tipperlin shook her head, smiling as she had not done since she had seen that other smile on her mistress's face in the morning light.

'Na, na, minister,' she said, 'I am no gaun to be the fortieth on your list. Megsy Tipperlin could never keep her hands art thae buiks, nor you your tongue aft' her! We are guid frien's as we are. Dinna let us rin headlong into temptation!'

'Suppose we compromise, Megsy?'

'What 's your wull?'

'I say, suppose we agree to meet each other halfway. I will not observe that you have been dusting, if you will refrain from moving one single book out of its appointed place.'

'D'ye caa this the appointed place o' that buik, minister?' said Megsy, pointing to the top volume of a pile on which the master of the house was leaning. 'There, what did I tell ye?'

The pile slipped sideways on its unstable foundations, broke in the middle, and distributed itself over the floor with a slithering clatter, disengaging clouds of dust on its way.

'I'm makin' ye an offer, Margaret!' said Mr. Borrowman, quite impervious to so slight an event as that.

'And I'm answerin',' said Megsy, 'if ye will gie a bit quiet hour to the bairn's learnin' when ye hae nocht

better to do, I'm willin' to bear wi' your temper as far as is in mortal woman, and also to leave your buiks in their appointed places — savin' always those that may be (as it were) accidentally disturbit!

And so it was arranged. The very next morning Megsy appeared at the door of the parlour.

'Guid-day to ye, mem,' she said, with the crisp brevity which characterised all her dealings with the

Torphichans, and making her regulation curtsy as if she were lodging a protest along with it. 'Well, Tipperlin?' 'I cam' to bid you guid-day, mem,' said Megsy, calmly drawing on her black thread gloves. She was dressed in her Sunday best, as she said, 'to gang to a minister's hoose, little as it deserves the name.'

'What do you mean, Tipperlin?' said Mrs. Torphichan, turning with the brow-beating frown which was never known to fail of its effect in Abercairn.

'What I say, mem. Me and the bairn are gaun to oor new situation, at the manse o' the pairish o' Saint John!'

'But surely you would not leave us till we are suited — you will receive not a penny of wages if you do. I bid you remember that!'

'Be ye weel assured, mem, that Megsy Tipperlin kens her richts,' answered that dauntless dame. 'She never was, nor never will be a servant in the hoose o' Mistress Sarah Torphichan. An' when she comes to claim her just dues, your guidman, wha kens brawly what side his bread is buttered on, will no refuse her. But Marget is nae clod to gang withoot a ceevil word. Guid-day to ye, mem. Anders MacQuaker, the kirk offisher, will caa' for my bit

box. My service to a' your innocent lambs, Mistress Torphichan! May you and them a' thrive accordin' to your several deserts!

And in this manner Megsy Tipperlin left the house of her forty years' service, taking Hester by the hand and walking sedately out down the avenue, through the clachan, and so to the white gate of the manse. The minister met her there.

'What said she, Marget?' he asked, eagerly for him.

'She said naething, sir,' she answered, 'but juist played chock wi' her jaw like a body doited!'

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

A GLANCE UNDER THE SUNBONNET

The story of the many years that followed I do not mean to tell at large. Yet I cannot forbear the pleasure of mentioning how swiftly 'Megsy o' Arioland' became the 'Minister's Megsy,' and a power in the land infinitely greater than before. To her was committed the power of the duster, and with that emblem of authority much real influence in the affairs of the little green-bosomed hill-girt commonwealth of the parish of the Evangelist.

Yet for all that, her rule sat lightly upon all concerned. The minister was well fed and well clad. His linen on Sabbaths was no more 'a sicht to be seen,' as, previous to her advent, the Clachan good-wives had, with some reason, affirmed it to be. Neither do I mean to record at length 'how the minister spoiled that bairn,' a process which, indeed, was patent to all. Hester was certainly made 'old-fashioned' beyond her years, by the constant society of three old people, who never before had had a child to divide among the three of them. For in the matter of spoiling Hester, Anders MacQuaker was even worse than Megsy and the minister, and being (inter alia) minister's man he had good reason for being often about the manse. Hester indeed regarded his snug whitewashed house at the top of the Back Raw in the Clachan as more completely her own property than even the manse, which sat like a square-built St. Peter's at Rome at the apex of its neat double colonnade of trees with the Darroch

water murmuring a little way beyond.

And the things that bairn learned! They were at once the glory and the scandal of the neighbourhood.

Did she not pose a neighbouring young minister, who was thought to be 'upsetting,' with a question about Nero and the burning of Rome? And when he floundered and tried upon the spur of the moment to rub up his classical history, was it not Hester who replied, 'Oh, yes, people used to think so, I know, but Mommsen has put an end to all that!'

At which first Mr. Anthony Borrowman, and afterwards three presbyteries chuckled.

To another who was 'a bit of a poet,' she recommended the study of Milton. 'Paradise Lost' was nicer to read than the little book he had sent her, though that was pretty, too. She had given it to Anders for a flybook, and Anders liked it fine.

To yet another who thought to court Hester by asking her to leave Megsy and Mr. Borrowman, and come with him to his grand new manse down in the market-town, grace was given her to reply as follows: 'I wonder you are not feared, with Megsy as witness, Mr. Girvie — and after the last time too!'

The young man was currently reported to have paid somewhat sharply to escape the consequences of a former love affair. For in Galloway no minister can face even the name of a suit for breach of promise of marriage.

Yet with all the pepperiness of her tongue the little girl had a wealth of love to bestow. She lavished it on Megsy in caresses and pretty exigencies, for to please her bairn had become as the breath of life to the manse housekeeper. The sadness of her

position, father and mother dead, her heritage taken by another, the 'grey wolf' her legal guardian — only twa auld dune bodies (and Anders that is half doited) to look after her — what wonder was it if in that kindly place Hester ran a hard chance of being spoilt.

Then, most culpable of all, there was the minister himself, with whom she trotted on all his pastoral visitations. He also did his best to spoil the girl, and the dry ironic smile played seldomer about the close-lipped mouth when she was with him. At other times he bent his intellect to the task of imparting vulgar fractions and the rivers of Europe, so that when the time came Hester might speak with her peers unashamed in the gate. But a tendency on the part of the teacher to refer everything to First Principles, and a belief in Latin prose as the one real necessity of a good education, made Hester's lesson-hours very peculiar ones for a girl.

Nevertheless, these were happy years, and all the time the minister sighed, and told himself it was not fair to the maid. This year should certainly be the last. She must go among her equals. She must mix with other more ordinary girls, and learn their ways. She was growing up straight and tall as a young fir that springs out of a cleft above the Darroch Linn, and though her figure kept its spareness and her features were still over-large for her face, there was a something in the luminous intensity of her dark eyes, something stormy and almost tragic, like the sun rising out of a purple cloudbank, that made the minister quake when he thought of her future.

But it was ever 'only this summer, and then!' For summer is beautiful in the strath of the Darroch.

Then again it was 'after the winter she shall go!' Winter bites snell between Moniaive and the Kells range. And so the years went by till Hester neared eighteen.

The crisis came one day late in June. Hester had gone out with the minister in the afternoon. He had a parishioner to visit up the Glencairn water, and the girl and he took the Waterside stepping-stones in their stride like a couple of ploughmen, talking all the time. In after years Mr. Borrowman often remembered how they were discussing the theory that great revolutions are cyclical, and have their periods, like eclipses and the rotation of the earth, as he argued.

Hester, of course, had not much to do with the enunciation of the theory, nor with the development of it. The minister attended to these things himself. But she criticised every detail, raised a hundred neat objections, and found holes in the minister's chronology at every bend of the path.

By the time they got to the road which winds up the side of the streamlet as it comes slipping and brattling down the glen, the minister was in full blast. He had forgotten everything but 'cyclical revolutions.' They were the only things in the world worth considering, and at the sound of his considering the cattle down on the meadows began to bunch and straggle homeward thinking they were being called to from afar. While the sheep on distant pastures looked over their shoulders for the herd's dogs, hearing a stormy voice crying mysteriously below.

Mr. Borrowman was contending for a period of three hundred years as that which best fitted the

facts — ‘Roughly, of course—you can't expect these things to go off as if timed with slow matches!’

‘No,’ said Hester, mischievously, ‘but most of your matches are very slow, and some don't go off at all!’

‘That is an objection futile—perfectly futile,’ Mr. Borrowman was declaiming. ‘I wonder at you, Hester. In presence of a great and glorious truth like this — newly discovered, and clearly demonstrated, you can only raise such paltry objections as that the French Revolution did not come exactly three hundred years to a day after the Reformation! Hester Stirling, ye are a besom!’

The minister twirled his stick by the handle, as if it were his driving-wheel, and the works were racing. He had just thought of the theory a quarter of an hour ago, and it seemed good for several months of discussion. He was now thoroughly enjoying himself. He took up his parable again, in a voice excellently calculated to impress his statements upon the quiet dead a mile back in the kirk-yard. ‘Listen to me, girl. I will recapitulate—to begin with, some three centuries after the birth of Christ, there was the general acceptance of Christianity by the people of the one civilised empire. Then after like periods, we have the breaking up of the old order in the seventh century, the beginnings of the feudal system in the tenth, its culmination in the thirteenth.’

‘A culmination is not a revolution,’ murmured Hester.

The minister's stick instantly did four hundred and fifty of the latter to the minute.

‘Hold your tongue, minx!’ he cried, ‘you will not give me time to speak a word! A culmination is a

revolution, as I will speedily prove to you. The top of the curve where this staff begins to descend—the apex of change, as one might say, has as much right to be called a revolution as an upheaval from beneath, like the French Revolution. Moreover the thirteenth century did represent the culmination both of the feudal system and of the Bless me, young man, who are you?’

The minister was stopped dead in full career. He had come to a stile over a hill dyke, and as he was throwing a careless leg across, he very nearly set a heavy-tacketed boot upon the head of a young man who was quietly seated on a lower step at the other side, deep in the study of a book. In his attempt to save himself from this catastrophe the minister did tread somewhat vigorously upon the youth's straw hat.

‘How do you do, Mr. Borrowman?’ cried the young man, instantly rising to his feet and holding out his hand; ‘what — have you forgotten me? You used to be very kind to me, sir, and did my holiday versions for me several times.’

‘Why, Carus Darroch,’ cried the minister, cordially, ‘what has kept you so long away, lad? You have been at college and brought home a decent degree, I hope? Ah, that's right! Though you are the Master of Darroch, a flavour of lear will do you no harm. This? Oh, this is my little girl — I think you used to know her—little Hester Stirling of Arioland, as she ought to be, if that — ah, well, I must refrain myself, and endeavour to practise the Christian charity I preach. Yet’ — in a lower tone as if meditating — ‘the Lord Himself cursed the serpent from the beginning! On his belly shall he go!’

While he was speaking the minister was watching Carus Darroch glancing curiously at Hester. He was holding the ruin of his straw hat in his left hand; while for a moment he kept the young girl's right in his.

'Why, you can never be the little girl I carried home out of the wood,' he said, his eyes telling out their astonishment, 'you have not grown. You have simply been made all over again!'

The blood coursed richly in Hester's cheeks at the remembrance. Her face had not ordinarily much colour. But now, in spite of herself, she blushed when the tall young man looked down upon her. Mr. Borrowman gasped and stopped, his eyes growing wider and wider, and his next unanswerable argument being silenced upon his tongue.

'Why, my little girl's a woman, and I never noticed!' he said over and over to himself. Then he grunted two or three times uncomfortably as he stood gazing.

'I am sure you are glad to forget that,' Hester was saying, 'I was horrid to you — and all those people at Arioland, except poor grandmother, that is, were horrid too!'

'Oh, no, I have never forgotten it,' said Carus Darroch; only today I went to look at the place where I found you. The tree you were leaning against was blown down some years ago, but everything else is much the same as it was. You must come with me and look at it some day.'

The girl promised readily, but the minister deep in his heart thought otherwise.

Hester wore a white linen sunbonnet which she had thrown on hastily, 'as they were not going

through the village, and it was best for the midges.' And now she seemed inclined to retire her face beneath it, and look at the heather. It was strange. Usually she threw back her head, and gazed straight and fearless at gentle and simple alike. But now? The minister was puzzled for a moment. Then he smiled a little and said to himself: 'Anthony Borrowman, you are getting old indeed to have forgotten how the young of the sexes look at each other! All the same, this will never do. This must be seen to at once. At once, Anthony! You have put off too long, sir! You are a selfish old man, Anthony. Umph — umph — what did I tell you, sir, a thousand times? You should have sent that girl away — yes, long ago. We must have no more village maids broken-hearted or sons and heirs disinherited. Hester is her father's daughter, but she is her mother's too — and though she may not be pretty — you can never tell! And — bless me, how the witch is blushing, and looking down! Like— why just as Jennie Lake used to look — what an old fool you are, to remember how Jennie Lake looked down at the ground forty years ago! Now then, Anthony! Attention, Anthony! Shoulder arms! Quick march!'

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

AN ANSWER TO PRAYER

While Hester slept soundly in her small white bed, lulled by the pleasant summer rustle of the oaks and beeches about the old manse garden, Mr. Borrowman 'had it out' with Megsy. This is rarely a pleasant process for any one concerned, and it was neither pleasant nor particularly illuminating upon this occasion.

Decidedly Hester must go — but where? He had no relatives to whom he could entrust her—Megsy of course was in a similar condition. A school to 'finish' in? Mr. Borrowman hated the name and the thing. Hester was educated as no girl in Scotland had been. This he held firmly to, yet society polish ('even if superficial,' said the minister), the companionship of her age and sex, these were absolutely necessary.

'If you had only heard her,' he said proudly, 'on the Reformation, and the French Revolution, today! The jade had me again and again. But I did not tell her so.'

Megsy shook her head.

'That's a verra weel,' she said, 'but the lassie is growing her ain feathers noo, and soon she will cast a' your auld borrowed plumes and pookin's that ye wad stick on to her, to the moles and to the bats! She maun live as a young lass, amang young lassies. She is a leddy, and should be amang her kind — no wi' auld selfish fowk like us — askin' your pardon, sir!'

'Aye, selfish, Megsy,' groaned the minister, 'ye

have said it, woman. That was what came home to me on the muir today. When I saw the young Master trying to keek under that lassie's sunbonnet — it all came to me in a flash. Hester must leave us—must leave us!’

‘But, oh, sirce! The desolation o’ the hoose!’ lamented Megsy, ‘never to hear her step come flichterin’ doon the stair, and her voice in the chambers liltin’ like a bird! Empty! — a’ empty!’

‘Hoot—hoot,’ said the minister with indignation, ‘I am selfish, but you must not catch the disease, Margaret! True, it will be lonesome, but after all there ’s the post and there ’s the railway. She will be back to us before we know it!’

Yet more sadly Megsy shook her head.

‘Aye, maybe,’ she said, with a pathetic fall to her voice, ‘but never the young bird o’ the nest. Na, never again! Never ony mair oor ain wee lassie — the bairn that cuddled in to me when she had nae ither mither, the bairn that — oh, sir, bear wi’ me. I am a foolish auld body, gin ye like, but she has been to me mair than ony dochter — me that was auld and thrawn and ill to look upon. And she has lo’ed me weel, and I had nane ither!’

And Megsy picked at her black apron and alternately sobbed and wiped the tears with the beaded hem of her best apron, minding no more than if the rough jet had been the finest and softest silk.

‘Aye,’ said the minister, sadly, ‘when the young birds fly the auld nest is bound to look bare. Hut your life and mine, Megsy, are wearing down to the swirl of the sand in the hour-glass. Hester's lies before her full to the brim, scarce a score of grains

yet fallen into the abyss. It remains to us, therefore, to keep an open door for her, here in the auld manse, to do our day's work and to pray.'

'Aye,' said Megsy, bitterly, 'ye hae your books — an' me my duster! They are braw consolations for the licht o' the e'e, the blithe word, the lovin' young heart! Guid be thankit, there's better consolation still — oot yonder aneath the wa' there's grass growin' green to hap us up!'

'Megsy — Megsy, we are in ill key. Let us read the Word, and if we can, offer up a prayer. It may be that with the morning, light will arise!'

It arose; but — strange are the ways of Providence— in a way little desired by any. Mr. Borrowman had a habit of going morning by morning to the waterside, where, close by the kirk, there is a walk under trees pleasant of shade, dappled every bright day with yellow flecks of sunshine and blue splashes of shadow. It is still called 'the minister's walk.' And the minister after whom it is called was Mr. Borrowman, whose tall figure, bent a little at the shoulders, was to be seen every morning for thirty years pacing it up and down— on wet mornings wrapped to the heels in a long waterproof coat and with hands clasped behind his back. But on fine mornings he carried a little Greek Testament between his finger and thumb, which in time came to be a sacred and mysterious thing to the villagers.

But whether Anthony Borrowman was reading, or praying, or meditating at such times was known only to the Two immediately concerned, and is a matter which does not come into this history.

On this particular morning as he returned, lo! the

clachan postman, the official and impartial distributor of Fate in these times (and sometimes as terrible as the entire conclave of the Grim Sisters) met him. One letter only was for the minister. It bore the London postmark. The minister opened it roughly with his thumb, and read the answer to his prayer—an answer bitter in the mouth, and unlooked for as snow in August.

‘Dear Sir (it read), — It will surprise you to receive a communication from me as guardian of the little girl Hester Stirling, who as I am given to understand, has been under your roof for some years past. I understand, also that you have provided for her education and maintenance. I feel it to be a duty which I owe to the respectable of Hester Stirling's progenitors (in which class I sincerely wish that I could include her parents) that I should defray any reasonable charges you may have been at. Be good enough, therefore, to draw up a properly-attested statement and forward it to me. If I am satisfied with the items I shall immediately send you a cheque for the amount of your claim.’

At this point, Anthony Borrowman stamped his foot and the remark he made under his breath, though not without excuse, could hardly be considered as worthy of a placed minister of the Kirk of Scotland as by law established.

He stood still, grimly biting his lip, while he perused the remainder of the communication.

‘But it is borne in upon my dear wife and myself, in view of the fact that Hester Stirling comes into the possession of a very considerable sum of money at the age of twenty-one, that we should have her more immediately under our own eye, in order that she

may have the very necessary influence and stimulus of a Christian home.'

Here the minister of Saint John's parish again made a remark.

'Where by example and precept.'

'Oh, I must skip this — I really can't stand it!' ejaculated Anthony Borrowman, rustling the pages impatiently, for the letter was of some considerable length. 'Um — umm — desires that the girl he prepared for the important change in her circumstances as quickly as possible but Lady Torphichan-Stirling — (bless the woman, Sarah Stirling, he means) — desires that no purchases of clothing be made in the country as it is her intention that Hester Stirling shall be brought up with her own younger children and accompany them on their walks. In order that she should do this it is of course necessary that she should be decently and appropriately clothed!'

(I suppose the man thinks we have had her running about the Glenkells in a suit of woad! I wish to heaven he was, and I two yards behind him with a horsewhip!')

The girl will be met at St. Pancras any day I mention, and he is, reverend sir, my obedient servant, Sylvanus Torphichan-Stirling, Bart.'

'Bah,' said Mr. Borrowman, fiercely, crushing the paper in his hand with a violence quite unseemly in a placed minister, and striding on to the house, making the good Darroch Water gravel grind under his angry heels.

'It's enough to make a man never pray again, to get an answer like this!' he said, unorthodoxly. 'Margaret!'

It was indeed the day of Marah — of the drinking of bitter waters — to the minister and Megsy, when they were called upon to decide whether their little maid should go into what the latter called the ‘den of wolves.’

But it was certain that Dr. Sylvanus (now Sir Sylvanus Torphichan-Stirling, Bart.) had the power to enforce his request. Moreover, after all, it might possibly be that the letter betokened a change of heart and a desire to make amends for years of neglect. At any rate, the experience would give Hester opportunities of seeing the world such as it was impossible she could ever have in the Clachan of Saint John. Then Anthony Borrowman thought of the sunbonnet, and resolved that she should go.

It was the afternoon of this day when the minister called Hester to him in the study. She was ensconced in an arbour of purple creepers out on the lawn with a favourite book — ‘Lockhart’s Life of Sir Walter Scott.’ It went to his heart to disturb her, but it had better be done at once. The waters of Marah do not improve by keeping.

‘I will not go,’ she cried, in a sudden panic of grief. ‘I am quite happy here — I don’t care to see the world. I do not want experience. I want just to stay with you always — always!’

The minister’s voice said something here.

‘Why is he my guardian? Did my father leave him my guardian? My grandmother had no right. I do not want her money. What is two thousand pounds to me? I will not go to my cousins. That is, not unless you wish to be rid of me! That is it — I see it now! You want to get rid of me. You are tired of me. And so is Megsy! I am sure that is why you wish me

to go away from you!’

And, flashing into a sudden fiery passion of tears, Hester flung herself out of the study and Itjcked herself into her room.

But that night, after the minister had gone slowly to his chamber, bowed down with the burden which had so suddenly come upon him, he heard a voice without, very soft and low: ‘I am so sorry I said it! It was very wicked. Please forgive me! I can't go to sleep till you do!’

The minister of Saint John opened the door. He had been standing looking out of the unshut window, the sough of the Water of Darroch in his ears and the black branches of the beech trees tossing gloomily against a stormy sky. He saw now a tear-stained face, masses of tumbled dark hair, and a sensitive mouth that quivered and tried to smile.

‘Revvie, I am sorry!’ the trembling lips said. And it will hardly be believed that this daring girl had thus contracted the ancient and sonorous title of ‘Reverend,’ which is the right of all Scottish ministers of the Gospel. But so it was, and it shows what she was capable of.

The old minister took Hester's face between his hands and kissed her on the brow.

‘My daughter,’ he said, ‘you are more to me than any child of my flesh could ever have been. You are the child of my spirit, the joy of my age, the companion who has brought happiness and new life to a man who stood on the verge of the grave. Yet, for a time at least, we must let you go from us — Megsy and I — and be content to watch you afar off. But remember, if that to which you go prove too hard — if the stairs of the stranger be too steep, the

fremit bread too bitter, the door of the old manse stands open, and there is ever the old place at the table for you. But it is right that you should go, and the Lord who gave will help us who wait to bide here in the hollow of His hand!’

‘Megsy,’ the same pleading voice from the same piteous red lips were to be heard at the old servant’s door a tew minutes later, ‘Megsy, dear, are you asleep?’

There was silence for a while, and Hester was almost stealing away silently as she had come, when she heard Megsy’s voice, altered somewhat, and hoarse, as if with many tears.

‘Yes, my bairn, bide — I am comin’ to you!’

‘Let me come in to you,’ Hester said, ‘I want to sleep beside you this one last night!’

And so the two who had been almost as mother and daughter — the woman who had never had a child of her flesh, and the girl who had never known a mother’s love save that of Megsy Tipperlin’s faithful and devoted service, lay all night awake, while the rain splashed on the window in driving sheets, and the wind lashed the leaves of the beeches upon each other with a noise like the Northern Sea on a rocky shore. But when with the dawn the storm as suddenly ceased, and the light came up broad and large and warm out of the east, the terror of great darkness seemed to pass from off Hester’s spirit, and she rose and kissed the wrinkled old face.

‘You have done so much for me, Megsy,’ she sobbed. ‘I have done nothing for you. But now I will try to be good for your sake — and Revvie’s! I will — I will — I will!’

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

HESTER IN THE STRANGER'S LAND

Sylvanus was far along the high road towards his goal. He had entered politics nearly ten years before. He became one of the heaviest contributors to the campaigning funds of a certain political organisation which requires a great deal of such sinews of war. And, as he was really a scientific man in his way, and took a prominent part in all discussions as to public health, both on the platform and in the House, it was felt that such a man was at least as deserving of a handle to his name as an average distiller or beer-magnate. Besides, he was so rich. He had, it was said, speculated in diamonds and other precious stones with enormous success. It was whispered that his share in certain diamond mines at the Cape amounted to several millions sterling. It was beyond question that he was largely interested in precious stones. He went and came a good deal to Amsterdam, which is at once a rallying and a distributing point for all who buy and sell carbon and alumina in their crystallised forms.

So not only his wealth, but his repute had waxed higher and higher every year. He had now his house in Empress Gate, and it was whispered that, for the next London season, he was in treaty for a palace in Park Lane.

His wife interested herself so largely in good works of the latest and most fashionable kind, that little time was left her for the duty of attending to her younger children, of whom there were three. Of

the seniors, whose acquaintance we have already made, Tom was now leaving college. But, as yet, he was of no particular account in the house, and, as of yore, his sister Vic was his sole crony and confidant.

As may well be believed, it was with a heart compact of fears tumultuary, that Hester found herself being whirled southward through the soft, pleasant dusk of an English twilight into the humming lamp-lit wilderness of London.

All day she had been in a constant state of wonder and bewilderment. The rush and clang of a great railway, the echoing spaciousness of Carlisle station, the eager shoutings of the porters, the whisking by of telegraph poles, and now the racing lights of the far-extending city, all these her heart noted with the sick and sinking thought, 'I am leaving behind me all I love, and I am going to those who will hate and despise me.'

Perhaps it was fortunate that Hester was not alone during any part of the way, or her face would most likely not have been 'fit to be seen,' as Megsy had warned her would be the case if she did not approve herself 'a brave lass.'

Hester had seen and heard many new things that day. The soft rounded hills of England, the gentle lilting speech, the contrast of the red brick of the houses and the intense green of the foliage, the lazy flap of a windmill by the seaward side of the line, all brought it home to Hester that she was very far indeed from her own country.

And so, when the train drew up at St. Pancras with a long musical sigh of regret (which was the settling back of the carriage bodies into repose), her heart beat thickly in her ears, and she gasped as if

not comprehending when the man asked for her ticket.

She was to be met, she knew. And she looked out for her aunt, whom she had seen once or twice during brief summer visits to Arioland. Or at least one of her cousins would come. She was not prepared, however, for the tall man-servant who, with a rug folded neatly over his arm, paraded up and down, peering into all the first-class carriages.

Looking from the window of her third, she heard him distinctly ask the guard for 'Miss Stirling!'

Could that be meant for herself? She took the little bag which 'Revvie' had bought for her in Cairn Edward in her hand, and ran after the man. He looked so tall and stately that she hardly dared speak to him.

'If you please,' she said, 'I am Hester Stirling!'

The man stared hard down at her, as if she were feloniously trying to pass herself off on him as a member of a respectable family.

'I saw you in the third class, but I didn't imagine — well, 'ave you any luggage. Miss?'

Then when in the ruck of the luggage delivery Hester's trunk was pointed out to him, a large one of japanned tin— 'very commodious' the Cairn Edward ironmonger had called it — his nose pointed more angularly than ever up at the roof of the terminus.

'This must go on a keb,' he murmured, 'we certingly can't take it on the kerrige. It'ud disgrace us for ever. I'll put it on a four-wheeler and take his number. Why, it's like a 'ousemaid's going to her first place! This is wot we has to put up with, William,' he confided to the coachman afterwards, 'through takin' service with these 'ere nivoo reesh!'

Then came a long drive through streets which all looked terribly crowded to Hester. She was certain that every second person must infallibly be run over before reaching home. The gas lamps strung themselves out till there seemed no end to them, and there were so many turnings all looking alike, that she could not believe that the driver really knew his way. He must just be experimenting, in the hope of chancing upon her aunt's house somewhere or other.

But at last they stopped in a place which seemed a little less terrible to her. There was, it is true, a great wall of houses facing her, with lighted windows and shining lamps stretching away on either hand. But immediately opposite, the trees rustled their leaves, and she could hear the wind sough among them just as it was doing at that moment by the Darroch Water — but here a sob rose involuntarily, and was as instantly checked.

Hester had an ordeal to undergo, and she was determined to face it bravely for the sake of 'Revvie' and Megsy.

In the hall there was another tall man in pale blue coat and knee breeches, who looked even more imposing than the first. Without even asking her name, he showed Hester up two flights of broad stairs till he paused at a large door. He inclined his ear and listened. Apparently what he heard satisfied him — or perhaps what he did not hear. For he opened the door, and ushered Hester in without announcement.

It was a great room, far grander in every appointment than anything Hester had ever beheld. There were tea-tables covered with a debris of dishes

and dainty silver. Flowers and palms stood about in corners. Yet the place was dimly lighted in comparison with the brightness of the stairways. The idea seemed to be to have as many lights as possible, and then to swathe and jacket and overcoat them, so that as little of it as possible should be in any way useful. Every little globe about the room was equipped with a kind of double extinguisher at top and bottom, of pink silk and frilled in the middle.

At the upper end of the room a pair of figures stood very close together. It seemed to Hester as if the young man had been holding the hand of his companion, a young lady, dressed in a most beautiful costume, which at that time, so little advanced was her social education, she did not recognise as a Liberty tea-gown.

This pale green vision turned and caught sight of them on the threshold.

'What do you mean, Timson,' she said, 'breaking into the drawing-room like this?'

'I beg your pardon, Miss,' stammered Timson — 'but I thought—I understood as how...'

'You had no right to understand, or to think. You knew very well I have this room for my guests, and that the young — ah—lady (How do you do, Hester?) was to be shown to the schoolroom till my lady could receive her!'

'Yes, Miss Ethel!' said Timson, submissively.

'Come this way, Miss,' he whispered to Hester in quite another tone, as if she had been responsible for his disgrace. As the girl was going out of the door she heard her cousin say, apparently in answer to some remark of the very elegant young gentleman

who, without showing the least embarrassment, stood posing with his elbow on the mantelpiece, 'No, do not go. Captain Carisbrook. It is only a sort of poor relation father is taking care of.

But at that moment the door closed upon Hester's cousin and her visitor.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

A SOMEWHAT WARMER WELCOME

Hester followed the tall servitor in the silver and pale blue coat with a feeling akin to awe. He on his part had abandoned all ceremony with her, and having accurately apprehended from Miss Ethel's tone the newcomer's exact position in the house, he confined himself to 'This way!' and so strode brusquely before her, along certain passages which seemed to run about two sides of a large square. Then he stopped at a door from behind which a great noise, confused and peculiar, was proceeding. Timson did not knock gently, probably knowing that he would damage his knuckles in vain. He merely thumped with his closed fist and opened.

It was a curious scene upon which Hester was ushered so unceremoniously, and even the tall Timson, in haste to return to his statutory occupation of admiring his own calves and flirting broadly with such of the servant-maids as might chance to pass through the hall, stood a while watching it with a grin.

In the corner of the room furthest from the door a slight pale-faced young girl was penned in by a table which three riotous children were pushing against her chest. She was making violent but unsuccessful attempts to resist them, and to reach her feet, which had somehow been tethered to the legs of the chair.

'My eye and Betty Martin!' the eldest was crying, a red-headed boy of about thirteen, 'Come on. Lot; push, Grubby, you little lazy beast — give it to her.'

I'll show her how 'prep' is done at our school!

'Oh, please don't, Master Stanhope, you are hurting — let me go!' cried the pale girl, 'here is someone. What would your mamma say if she knew how you behave?'

'She'll say nothing, 'cause she won't know. She'd sack you right away if she did. Then you'd never get any more shawls and things for your old mother. She lives in an almshouse, we know, for we have seen you go in! Ha, ha, you didn't know that, Betty! Lot and me watched you. Miss Elizabeth Martin.'

'Do let me go.'

'Sing 'Clementine,' then. You shan't go unless. Pipe out like this...

'Hello, though, here is somebody — oh, it's only ma's long-lost brother or niece or something. Say, Country, let's see your birthmark — shell out that strawberry on the arm or we shan't own you! None genuine without! Come and hear Miss Martin sing!'

Then Master Stanhope Torphichan-Stirling turned round to the younger two.

'Now, you little beasts,' he cried, 'stand in line. Get ready to bow. I'm going to introduce your teacher. Long-lost-cousin-with-the-strawberry mark, this is Miss Elizabeth Martin of Alms House College, commonly known as Betty Martin!'

'Oh, let me go — do let me go!' said the girl, struggling till the crimson flooded her pale cheek. 'It is shameful when I am trying to do my best, and to be as kind to you as possible!'

Hester had been taking off her gloves in a kind of daze. But now something in the girl's tone touched her. She seemed to comprehend all at once. She went forward to pull the table back, and

encountered Master Stanhope on her way.

'Oh, I say, you let that alone, will you, Country!' he said, 'you 've got nothing to do with us — yet. If you stay, you'll have plenty though!'

He attempted to hold Hester's wrists. But he imagined a vain thing and had reckoned altogether without his host. Hester's slender young body did not give much idea of strength, but the flabby boy, sleek and soft with sweetmeats and surreptitious pasties, was as nothing in the grip of one who for years had accompanied the minister of Saint John over hill and dale, and all unbreathed had kept pace with his heather-step, even when he had forgotten himself in the full blast of an argument.

So Master Stanhope found himself as calmly set to one side as if he had been a doll. Lot, a girl of nine, pulled as vainly at Hester's skirts, and Grubby, whose age was seven, rolled on the floor in vain attempts to bite Hester's legs. But the table came back nevertheless, and Hester, with her hat still on her head, went forward to loosen the unfortunate girl from the armchair to which she had been tied. But by this time Master Stanhope had rallied, and now once more flung himself between Hester and his victim. He gave the former a violent push on the chest, but the girl, accustomed to the quick movements of animals and perfectly at home in the art of watching your opponent's eye, anticipated Stanhope, and with a step aside and a wrestler's swinging grasp upon the boy's collar landed the red-headed youth with his back to the schoolroom wall.

'Oh, I say — you let Master Stanhope alone!' cried Timson from the door, 'you've no right to hinterfere,

'aving just come.'

Hester turned. It was one of the times she wished she had grown quicker. But she had height enough for her purpose, and there was something on her face which intimidated Timson as much as if he had found a desperate burglar astride the plate-chest.

'I seen the very devil look out of that wench's eye, I tell you!' he said afterwards to the other footman. 'She'll come to no good, that un, you mark my words!'

'Go to your work!' Hester bade him, pointing to the door. And Timson went, muttering something which sounded like 'shall hinform her ladyship, that I will!'

But he was not even thanked for his pains, for Master Stanhope put his red head out at the door and cried after him, 'Bully for Country — served you right for sticking your oar in, old Straw-calves!'

What would have happened after that it is difficult to say. Hester, was busy unfastening the cords from the unhappy governess's ankles when a loud 'Hem — hem!' some way along the passage announced the approach of a newcomer. As soon as Master Stanhope heard this, he seized a knife which lay on the mantelpiece and threw himself impetuously at Miss Martin's feet. In a moment he had the cords cut, gathered up and flung into a corner. In the same space of time, which passed more quickly than it can be told, Lot and Grubby had seated themselves at the long ink-stained table, while Stanhope, seizing a book at random from a shelf, fairly hurled himself into the chair at the bottom of the table and became desperately absorbed in his studies, his brows knit, his eyes

fixed, and the fingers of one hand making riot in his hair.

The weighty tread approached slowly along the passage. They were the kind of footsteps which go well with the tune of 'See the conquering hero comes.' They seemed to bring with them the accompaniment of rolling drums. Miss Martin had only time somewhat hastily to run her fingers over her roughened hair, and seat herself scholastically at the table-head, when the door opened, and Sir Sylvanus Torphichan-Stirling, Bart., LL. D., F. R. S., &c., &c., entered with his bland smile, which smile, be it said, had the unfortunate peculiarity of irritating some people. ('For heaven's sake, let the gentleman take that smile off his face before I answer him,' a rude adversary had said on one famous occasion.)

'Ah,' said the great man, beaming upon all in the room, 'diligence is always pleasing in the young! How do you do — Hester Stirling, is it not? I thought so. I hope you were duly met at the station. You have, I see, already made the acquaintance of our youthful hopes. I trust you will be all very happy together. They are good children, and have never given either their mother or myself one moment's uneasiness. You find them diligent, do you not, Miss Martin?' The pale governess bowed silently as if overcome with shyness in the Presence— a peculiarity greatly approved by Sir Sylvanus. It showed so much good sense in one in her position.

'Ah, Stanhope, my son, what is that you are studying?'

Stanhope made a curious noise in his throat. The book he had snatched up was a brown leather-

bound Bible, much affected as a missile in the schoolroom, and the red-headed boy held it upside down. He had been trying to get a chance to turn it all the while. But he felt that his father's eye was upon him, and it would not do to be caught in the act.

'What did you say? Speak clearly, sir, if you please! Remember that Sir Gully Grundy, the eminent Q.C, was good enough to say that I myself owed no small part of my success in the House — I speak of the House of Commons, my dear,' —this condescendingly to the country cousin, who would not be expected to know such things— 'Sir Gully Grundy, a great orator himself, was flattering enough to say that the clearness of my intonation and the fine quality of my voice carried me through where other men would have failed. So learn to speak clearly, my boy. And now, tell me what you are studying. Ah! the Bible! I am glad to see that, Stanhope. It argues well for your future that, coming in upon you thus without warning, your father should find his children of their own accord studying the Scriptures. I shall inform your mother of that tonight and she will rejoice with me. But what part of Holy Writ excites your curiosity, my son? I am interested to find out.'

So would Stanhope have been. But he never could read type upside down, and so had to make a hit-or-miss dash for it.

'The Holy Gospel according to Ezra,' he gulped.

'Wh—a—at?' gasped his father.

'Luke!' whispered Hester, taking pity.

'Saint Luke, sir!' said Stanhope, picking his words like one well accustomed to the operation.

'Let me see, sir!' said his father, who was somewhat suspicious.

Stanhope gulped, fumbled, and dropped the book. Hester, who was standing close behind the boy's chair, lifted the volume as if to hand it to Sir Sylvanus, and with a quick movement, learned in the Kirk of St. John, she opened it at the Gospel of Luke, the next moment presenting it open to the baronet.

'Ah, thank you, Hester,' he said; 'I can see that you have already won the affection and confidence of your young charges — I mean companions.'

'If you please,' said Hester, quietly, 'I am a little tired. Might I go up to my own room?'

'Certainly, my dear,' said Sylvanus, with a smile; 'we will doubtless see you again after dinner. I will send some one to show you the way upstairs. Au revoir my dears. Continue your studies in the same spirit in which you have begun, and you will be honoured of God and man; also you will receive my approbation!'

Sir Sylvanus passed away up the corridor, apparently to the same unheard roll of martial music. A hush of silence fell on the schoolroom which lasted exactly till the dull and resonant sound of his footsteps on the inlaid wooden floor of the passage had been exchanged for the sharper fall of boot-leather upon the tiles in the outer hall. Then pandemonium broke loose. Master Stanhope flung the leather covered Bible to the end of the room, carrying with it an ink-bottle and plentifully bespattering Miss Charlotte on the way, as also that young lady's doll, which she had been concealing on her lap under the table during her father's visit.

Angry at this affront, Lot threw herself upon her brother and pulled his hair—in the circumstances an unfortunate method of assault, for her own single Gretchen plait was much better adapted for rude seizure. So in a few moments she was reduced to sulky sobs and moody shakes of the head. She would tell anybody and everybody. She would be revenged. Ha! ha! Just wait!

Then Stanhope turned his attention to his cousin. He looked at her now with a kind of respect.

'Let's see your muscle,' he said; 'you must be a strong 'un! Nothing much to feel,' he commented, critically, as Hester extended the part of her body required. 'But it must be jolly whip-cordy what there is of it! Say, d 'ye know you made me see stars when you fetched me round that whopper against the wall? She has got none at all. That's why we can rot her so easy!'

The young gentleman pointed casually at Miss Martin, who was resignedly gathering up the books, slates, pencils, pens, blotters, which were scattered round everywhere and restoring them to some kind of order on the shelves that filled one entire side of the room.

Stanhope watched her contemptuously.

'She's all right, but has got no savvy,' he remarked, exactly as if Miss Martin had been deaf.

'I think you are a horrid little boy,' Hester began, indignantly, 'and if I had anything to do with you I would teach you to behave differently!'

'I daresay you would,' said Stanhope, calmly, 'but then you see you ain't old Betty Martin. I say, though, it was very decent of you not to split to the Bart. And you got me out of that hole about Ezra as

smart as if you had been Tony Gibbons!

'And who is Tony Gibbons?' said Hester, who was very tired, but who had no idea of allowing the fact to appear.

'Tony Gibbons is my school-pal. He is a wonder, I tell you, and has the loveliest terriers — I mean tarriers!'

'If you please, miss, I was to show you to your room,' the voice came- to the ear of Hester as from a great height.

'Hey,' cried Stanhope, rushing at a middle-aged woman who filled up the doorway, 'here's old Bidy Barker. How do, Barker? Come and dance.'

'You may see me dance the polka! You may see me whirling round; You may see my coat-tails flying,' he sang to no tune in particular.

And before the stout and dignified woman could protest the red-headed imp of mischief had seized her by the waist, or rather by as much of it as his arm could encircle. The next instant the two were spinning round the room, colliding freely and solidly with bookshelves, desks, and chairs, besides sending Grubby howling into a corner by a resounding whack on the ear, bestowed by Master Stanhope in pure affection and levity of spirits.

'Muster Stan'ope — sir — I will not endoore sich conduct!' cried the old dame, breathlessly, when the whirl ceased; 'your lady mother shall know of this indignity before I am an hour older.'

'If you tell, Bidy,' retorted the red-headed boy, as sure as I live I will write for the certificate of your birth and give it to the coachman. He only wants your money anyway. 'Why, it's like keepin' company with your bloomin' grandmother!' he said to me one

day!’

‘Figgis never said no sich imperence,’ said the lady, resettling her hair and dress. ‘He is a most respectable man and careful of his words. And as for you. Master Stanhope, the birch does not grow that would make you speak the truth.’

‘No, but the cane does,’ cried a new voice from the doorway, as a stoutish, silk-hatted young man, round-faced and ruddy, rather over-dressed and over-buttoned as to surtout, but with a good-humoured expression on his countenance, entered briskly.

‘What’s up?’ he cried. ‘By Jove, who ’s this? Why, little Hester, how you’ve grown! Shake hands!’

It was Tom Stirling, up from college, and grown into a fine young man about town. He had just come in from airing his latest stick and lavender gloves on the most suitable and fashionable pavements.

Hester extended her hand and looked him straight in the eyes.

‘Come for good?’ he asked, cheerfully.

She sighed as she nodded. The dear old whitewashed manse by the water of Darroch appeared very far off tonight. It did not seem as if she could ever get back there again.

‘Going to get your things off and tittivate a bit, eh? So long, see you at dinner?’ cried Tom, jovially. ‘See and get her down in time, Barker!’

‘Master— I mean Mr. Tom,’ (It’s as well you do, Barker,’ from Tom), this young lady (the personnel of the house in Empress Gate had great difficulty in uttering the substantive when they spoke of Hester) is to take supper in the schoolroom. There is some of Miss Ethel’s friends dining tonight!’

'What a dashed shame! And what rotten cheek of Eth! I won't have it. If my cousin dines in this old hole, hang it, I will, too, I like Eth's impudence, and the mater does just what that girl says. I'll see about it!'

Whereupon Tom dashed upstairs, taking the steps three at a time. As he went he communed with himself, and Hester was the subject of his meditation.

'Not pretty,' he said to himself, 'no, not in the least pretty — too angular and flat. And yet I don't know; she is jolly, and there is something about her eyes when she looks at you. Well, it's a sight better than having Vic away, and nothing but these beasts of Ethel's about the place. I'll have a headache and dine in the schoolroom tonight!'

So Hester was not wholly alone. Even on her first night in the great city she had achieved one ally in the house in Empress Gate, and that no unimportant one — at least in the opinion of Mr. Thomas Alistair Torphichan-Stirling.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

MY LORD DARROCH TALKS BUSINESS

Carus Darroch steadily confronted his father in the business-room at Darroch Castle. He came but seldom into the presence of Lord Darroch, save at meal-times, or when he had been specially sent for, as on the present occasion. Father and son had absolutely nothing in common save name and race, and for the most part they were content to meet without gladness and part without regret.

Carus spent much of his time with a book about the woods, or out on the moors of heather with a seldom-discharged gun under his arm, and a favourite author in his pocket. He had been born at the tall old castle which sat so proudly on its eminence at the head of the loch. So the burns and scaurs of Glencairn, the pebbly beaches and lily-studded shores of Loch Darroch were as part of his own life.

His father, the present Lord Darroch, had but two aims when he visited the Strath, the first being to get as much money as he could obtain from farmers and agents, and, this being accomplished to the accompaniment of cajolings and coaxings—or, as it might be, of oaths and curses, — to get himself as rapidly and as swiftly away as possible.

Lord Darroch considered the universe as made specially for his gratification. To this rule there could be no exceptions. He had impressed it on his wife so completely that, after giving birth to Carus, she had first of all betaken herself back to her

mother, the Duchess of Niddisdale, and presently, discovering no claim or hold upon life, yet farther — to the place of all unfulfilled hopes and wasted lives. The Duchess considered this very weak, as doubtless it was. She herself would probably have first horse-whipped Lord Darroch, and then brought a suit against him in the proper court. But she could not inspire the same determinate course of action in the Lady Sophia.

‘I always told Niddisdale it would turn out so,’ she said. ‘What can you do with a person who has no pride, and who is named Sophia?’

Lord Darroch had come all the way from Paris in order to have this interview with his son. He might have sent for Carus to come to him there, indeed, but with the squeamishness of such parents he did not want Carus in Paris. And besides, there were various other ‘birds’ connected with the cutting of wood and the mortgaging of some remaining morsels of free property, that he hoped to kill with the selfsame stone.

So, on the morning after his arrival, he installed himself in the high-backed chair at the upper end of the business-room, from which his own father had often risen to flog him, and sent the butler to summon Carus to the momentous interview. Of the two Lord Darroch was by a great deal the more nervous. Yet Carus had known that there was something in the wind, as soon as his father came in the night before. He had given his son a greeting more than usually effusive, and helped him to wine with a vast deal of pleasantness and good comradeship.

But Carus Darroch knew his father well enough

to be aware that this bonhomie was merely assumed for a purpose, and what that was he guessed more or less accurately. Lord Darroch was a man who at one time of his life, when the 'smart set' of the period was less invaded by millionaire proteges of royalty than at present, had made a certain figure in life as a young fellow of expensive tastes and a dashing manner of gratifying them. And now, when he was threescore, he still endeavoured, with straitened means and the most perfect of valets, to hide from himself and others that he was anything else.

His wig was a marvel of clustering (and yet not too clustering) raven locks, with the least artistic touch of decorous gray at the temples, which only a master could have allowed himself. But then it was the pride of Silas Clark and Sons that, when allowed to do their best without regard to cost, they sent a man to study their subject for a month before putting so much as the foundation upon the block. Well-preserved was not the name for Lord Darroch. He was perfectly preserved— fresh as if he had been packed in ice every night and unpacked by his valet in the morning.

'Good morning, Carus,' said his lordship from the chair of state, bending graciously towards his son, 'do you take anything so early in the day? I suppose not. Boys like you never ought to need a fillip in the morning. Peach brandy is a good thing, though, if you have no fear of gout. I recommend peach brandy. No? Well then, let us talk business. I have come a long way to do it, Carus, my boy. But I could not bear to bring you away from the country at this season of the year, and perhaps I had a desire to

look at the old place once more.'

Carus bowed silently, and sat down, regarding his father with the quiet, grave attention which the elder always felt to be a little disconcerting.

'Well, my boy,' said Lord Darroch, 'you are twenty-one—you have been through college with the best. You have taken your degree, which there was not the least necessity for you to do. You have had your send-off—a first-class coming-of-age dinner, good speeches as ever I heard — and capital verses that poet fellow recited in your honour! Now I want to know what you are going to do. It's too late to think of the army, I suppose, but you could easily get a commission in the Militia. You could do a little toy soldiering — a pretty uniform goes a deuced long way, I can tell you, and I was in the Guards. The girls like it, and you may marry a pretty one as well as a rich one. Which last you must do in any case. But, hang it, that's what I always say — when a fellow is any catch, he can get a pretty rich girl just as easy as an ugly one.'

'There is no need to think about that yet, sir, I think,' said Carus, smiling.

'Never too soon to think about it, when it's got to be done,' rejoined his lordship, 'or to 'go where money is,' as somebody or other said. Well, about your future?'

'I had thought, sir, of reading law, and by-and-by writing a little, if I have the ability,' said Carus, modestly.

'Tut — tut, what does a man want with scribbling for a few pence, when he will have a title, and one of the oldest in Scotland? Reading law is all right. The more you get up about that, the better you will know

how to raise the wind when your time comes. By the way, speaking of law, it was a matter of that kind which brought me here. I have waited till you were twenty-one in order to speak freely with you. It is this. The Glen Sorn estate does not lie well to the rest of the Darroch property. It is chiefly arable land, and contains no considerable moors worth shooting over. It is badly burdened. Now, there has come along an orterer for it who is willing to give a fancy price, and I have determined to sell. We shall never get another such offer.'

'But, sir, is the Glen Sorn estate not a good two-thirds of all the property — in rental at least — and is it not strictly entailed?'

Lord Darroch bit his lip and was silent a full minute, while he controlled his temper. Then he rose, took his son's arm and stepped to the window.

'Look,' he said, and the young man's eyes swept from verge to verge of bounding horizon. Dark, heathy mountains extended far to the west. Rolling moorland, purple and yellow and brown, undulated along the east in great waves that never broke, and to the north rose the deep-bosomed green hills of Windy Standard.

'Two-thirds, you say, and yet all that would be left? Hampering debts would be cleared, and, if that is any matter to you, your father made a free and happy man.'

Then he led the young man to the other window, which looked down the Loch of Darroch. Blue and calm, scarcely fluttered by a passing breath, it stretched beneath, mile beyond gleaming mile. White farmhouses nestled upon either side. The fields about were golden and green, and the pastures

nearer at hand were dotted white with sheep, that looked no bigger than gowans, so high towered Darroch Castle on its hill,

‘All these would be left. Surely a few turnip fields over in Glen Sorn would not be a great price to pay for a father's blessing, and the knowledge that you have given him new life.’

Lord Darroch went slowly back and sat down in his chair, while his son stood a moment longer at the window, before turning and saying quietly, ‘What would you have me do, father?’

The elder looked up hopefully. He had not heard his son speak so affectionately for a long time. He congratulated himself on the success of his appeal, which he had carefully thought out upon his northward journey.

‘I would ask you to join me in breaking the vexatious entail on the Glen Sorn property,’ he said, looking steadily at Carus, ‘Mark — I do not mean without safeguarding your own interests. Indeed the courts would most certainly see to that. A part of the price, and probably a large part, would be set aside for you — invested in good securities, that is!’

‘I presume that in making this proposal,’ said the young master of Darroch, ‘you have considered the terms of my mother's marriage settlement?’

Lord Darroch's eyebrows rose a full half-inch with that haughty lift which is only seen on the faces of irascible men when they find themselves unexpectedly cornered.

‘I have,’ he answered, with a quick, ugly look, and something like a snarl in his tone, ‘or I should not be here asking your consent. But how are you so glib concerning marriage settlements? Have you

begun to read law already? Who has been talking to you, I should like to know?’

‘My grandmother showed me a copy of it the last time I was at Dalveen,’ said Carus, quietly.

My lord muttered a malediction upon her Grace of Niddisdale between his clenched teeth.

‘I thought it was the old harridan who had put you up to all this. You refuse your consent, then?’

‘I have not said so,’ said Carus, still more quietly.

‘But you mean to say it! Quick, out with it — aye or no! None of your dashed philosophical melancholies with me! I want to know my friends!’

‘I certainly have seen no adequate reason for giving my consent to what, once done, would be irrevocable, and might gravely prejudice not only myself, but those who may come after me!’

His lordship rose up in furious anger.

‘Then I will do it without you, and in a way you may like even less. If you do not give me your consent to this arrangement, and in addition consent to marry a daughter of my friend, Sir Sylvanus Torphichan-Stirling, I will see to it, sir, that you succeed to a worthless estate. Not a penny of money, not a farmhouse that will not need to be rebuilt before a tenant will live in it, not a stick of wood thicker than my little finger from one end of the property to the other! Now you have heard, sir, and what I say, I will do!’

‘Is Sir Sylvanus the customer you proposed for Glen Sorn, sir?’ said Carus, with the least touch of weary scorn in his voice.

‘And if he is, sir, what is that to you? Is his money not as good as any one else’s?’ cried my lord, white with the very intensity of his passion.

‘So you propose to sell your estate to the father and your heir to the daughter,’ said Carus. ‘Well, sir, I will be a party to neither transaction!’

‘You infernal young puppy!’ cried Lord Darroch, stamping with anger, and then, suddenly stopping, he picked up the foot in one hand as the action sent a twinge of agony through his great toe.

He limped to his chair, furiously threw himself into it, and leaned back.

‘Now, listen to me, sir,’ he said, ‘I give you a year in which to come to your senses. Few fathers would be so generous. You shall have four quarterly allowances, and then, by heaven, you can fend for yourself. If, however, you like to be reasonable, come to town next week, and I will introduce you to Sir Sylvanus and his daughters. If not — why, go to the devil your own way. I will have no more to say to you!’

CHAPTER TWENTY

HER GRACE OF NIDDISDALE

Carus did go to London, but it was by way of Dalveen. He found her Grace the Duchess of Niddisdale in her rose garden. She was a tall, powerful frame of a woman who, though over seventy, still carried herself like a grenadier, and showed her age far less than her perfectly preserved son-in-law.

As was her custom when in the country, her Grace was equipped with a hat shaped like a Chinese umbrella, the brim of which came down nearly to her shoulders. It was, however, tilted well back from her strong, capable, masculine face. Her dress was of stout dust-coloured calico, such as no one of the housemaids of Dalveen Castle would have done their morning's dusting in. The Duchess's slight but quite perceptible grey moustache had a top-dressing of red earth, and in her hands there were the trident and 'spud' used by gardeners for applying fertilising materials to the roots of rosebushes and other plants in need of nourishment. This nutriment was also present in a barrow. And a gardener, well accustomed to his mistress's ways, and too well bred to smile at them, was receiving a practical demonstration as to his business from the Duchess's own gracious lips.

But scarcely had he begun to carry out her instructions—indeed, before he had been a minute at work—the 'spud' and 'graip' were snatched from him, as he had expected. An aristocratic

heel, concealed in a huge 'tacketty' boot, laced half-way up the leg, was driving in the prongs of the 'graip,' and a plant was receiving food in the only proper way from the hands of her Grace the Duchess of Niddisdale.

'Hello, Carus, what wind blew you here? I wish to heaven it did not blow from that wheelbarrow to my nose—but it is good stuff for all that! I saw it mixed myself. Did you ever study the theory and application of court manures, Carus? Just move the barrow a yard to leeward, will you? No? Whatever did you spend your time on in college? You can go, Thomson. The Master of Darroch will assist me! Now tell me all your news. What mischief has the Old Adam been hatching now?'

For it was by this name that this most unconventional of Duchesses was in the habit of referring to her son-in-law.

'Let me help you, grandmother!' said Carus, offering to take the spud and graip out of her hands.

'You!' cried her Grace, highly astonished at his daring; 'faith you might be acquainted with all the Georgics of Virgil and yet not be able to shovel dung to my satisfaction. Do ye really think, Carus, that what I cannot trust John Tamson to do, I would lippen to a callant like you?'

So with Carus at the 'trams' of the wheelbarrow, and the Duchess feeding the roots of her roses as daintily as if they had been sick canary birds, the tale of Glen Sorn was told.

'What did I tell ye?' cried her Grace, setting a hand on her hip in the attitude of a fishwife resting her creels against a railing while she 'redds' up a friend's character over the way. 'I think I hear him —

'your interests' — 'safeguards' — 'burdens!' Truly the devil in the form of a serpent hath entered into the Old Adam. But I am no gumptionless Eve, that he should beguile me. The burdens he put on himself— 'your interest,' forsooth, when all this is just that he may get ten thousand to squander on besoms like' — (here her Grace entered into unnecessary detail.) 'And that for his threats, Carus.' (Here the Duchess snapped her loamy ringers.) 'There 's aye as much as will feather a nest in the auld wife's sock, Carus — and Niddisdale has no need thereof. (Where are ye with that barrow?)'

'But what would you advise me to do first, grandmother?' said Carus, keeping his eye on the work before him.

'Get another fill from John Tamson,' said the Duchess of Niddisdale, 'and when I have done this last row, I'll get peace and ease to cast my mind over the latest writhings of the serpent, the Old Adam!'

This was not exactly teaching the young man to observe the first commandment with promise, but the old lady owned no bridle for her tongue. And to do her justice, she would have spoken to the full as frankly in the very face of my Lord Darroch himself and, moreover, have been most grateful for the opportunity.

After she had cleansed her hands and given a perfunctory dabble to her face at the stop-cock of a garden watering-pipe, she called out 'Have ye a napkin, Carus?' Carus instantly plucked one from his pocket and gravely presented it to his grandmother.

She rubbed her large-featured good-humoured face with it, and as she finished off by polishing her

hands, she took up the burden of her prophecy.

It has been in my mind, Carus, that ye were in danger of becoming somewhat overcareful and pernicketty. But I have hopes of you yet, for this is a good stieve linen napkin, none of your flimsy lace and cambric that make the young men of the day like Aholah and Aholibah, that painted their eyelids and decked them with ornaments and other apparel!

'As for the apothecary's daughter, Carus, this is what I tell you, go — look — see! That is neither here nor there. They cannot tie ye to a bed-post and marry ye with your will or against your will, as the Faas wedded their wives. And for what should a lass the less or more fright a brave young man like you, laddie?'

'But,' urged Carus, 'I flared up, and told my father that I would have nothing to do with either entail-breaking or wife. Am I to go back to my father with a finger in my mouth!'

'Flared up, did ye?' cried her Grace, indignantly, 'it would have been telling you, lad, if ye had flared up oftener and higher — as high as Etna and as often as — your grandmother! Nor do ye need to gang back with any finger in your mouth. What for need ye to be beholden to the Old Adam to introduce ye to the lass? She comes of as good blood as yourself on the 'woman' side of the shilling. And when ye are thinking of marrying, that is the only one to be considered. If she be like Isobel Stirling of Arioland, she will be worth kissing by daylight. She was a beauty in the year '30 — I mean '50 — and my very good friend. I married poor Niddisdale, and she a decent bonnet laird, but neither of us was the better or the worse for that. Aye, good friends we

were till the day of her death, as when we skelpit it over the braes barefoot and bareleg, wild as colts turned out to the hill.'

So after this fashion her Grace of Niddisdale counselled her grandson with the wisdom of an expert in affairs and a woman of the world. Carus had always been a favourite with her, and whenever he rode over from Darroch on his chestnut, his grandmother used to look at him and say, 'Ye should be clothed in blue silk, my young Assyrian captain!'

'Why do you call me that, grandmother?' the boy would ask.

Then the old lady would sigh a little and answer, 'Aye me, and the days that were — the days that were! But it shall not be an auld wife's fault if ye be not clothed in scarlet and other devices — which, being interpreted, means that ye shall have the wherewithal to have your fling like every other proper lad. May I be there to see! And I shall also give you advice upon the best kinds of fling — very judicious advice, too!'

'Why are you so kind to me, grandmother?'

'Ah, laddie,' she would reply, 'and that is a long story. It has been my blessing or my bane (I ken not which) all my life to have a soft side for desirable young gentlemen of Assyria, riding upon horses!'

'Is that why you gave me that chestnut mare, grandmother?'

'Maybe, Carus lad, maybe.'

'Did my grandfather ride much when he was a young man?'

'Him!' (The Duchess gazed a moment at Carus with a kind of lofty surprise.) 'Ye didna surely think I

was meaning my poor dear Niddisdale. Nay, Carus, nay — the pleasant young men clad in blue had long done with their riding before he came on the scene. But that minds me. Ye have an objection to taking an observation of this apothecary's daughter? Now, there is only one objection in a young man's mind which can excuse him from desiring to visit a pretty girl. And that, of course, is, that he shall first be in love with another. Are you in love, Carus? Out with it, lad. I shall certainly think none the less of you for it. Who is Georgiana Niddisdale that she should?'

'On my honour, no, grandmother!'

'So much the better — as far as the apothecary's daughters are concerned. Go and see how the lass takes ye, Carus! Mind, it's no altogether beauty, though that some men count all the law and the prophets. I never was what you would call a beauty myself— yet — well, I have not come to the threescore year (and a pickle) to begin to complain now! But if ye are looking for a wife, Carus, choose ye the woman ye would like to keep ye company through a month's rainy weather in the Isle o' Mull!'

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

THE FOUR WORLDS OF EMPRESS GATE

At the age of twenty-four years and under, the Torphichan-Stirling girls had enough beauty and money to be attractive to three-fourths of mankind, enough sense to be tolerable to the other quarter, and — what was doubtless a chief factor in rendering the house in Empress Gate an agreeable resort — the tact to keep their father and mother in the background without appearing to do so.

By almost universal acclamation Ethel was allowed to be the beauty of the trio. Victoria was a fine, handsome girl of the more dashing sort. But that type had not yet fully come in, along with the decay of lawn-tennis and the apotheosis of golf. Claudia — well, Claudia sat in corners, and it was pleasant enough to sit in corners also — when you could not get Ethel. Indeed, Claudia, on her own merits, was as yet no more than the snapper-up of Ethel's unconsidered trifles. But for all that, the youngest Miss Torphichan-Stirling was the cleverest of the three by a very great deal.

Devoted to her elder sister as Claudia apparently was, she secretly aspired to quite another role. She believed from an early age that knowledge is power, and she had studied under several able instructresses.

She knew how to sting a dull man by a whip cracked over his vanity, how to astonish a clever one by an unexpected quip, generally at the expense of another woman, or how to draw on a reluctant

cavalier by a bold sally. Then she had taught Ethel a code of signals. She would come in or go out, according to the lift of Ethel's eyelids, or telegraph to her heliograph-fashion, by the merest flutter of a fan. She knew when her sister desired to move in the direction of the conservatory, and when she was to interpose with a problem in macrame-work. But all the while Claudia was playing her own game, and playing it well.

'When Ethel goes — well, there will only be me. Vic is a rank outsider, and father is getting richer all the time!'

Decidedly a young woman of no illusions — a force to be reckoned with was Miss Claudia Torphichan-Stirling.

In the large house in Empress Gate there were, excluding the coteries of the servants' hall, four separate and independent worlds — and between them four several great gulfs fixed. So, naturally, it took Hester a considerable time before she began to understand the intricate politics of the establishment.

There was, first of all, the world of fifth-rate politics, which talks of party leaders by their surnames, as if they were partners in a foursome; with this was conjoined, as a paying annex, that particular province of philanthropy which may be called the professional one — that which not only lets its right hand know what its left hand is doing, but advertises details in the newspapers. This, of course, was the world of the Baronet and his lady. The seat of its empire was the black walnut dining-room with a table seating thirty-six, together with the great drawing-room into which at the memorable

meeting of the Sparrow Protection League, over three hundred ladies (mostly of weight) had been packed — without apparent danger to the walls, which proves that the theory of strains is sometimes considerably out.

The second world was bounded by the walls of the Blue Drawing-room, of Miss Ethel's boudoir — and of the conservatory. This was the social and fighting world, and when the new ball-room, with the most marvellous floor in London, should be finished, Claudia anticipated that quite a number of Waterloos would take place, having the general result of crowning her own and her sister's foreheads with bay — or even with strawberry leaves.

As to the third world, its perfume was tobacco, its temple enclosure and court of the Gentiles being the smoking and billiard rooms (added by Sylvanus against his principles, but with the strongest feeling of their necessity), and its Holy of Holies a certain nondescript barracks at the top of the house, full of all manner of long-seated cane chairs, pipe-racks, guns, rods, golf-clubs, dressing-gowns, with a table for Vic to sit on and swing her legs while the men talked horse and racecourse, rod and gun, wine, women, and the music-hall song of the moment. This comfortable lumber-room was called, for no particular reason 'Tom's study.'

To it a few approved men were sometimes invited to ascend 'after you have got through with Eth.' But the apartment was strictly tabooed, not only to the majority of 'Eth's wild beasts' and 'tame cats,' but to the young lady herself, and her aider and abetter, Claudia.

'See here, you fellows,' Tom would say upon occasion, 'light up and smoke like chimneys, or these crimpy girls from the Blue-room will be coming up to spoil the fun. Light up, Vic, old gal — here's a gold-tip for you!'

And in five minutes there would arise a white cloud, suffocating like the smoky steam from a score of high-pressure engines—not the dim blue haze pervading and fragrant as incense which gathers when men are smoking slowly and with their souls in the evening oblation. This faked-up pother would not have deceived a man for a moment — even Vic would have detected the imposture. But 'bless you,' as Tom declared, 'Eth and Clau will never know that we have not been at it for hours.'

Then, when, having themselves 'got through' with their visitors in the Blue Drawing-room the two young ladies of the house (Vic being avowedly one of the 'fellows') were heard gingerly ascending the wooden stairs, Tom would wave his arms wildly 'to mix things,' as he said, occasionally animadverting, in a hushed whisper, on the apparent treachery of some intimate.

'Look here, you Armytage, I believe you want 'em to come in. Smoke as if you meant it!'

Then Ethel would tap gently, and open the door in the midst of a great silence.

'Why, Eth, is that you?' the wary Tom would cry. 'Come in, old girl.'

'Ugh! ugh! You horrid wretches, you have atmosphere as thick as black fog. And the smell! Come, Claudia, we shall be like costers in a minute! Why, it's worse than the bar of a public-house!'

By this time all the men are on their feet.

'Look here, Eth — hold on!'

'Don't go Miss Stirling! We'll shut off steam! Didn't know you were coming up! Awfully sorry, y'-know!'

But by this time the 'young ladies' were half-way back to the Blue Drawing-room.

'It is a shame,' thus Claudia would meditate, sadly; 'and some of them quite nice, too! I wish we could have stayed!'

The fourth and last circle of this doubtful Paradise in Empress Gate was that of the 'younger children,' the world of the schoolroom and the day-nursery, which was just emerging into the 'children's parlour.' This, as we have seen, was the haunt of Stanhope, Lot, and the Grub. It became the Inquisition and Holy Office of poor Miss Martin during the evening, and the lecture-room of several tutors and masters during the day — the chief of whom being a certain Mr. Clarence Shillinglaw, a hard-fisted, hard-driving Scot, than whom no better tutor could have been obtained for such Crim Tartars as the younger hopes of the house of Torphichan-Stirling.

This, of course, was the world set aside for our particular little Ugly Duckling from the lily pools of the water of Darroch. But it was to the second that the Master of Darroch was welcomed with open arms — if one may use the phrase of damsels so correct as the twin queens of the Blue Drawing-room.

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

THE COMFORTABLE ESTATE OF MATRIMONY

It was the stillest of mornings at the Manse of St. John. The minister had gone down by the waterside to the walk that is called by his name to all time. The moon was yet shining quite brightly when his thick water-proof boots first swished through the grass. She was an old moon, in her last quarter, already gravid and quick with the promise of the new light which was to come after the days of darkness.

It was too dark for the minister to see his Greek Testament, but the moan of his unspoken prayers sighed from him as the night winds do through the willow copses on the Darroch edge.

It was the Fast-Day—that is, the day of solemn preparation for the yearly communion in God's-House-of-Saint-John, and the minister had old-fashioned notions. So he prayed for his people, that they might be enabled to attend the services of the sanctuary, and for strength and grace strenuously to reblike them if they did not. He prayed for Megsy, that she might have resignation given her to see in the separation from her bairn the onlaying of a higher hand.

He prayed for the bairn herself— his bairn — their bairn.

And at that moment the prayer ceased in a little outcry— a kind of invincible eruption in Anthony Borrowman's breast, half protest of contempt at his own weakness, half involuntary upheaval of his

whole nature — as when over a hidden rock, weed-grown, the green seawater which has long been gathering and swaying, sinks, rises, and breaks in one great pulse of whitening suriie. So within him the soul of the minister heaved, swayed, and broke.

There came a voice from over the wall of the kirk-ward — a voice from among the tombs, startling enough at that hour, and in that quiet place.

‘What for are ye greetin', minister?’

Anthony Borrowman upheaved himself on tiptoe, put his hand on the rough stones of the dyke, and looked for his interlocutor, that he might discharge upon him the bitter sixth vial of his heart.

‘You that dares to say that I am greetin' — stand forth!’

In a moment the man had forgotten his weakness, and the minister risen to the height of his office.

‘It was like being at a session meetin' when the minister girds his loins for the reproof of the stiff-necked and rebellious,’ said Anders MacQuaker. And Anders, by reason of his office, was a connoisseur in such things.

‘Man,’ said Anders, telling the tale afterwards, ‘when I saw himsel' face to face, glowerin' at me like an angry bull o' Bashan — faith, but I was glad that there was at the least a guid five-foot stane dyke atween us. For the minister is no canny man to face when the fit is on him!’

‘What richt hae you, or any man, to say that a minister of the Gospel is greetin'—when, as it may be, the wind may hae brocht the water in his e'en?’

‘And I am tellin' ye it was that still ye could hear Kip MacKinstrey cryin' in the kye on the back hill o’

Arioland. But there stood the minister, wi' the black lee in his mooth and the licht o' anither warl' on his coontenance. Faith, boys, but I couldna but admire at the genius o' the man!

'Then says he, for I could speak no word, 'Anders MacQuaker,' says he, 'what seek ye in the resting-place of the saints before the breaking of the day?'

'Noo, lads, ye are decent lads, but maist o' your experience o' life is yet to come to you; but if I am to tell ye this thing as it happened, there maun be nae lauchin', or scornin', or, by the grave o' Peden the Prophet, though I am auld enouch to be ony o' your grand-fathers, I will tak' the scoffer to the door and gie him strength-o'-airm. Noo, be heedin', lads!

'So I telled him what I did in the kirk-yaird.

'Minister,' says I, 'I seek no man's hurt, neither the property of ony. I am no resurrectioner, nor yet wad I move the ancient landmarks and say that any man's plot o' kirk-yaird grund was mine. But there is a headstone here that I hae an interest in. It marks the spot where lie the forbears of an honest woman, Margaret Tipperlin, that is housekeeper to yoursel'. Here lies her faither, decent man, that was portioner in Mayfield o' Balmaghie, as the stane itsel' records, her mither that was cut aff in her prime, her faither's faither, Tammas Tipperlin, carrier to Carsphairn, and his brither John, that was hangit for sheep-stealin' — but maist unjustly, for John only helped the thief to drive them awa', being prood o' the workin' o' his dog, and saft by natur'. Ye see his inscription, 'Died by the veesitation o' Providence.' For the lads beggit his body frae Calcraft, and he was brocht in here ower the wa' and buried under cloud o' nicht, as I hae

often heard my faither tell.

‘Noo, sir,’ says I to the minister, ‘ye ken that of a lang season, I, Anders MacQuaker, hae desired to put up the banns wi’ Alargaret Tipperlin. But aye, tor a taut in the past that I need not condescend upon, Marget says me nay. So it is aye some comfort to a man’s heart when he no permitted to care for Marget leevin’, to gie a bit owerlook at the place where she will lie when she is dead. And I hae bocht the bit o’ grund next to the Tipperlin plot, sir, so that at the judgment-day her and me will sit up in oor shrouds thegither, and I will juist nod to Marget, and she will nod back to me, weel pleased-like to see a kenned face at sic a time. For we will no be able to hear yin anither speak for Gawbriel and his trumpet!’

Then the minister upraise to reblike. I wondered when it was coming!

‘Anders,’ says he, ‘that is no a proper mainner to speak concernin’ the mysteries o’ the Last Things!’

‘Maybe no, minister,’ says I, for his e’en were kind, though tho anger was on his tongue, ‘but, as ye ken, I am an ignorant man and unlearned. Yet noo that your honour is here, maybe I micht ask ye to say a bit word to Marget for me — to influence her mind sae that after a’ she micht tak’ a thocht to marry me. I hae a bit snug doon-sittin’, minister!’

‘What does a man o’ your age want wi’ a wife?’ says he, brisklike.

‘What does ony man want wi’ a wife?’ says I back to him, to the full juist as brisk.

The minister gied a bit lauch at that, and says he, ‘I hae never wanted yin, at any rate!’

‘Never?’ says I, gieing him a bit slee look, for I had

served doon in Borgue, and had heard a wee sough there o' a bit lass they caaed Jennie Lake, an Englishy craitur that cam' to bide ahboot the Lennox Plunton when Maister Borrowman was a student. And the Borgue folk said she was a consaity handfu', and fell bonny. At ony rate, she twined young Anton about her fingers like woodbine on a hawthorn bush. And a' the while the deceitfu' wee fairy was trystit to be married to anither man. And they said doon there that Maister Borrowman never could look at ony woman wi' pleesure again. And sma' wonder!

'Sae when I said to him 'Never?' — like that, lads, and gied him the pawky look, I saw that I had him.

'Davert!' says he — weel, lads, may be he didna juist say 'Davert,' but that was the sense o't. 'What do ye want me to do? I hae a good housekeeper, and I dinna want to lose her, and gang back to thae camsteery hizzies that ravin' wi' dishclouts and dusters athwart the land!'

'Oh, he's an almichty queer speaker is the minister when he gets started, and his language is the best substitute for sweerin' that ony religious man ever invented. Na, na — I'll no sit still and hear ony man say that the minister swears. But a' the same, whiles there's a savour about his conversation as if he did!

'So says I, 'Minister, the same was in my thocht. It's juist a notion I hae that I'll no be lang for this warl', and I wad like Marget to bear my name, and heir my bit property when I am gane. It's wi' nae light and foolish thochts that I speak till ye, minister. But if Marget wad mairry me, she micht juist stop on and keep the Manse as she has been

doin'. And I wad leeve my lane in the wee hoose at the tap o' the brae — but oh, wi' whatna gladsome heart! For then her an' me wad sit in the kirk on Sabbath days, no man daring to hinder or make us afraid. And we could sleep soond thegither under yae moniment. I wad feel it an honour to hae my name amang sic a weel-kenned stock and on sic a weel-tilled stane. It wad read fine:

'Also of Andrew MacQuaker, spouse to the above Margaret Tipperlin, departed this life in the sure and certain howp o' a glorious resurrection,' and so forth. And I'll admit that it was wi' that thocht in my mind that I hae gi'en this stane a bit touch up every year wi' black soap and a flannel rag.'

I could see that the minister was in a strait betwixt two, and I had hope that he wad say the word I wanted him to say. But instead he only looks at me kind o' curiously.

'That 's a mighty cauldrieff view to tak' o' the maist comfortable estate o' matrimony,' says he, 'and I canna expec' a sensible woman like Megsy to agree to ony sic daft-like thing. But I'll do my best for ye, Anders. I'll mention the maitter to Margaret at a suitable time.'

'Thank ye, minister,' says I, 'that is as muckle as I hae ony right to expec!'

CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

RED-LETTER DAY AT THE MANSE

This was Anders MacQuaker's account of the interview over the kirk-yard wall early on the morning of the summer Fast-Day in the parish of St. John. The minister walked away back to his breakfast, smiling quietly to himself at the peculiar views of Anders upon marriage, and concerning the duties and privileges of husbands.

When he reached the gate which leads to the Manse door, he met the postman just turning out of the avenue into the dusky, tree-shaded road which leads towards Darroch Bridge. At sight of him, Mr. Borrowman quickened his step considerably without explaining very definitely to himself why he did so. He found Megsy standing in the doorway turning over a letter in her hand, a letter small and square, 'backed' in Hester's quaint characteristic caligraphy, which had been formed upon his own manner of writing Greek.

'Deed, minister,' said Megsy handing him the letter, 'it's as weel that ye cam' in when ye did. For if ye had been a meenite langer, I declare to peace I wad hae opened it mysel!'

Mr. Borrowman seated himself deliberately in the great chair in his study, and, producing his spectacles, entered upon a performance which tried to the utmost the reasonable soul of Megsy Tipperlin. He breathed upon the glasses. He polished them with a particular silk handkerchief he carried for the purpose in an inner pocket. If

another handkerchief appeared in its place it had to be returned, and the proper one found. Then at last the glasses were carefully adjusted, and from his waistcoat pocket the minister produced the worn silver blade of an old fruit-knife, a relic of the days when he pared apples for Jennie Lake on the fair green shores of Borgue, the sea-washed pearl of Galloway parishes.

Finally, with the proper weapon, and holding the missive at the proper angle, Anthony Borrowman slid the point along the upper edge of the envelope, at the precise moment when Mount Tipperlin was about to erupt with destructive force. Then he turned the contents leisurely over, looked well at the signature as if he suspected forgery, counted the pages, examined the envelope again, comparing the postmarks with the date on the letter—and (just as Megsy began to move slowly nearer to snatch the letter from his hand) he cleared his throat, and began. To allow her master to read Hester's letter over to himself first was a point beyond Megsy's endurance. He had tried it once, and once only. For Megsy had snatched the letter out of his fingers, with the words, 'For a minister o' the Word ye are the maist provokin' craitur — gie me the letter, gin ye dinna want to read it,' and so retreated into the kitchen, to which, after a conflict with his pride, the minister was fain to follow her.

After that he drew the line at private readings.

'Dearest old darlings,' it began ('How often have I told the girl that such conjunctions of endearing terms are superfluous and trivial!' commented the minister, looking at Megsy).

'I'm standin' about a' I can frae you, minister!'

said Megsy, warningly, her fingers twitching. So, very hastily, in fear of that which might happen, the reader resumed: 'How are you both, and is Revvie's rheumatism better? Mind the something warm before you send him to bed. I wish I were there to see that he takes it. But Megsy will attend to that if I tell her.'

(As she listened, Megsy's face grew rapt and joyous like that of a worshipper at a shrine.)

'I am very well here, and liking it better every day. They are all wonderfully kind to me, and I think when I get used to being away from home, I shall enjoy some of the many advantages I have here. There are the best tutors and masters in London. And uncle has given orders that I am to have what lessons I like with them. The man who teaches dancing is a very funny little Frenchman, and takes a great deal of pains with me. He often teaches me the whole hour, while the children play, and afterwards, too, if we can find an empty room. That is the pleasantest part of the day for me. But you can tell Anders, who taught me my steps in the old barn at Arioland, that if I do well and the Frenchman is pleased, it is all owing to him.'

('That will please Anders!' interjected the minister, looking up.)

'Drive on—beggin' your pardon, minister,' said Megsy, impatiently.

The tutor who comes for English and languages is an Aberdeenshire man and a good scholar. He can manage the children best of them all, and he is very strict with me. But he says my Latin version is as good as he can do himself. 'Melvin could not better it,' he said yesterday. So my dear old bear on the

three-cornered chair will be pleased that I am doing him credit. Cousin Tom is nice to me, and means to be very kind indeed, but I see little of any in the house except the three younger children and the masters. I have supper with the Preparation governess, and the rest of the time I take my meals with the children.

‘Uncle Sylvanus often comes in to see us, and sometimes Aunt. Occasionally I go to the drawing-room, and who do you think was there one evening — Carus Darroch. But I got out before he saw me, though I don't believe he would have remembered me. They say he is going to marry Ethel. But oh! I hope not, for she is a vain, empty, silly, spiteful, dressed-up doll. There! I am sorry to speak so horribly of any one under a roof which shelters me, but I am sure you will forgive me. I do not want any more money, dear Bear; I have nearly all you sent me at Christmas. And I have not needed to get any new clothes. Those I have are quite good yet. I take great care of them, you see — much better care than Some-one-who-shall-be-nameless takes of his Sunday coat.

I go to church with the children, but the minister does not preach. He just stands in a corner and mutters as if he was ashamed of what he was saying. As, indeed, well he may. He is very young and clever — so they say — and has just come from Oxford, where he was a great scholar, which makes it all the greater shame that nobody there should have told him not to mumble. His name is Rupert Challoner.’

(‘What a peppery little quill we drive!’ said the minister, smiling.)

'He comes to see Claudia on her 'at-home' day,' the letter proceeded, 'and one day he came into the school-room, where we were working, and I was all bent over the desk (as the dear Bear has often told me not to). And Mr. Challoner patted me on the head, and asked me if I had been confirmed, and if I knew my catechism. For he has very strict notions about confessing and early communion and things like that. They call these religion here.

'Which catechism?' I answered as innocently as I could, looking down as if I were shy. And I don't think he knew I was so old. For you see it was a warm day and, not expecting anyone, I had just tied my hair with a ribbon and let the ends hang down my back.

'The Church of England catechism, of course;' he said, very much surprised.

'I have read it,' I told him, 'but I don't call that a catechism!'

Then he gasped just like a dog that had snapped at a fly and missed it.

'You are surely not a Dissenter?' he said.

'Oh, no,' I answered, 'I belong to the Church of Scotland, and if you came to my country, you would be the Dissenter if you didn't go there, too.'

So after he had thought a while, he said that he had not time then, but that he would come back after his holidays, and instruct me about churches and catechisms. So, please, dear Ursa Major, send me 'Pearson on the Creed,' and Doctor Whyte's book on the Shorter Catechism, and Rutherford's 'Lex Rex' — and anything you can think of, and oh, Principal Rainy's Reply to Stanley, and everything. I will read them all, so that I may be quite ready to be

instructed. There is not much fun here, but I think that will be funny. Mr. Challoner did not pat me on the head when he went away. I think he thought me a lapsed mass; and oh, I forgot, he asked me if I was a 'devotee'? I said I did not know what that was. Had it anything to do with a dove-cote?

'Then he did not know whether I was laughing or not, and went away in a rage. And perhaps it was wicked of me. But it is so dull here, with nothing but lessons all day long, and preparation in the evening, that one has to do something. So, Revvie, please send me the books. I will take such care of them.'

('The little vixen!' said the minister, smiling. 'That is all, Megsy, on my honour. Oh, no, there is a postscript. Was there ever a woman's letter yet without one?')

'I wish there were twenty. I could stand all day listening, and the potatoes no scraped.'

'Good-bye, dear Bear. Be good and change your socks. And Megsy, remember about Revvie's 'internal application' — at bedtime — hot!'

'Oh,' said Megsy, with a long and wistful sigh, 'it will be a hale week before the next comes!'

So in the Manse above the sough of the Darroch Water these two lived a double life — that of the pleasant white-washed Clachan on its sunny brae, and that of No. 9, Empress Gate, Hyde Park, W.

And to both Megsy and her master, that which was far away was the more real, while that which was near rang hollow as when one speaks aloud in an empty church.

CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

THE WAY NOT TO FALL IN LOVE

The Master of Darroch took his grandmother's advice, and went to town, determined at least to see the lady whom fate and his father had constituted his alternative to practical disinheritance. The Duchess presented him with a neatly-rolled parcel upon his departure, which she described as a little silver lining for his cloud of misfortune. Now the Grenadier had tipped Carus ever since his going to school, and he took the little sheaf of banknotes as readily as he had taken his first grandmaternal sovereign.

In London and especially in Empress Gate it was glaringly white and hot outside. Within the latter it was Ethel's day, and, as usual, all was cool and dusky and subdued in the Blue Drawing-room. The fountain sprayed deliciously in the little built-on conservatory, and, falling over concealed blocks of ice, diffused a charming freshness through all the domains of Ethel and Claudia, the second of the four Empress Gate worlds.

Carus called somewhat late, walking reluctantly out of Kensington Gardens, where he had been trying to keep cool among the leaf shadows, and to retain his self-respect in the vicinity of a host of nursemaids, who, quite unabashed by his presence, continued to perform the duties of their profession with a frankness and zest quite oriental.

The young man walked across Hyde Park and presented himself before the blue and silver menial

at the door of Sir Sylvanus Torphichan-Stirling. Carus asked for Lady Stirling, but the man appeared to take no notice whatever of his words. As he mounted, Carus observed a large number of respectable ladies taking tea and at the same time talking vigorously in a vast drawing-room looking to the front. He half paused, as if expecting to be shown in there.

'This way if you please, sir,' said Timson, and led the way along a passage to the right. A moment later he was announcing 'The Master of Darroch' at the door of the Blue Drawing-room.

There were a number of young men, but only two ladies, in this small and pretty room. At first Carus could not make out which of these was his 'alternative,' but at the sound of his name, a tall girl, with features strikingly regular, and the confident carriage of an undoubted beauty, sprang forward with the charming little trip of impulsive unconsciousness which was then the fashion.

'How kind of you,' she cried; 'I made certain you had forgotten me. And you have come to see us after all, and on such a day! Claudia, my dear, here is the Master of Darroch!'

A second girl, somewhat paler of face, with less sprightliness and animation than her sister, disengaged herself with lingering glances from the society of a gentleman who had been entertaining her in a little alcove near the fountain and the ice-blocks. Her manner said as clearly as mere expression could, 'See what a bore it is, but I have no alternative!'

Claudia was dressed in pure white, which suited very well her fair and delicate style and capacity for

statuesque poses. 'Classic Claudia,' Tom called her. 'If there's a mantelpiece within a mile,' that young gentleman declared, with his usual fraternal frankness, 'Claudia will hook herself on to it somehow by the elbow-joint. Then she will cross her legs, tilt her chin, and there you are! Walk up, ladies and gents!' Gallery of statuary — classical department! No extra charge!"

Ethel encouraged her two sisters to dress in white. For herself she did not mean to be clothed like every other girl in the world. The ingenue was not her role and she knew it. Certainly, in that cool, dusky room, she looked wondrously vivid and full of life. She wore what, to the eye merely masculine, appeared to be a dress composed of creamy lawn or gauze, over a foundation of pale blue, full cuffs of the same were turned back from her white wrists, and the permanent chill which abode in her yellowish eyes was unnoticed in a place into which the outer glare was only permitted to filter.

Carus was the last man in the world to make a habit of frequenting afternoon teas, but there is no doubt that he thoroughly enjoyed this one. It is pleasant when the prettiest girl in the room, and your hostess to boot, is moved to show a marked preference for your society. It is pleasant to find a sheltered nook, and talk confidentially of books and men, of distant travel and the hills of home.

'It is strange, is it not,' said Ethel, leaning towards Carus a little mysteriously, 'that we should be such near neighbours and yet see so little of each other? I hear my father talk a great deal of yours. Yet you we have hardly ever seen since you were a boy.'

'I suppose I have been at college and abroad ever

since. And you, I fancy, have lately been more in town than at Arioland.'

'The new house there has that to answer for,' smiled Ethel; 'we have been building a new one on the old site, you know. I believe that from the towers you can see Darroch Castle.'

'I declare I don't know when I was last on the top of Darroch,' answered Carus, gallantly, 'not since I was a boy looking for jackdaws' nests. But now I shall have a reason for climbing up there again!'

'And what is that reason?' said Ethel, piquantly, letting her eyes dwell pleasantly upon the handsome youth.

'Why, to find out whether you are at home, of course—you will fly a flag, I suppose?'

'What fun!' cried Ethel, clapping her hands, impulsively; 'we will organise a system of signals. Hector Maxwell is a signal lieutenant in the Navy. I shall ask him to send us up a complete code.'

It was just at that moment that Hester came into the Blue Drawing-room to get a book, but, seeing Carus talking confidentially to Ethel, she stole quietly away without his having seen her.

'It is a pity,' she thought; 'if he only knew how cruel and hard-hearted she is — but, after all, what does it matter to me?'

She ended with a sigh, and so put the young man out of her head. She was only a little country girl, a nursery governess — what better? — whom her uncle had brought to town to look after the younger children and keep them within bounds. She glanced down at her dingy brown frock, which, with all her mending and care, seemed to wax shabbier and more threadbare day by day.

'Well,' she meditated, 'I have no business to be thinking of such things, and it is very kind of Sir Sylvanus to give me the opportunity of studying under all these good and expensive masters. Certainly the dancing lessons are very pleasant. Monsieur Gargillesse is more than kind.'

'You are my most favourite pupil,' that gentleman was accustomed to say to Hester; 'you have the soul in your feet. Mademoiselle dances with her heart, and also with her eyes! It is good to behold you. Tomorrow I will begin to teach you ze skirt dance!'

And though at first she had shrunk from the thought, yet when her cousins went away for a long holiday, in which she was not to participate, and left her alone with Miss Martin and the three children, the dancing lessons were certainly very interesting and M. Gargillesse took a great deal of pains with her. It was something to do. It gave a point to the dull monotony of the day. But Mr. Clarence Shillinglaw, of Aberdeen, coming in one day at the close of the lesson, gazed at the graceful performance with severe disapproval, and when Hester paused, panting, upon the ball-room floor where the children received their dancing lessons, the tutor came close up to her.

'Do you think Sir Sylvanus would approve?' Mr. Shillinglaw inquired, looking at the red of Hester's lips and the brilliance of her eyes.

Hester had danced well, and she knew it. M. Gargillesse was loud in her praise, and at Empress Gate she got little enough of that. So at that particular moment she was not going to be snubbed by Mr« Clarence Shillinglaw.

'Do you mean to ask Sir Sylvanus whether he

approves of my learning dancing or not?' she inquired, with the slightest saucy curl of the lip.

'No,' said the Scot, readily, 'that I do not!'

'Then,' said Hester, recklessly, 'we will try again, if you please, M. Gargillesse!'

Yet this was done in all innocence—with the sole thought of astonishing Megsy, and perhaps (under seal of the utmost secrecy) the minister himself, when the glad day of her return should at last arrive. And now, though he maintained his attitude of severe and even censorious disapproval, Mr. Shillinglaw did not go away. On the contrary, he remained to the end of the lesson. At which the eyes of the little Frenchman twinkled, and his shoulders shook.

'Oh, Mees Hestere,' he chuckled, as he brushed his hat carefully on his coat-sleeve and waited for his pupil, who always helped him on with his overcoat. 'Meester Sheelinglong is in lof—aha, yes—I see it! He no like, me to teach you how to dance, for fear one day you dance yourself away from him!'

'But, Monsieur Gargillesse,' said Hester, who was rapidly growing wiser, 'I do not know Mr. Shillinglaw at all. You are pleased to talk nonsense, Monsieur!'

'Oh, he is quite raight,' said the little man, 'but it was so funny. He no like ze dance, and yet he no can go away! Pardon an old man if he finds it amusant. There are not many amusant things in London!'

'Well, what do you think of him, Clau? Will he do?'

These were Ethel's first words when the door of the Blue Drawing-room closed upon the young Master of Darroch.

'Have you got as far as that already?' said Claudia, a little acidly. She had not obtained an innings herself, and she had much desired to pose for the handsome newcomer. She had indeed stood talking to Sidney Charlton for nearly half-an-hour for that very purpose. Yet never once had the misguided young man's eyes been raised to hers. Ethel had completely monopolised him, and thought that was all right, and Claudia knew that as yet she had only second choice of the visitors; still there were moments when she felt herself distinctly put upon.

'Come, Claudia — isn't he awfully handsome? Don't you think he has quite an aristocratic profile?'

'Oh, he's well enough,' said Claudia, carelessly, 'but there are handsomer men to be found every day!'

'I deny it,' cried Ethel, who was in high spirits; 'and if there are, which of them is the only son of my Lord Darroch!'

'So you have made up your mind to pick up the glove!' said her sister, a little spitefully. 'I wish you joy, Eth. But what will Sidney Charlton say? He looked as black as thunder, and only hemmed at me instead of answering, all the time you were talking to young Darroch on the ottoman.'

Ethel shrugged her shoulders at the name.

'Sidney Charlton can exactly please himself what he does. He is nothing to me!' she said, with a curl of the lip, and the hard look rising to the surface of her eyes. 'Besides, I do not throw myself at any man. I know my value too well for that!'

'Are you sure he is in love with you?' asked Claudia, her curiosity beginning to get the better of

her initial annoyance.

‘No,’ said Ethel, with a toss of her head, ‘even I could not say so much as that, after a bare hour in a drawing-room. But he admires me, and I am sure I can make him in love with me if I like!’

‘And will you like?’

‘That is as may be, miss,’ said Ethel, emphatically; ‘but did you see that little cat, Hester Stirling, come sneaking in to see what she could spy out. I will let her hear about that on the deafest side of her head. What business has she to enter my drawing-room without being invited? And in that old brown frock, too; none of the maids would be seen in it.’

‘The maids have wages, Eth,’ said Claudia, pointedly; ‘has Hester had any since she came, do you know?’

‘What should she have wages for? She gets her food, and the benefits of a good education.’

‘Mr. Clarence Shillinglaw,’ cried Claudia, with a loud laugh, ‘oh, Eth, do you know I met him in the hall today. He looked more than ever bare and bleak, as if he had been squared off with a chisel like a block of stone for the new house, straight from the quarries at Aberdeen.’

‘Well, anyway,’ said Ethel, reverting to her cousin, ‘she had no right to come into my drawing-room when we were receiving. And I will tell mother as much!’

On his way eastward to his hotel, Carus Darroch meditated to himself. ‘You are young to think of marrying, Carus, my friend — but, at any rate, she is not so bad as your fancy painted. On the other hand, she is distinctly handsome and certainly very

kind. A man might do worse than marry a bright, pretty, companionable girl like that. And, after all, though the governor and I don't get on, he has brought me up, and I will oblige him if I can.'

In this manner Carus began, a little indolently, to argue himself into a species of love, which is a very amusing thing so long as it is not tried by the 'expulsive power of a new affection.' A little carefully-tended picnic fire, fed with casual sticks, is one thing, and the horizon ablaze with burning heather from verge to verge, leaping fences and eating up pine forests, is quite another.

On the whole, however, Carus came away from Empress Gate very well satisfied with the impression produced by his visit. But he ate an excellent dinner at the United Universities Club, of which he had recently been elected a member, played a careful rubber at whist, and never thought again of Ethel Torphichan-Stirling till he was winding his watch.

'A decidedly handsome girl!' he said, yawning as he spoke, and then started at the sound of his own voice. For before him rose all suddenly the vision of a hot moorland day, a stile, a crushed straw hat, and — something he had seen beneath the shade of a white linen sunbonnet.

CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE

THE WAY TO FALL IN LOVE

'I was glad to hear it, my boy,' said his father, greeting Carus, heartily for him; 'Sir Sylvanus told me you were frequently at the house and, as you know, nothing could please me better. I am under very special and personal obligations to Torphichan.'

'Which as usual you would like somebody else to discharge,' was the phrase that leaped to the tip of his son's tongue. But he also was anxious to keep the peace, so the words remained unspoken.

Father and son did not live together in town. They did not belong to the same clubs. Their only common meeting-ground was the pavement, where, when they encountered, they stopped with forced smiles and gingerly politeness, more like dogs smelling each other in the armed neutrality of mutual distrust, than like a father and his only son.

'Come along and dine with me tonight, my boy,' said Lord Darroch, with a sham heartiness which sat ill on him and deceived no one — not even himself.

'Sorry I can't, sir,' said Carus, smiling — 'the fact is...'

He allowed Lord Darroch to see a pretty bouquet of roses which he was carrying as unobtrusively as possible in a paper twist — a sign that Carus had not far to go. For, like all men, he hated to carry anything on the street.

'Ah, you dog!' said his father, for the first time in his life pinching him confidentially on the arm, 'get

along with you, you young rascal. I used to do the same kind of thing, but you have a more considerate parent than I had. For my father would have made me dine with him whether I liked it or not. But I never believe in being too hard on the young.'

But, alas, the visit turned out quite otherwise! Carus was not asked to dine at Empress Gate. Instead, he accepted an informal invitation from Tom, whom he often met on the stairs, to go up to his rooms after he had got through with Eth and Claudia in the Blue Drawing-room.

This Ethel tacitly resented when he declared it, and she strove by every means in her power to detain him, even to the extent of bidding Timson say 'Not at home' to the other young men who called later, and getting the room cleared of the tea-tables at an early hour. Then, when all was ready, she raised her eyelids meaningly to Claudia, who, however, being a little cross at what she considered her sister's selfishness, did not immediately respond. Carus showed signs of moving also, so that Ethel, with a simplicity of method which made her a power, asked him if he had seen the new Fig Marigold in the conservatory. Carus replied that he had not, whereupon she rose and led the way, turning at the same time a fierce frown upon Claudia when she thought that Carus did not see. But the young man caught the significant gesture, and, naturally enough interpreting it to mean that he had stayed too long, he promptly discovered an engagement, and took his departure with disconcerting suddenness.

At once Ethel developed an astonishing frigidity. A winter of discontent fairly Arctic in its severity

descended upon her countenance, and instead of shaking hands warmly, as was her custom, she bowed the astonished Carus out of the room as if he had been a chance intruder. He had begun to be sufficiently familiar at Empress Gate to leave his hat and umbrella without, and now he found himself searching for them in the dusk of the curtained hall, in a kind of wondering maze. It did not matter, of course, but what could the girl mean?

Then all at once he remembered his promise to Tom. After his declaration to Ethel about the pressing engagement, he certainly could not go up to his rooms. Yet Tom might be waiting in for him. So he tore a leaf from his notebook and scribbled a line or two upon it, resting the scrap of paper on the edge of the iron calorifer by the wall.

Carus looked for some one to carry the note upstairs. No servant seemed to be about. It was dusk, and that ambiguous hour on the confines of dinner when the service of hotels and great houses becomes, if not disorganised, at least temporarily invisible.

Suddenly and silently a door behind him opened, and Carus saw a girl's figure pass across the hall in the direction of the great staircase. A tallish slim shape it was, clad in black. The girl's head was turned away from him. He could see no more than the curve of a cheek and that graceful poise of neck, which comes naturally to women who dance well.

Something seemed to tell Carus that this was his opportunity. He was afraid of Ethel coming downstairs and finding him still lingering there. He did not want to break his word to Tom, though probably that young gentleman would not have been

greatly concerned if he had. He knew that this girl could not be one of the family. As certainly she was not a visitor. He had it — Miss Martin, the invaluable invisible Miss Martin, of whom Mrs. Torphichan-Stirling had many times spoken to him, even unto boredom. All this went rapidly through his mind as the girl passed across the hall and set foot on the staircase.

‘I beg your pardon — Miss Martin,’ said Carus, hesitating a moment over the name, ‘but I am anxious that Mr. Tom should get this note at once. I cannot find any of the servants. Would you be good enough — if you are going up — if I might ask? — Thank you!’

The girl had stopped on the lowest step, one hand on the balusters looking back and downwards at him. The head and features were profiled against the dim richness of the painted staircase window which encircled them with a kind of halo like that which enshrines a saint. She held out her hand for the note without speaking, bowed slightly, and moved away upstairs with a certain free wilfulness of carriage which seemed to Carus particularly attractive, though it appeared to him curiously out of keeping with the character of the immaculate nursery governess, as revealed to him by Mrs. Torphichan-Stirling.

But after all, that was not the strangest thing. It was the impression upon his mind that he had seen the girl somewhere before. She had reached the turn of the staircase while he still stood at the foot with his hat in his hand. Then he spoke again. ‘Thank you, Miss Martin!’ he said. And in the dusk of the empty hall the sound of his own voice came back to

Carus Darroch with a certain mocking flavour. At the same moment the antique eight-day clock half way up the staircase struck with a whirr and tingle like sudden impish laughter. And at the sound Carus fled. Was he thinking of the anger of Ethel Torphichan as he walked away from the door?

Curiously, no! He was recalling the graceful figure and wild-wood carriage of the unknown maid as she passed up the staircase. How strange it was that Tom, a professed admirer of beauty, and often almost too frankly oratory about it, should never have mentioned this paragon to him. But again, after all, what did it matter?

All the same, the young man was sure that he had seen somebody like that before, he could not remember where. And the momentary touch of the girl's hand as the note passed between them thrilled him with a recalled delight, like a cast-back into some previous existence of unknown happiness. Then her carriage — he had seen something like it once, when a startled fawn cleared a low wall, stood one moment wildly at gaze, looking back at him, and then bounded away up the slope. So this girl had vanished out of his sight.

But it was the look she left behind that rankled in his mind. It was like a barbed arrow in his breast. He had not been able to see the girl's eyes. They were lost in the darkness of her face, which she had obstinately kept in shadow. He had only a general feeling that they were large and dark and luminous — in fact, like those of the startled fawn. They seemed to reproach him — yet for what? Carus felt himself singularly free from all reproach. Ethel Torphichan — why should he not marry her? Did it

really make any difference whether she had money or not, or if his father and her father wished this marriage as a business arrangement? That was neither his fault nor hers. Besides, anything romantic was absurd. Every one did it nowadays. He owed it to his family. Every other fellow similarly situated had to do it, and why not he? Besides, Ethel was a very pretty girl, and — what if he did not love her? Love was a figment of the poets. He had often laughed at it with other young men. He liked well enough to read about it in books — but, after all, it had no place in practical life, when you brought things down to a fine point.

Nevertheless, Carus looked back several times at the gloomy house in Empress Gate as he walked away. And he was not thinking at all about Ethel Torphichan, as by his own showing he ought to have been. Instead, he was carrying away a little aching place nearly opposite the third stud in his shirt-front, which had no business to be there. It was all too absurd. But it was also undeniable.

As he looked back momentarily he saw someone in huge and hatless haste dash across the road after him.

'Hallo, Darroch!' the voice was Tom's. He stopped in wonderment, and the reckless scion of the house of Torphichan-Stirling dashed up to him with the clatter of a fire-engine.

'You are a nice fellow, sneaking off like this — when I was waiting for you more than an hour. And sending up that rot about an engagement, as if it had been a dinner of the old fogey philanthropists you were getting out of. Look here, Darroch, are you doing anything tonight? No — then Vic wants you —

I mean I want you. She and I have a ploy on hand. We generally run in double harness, you know. What do you say to dining at Beritsky's and going somewhere after? It's Vic's little treat. The other two, Ethel and Claudia, are going out later, and will be having a snack in their own rooms as they tittivate. The Powers-that-be are away laying the foundation-stone of something or other.

The governor has got a hodful of silver trowels already. You'll come, eh? Good — meet you at eight — Beritsky's, in Greek Street, you know — sharp. S' long!

A thought occurred to Carus.

'Who was it gave you the note I addressed to you?'

But Tom was already down the street. He paused, however, at the sound of the Master's voice.

'Eh, what's that?' Certainly not—don't dress — never do at all. I must hook it, or I'll get a beastly cold in my head. See you at eight!'

And Tom was gone. Carus Darroch walked slowly home, whistling softly and smiling occasionally in spite of the little pain under his third stud. It was Conscience pressing a button which rang a little irritant t-rrrrrrrrrr in his heart like an electric bell outside one's bedroom-door at an Embankment hotel. Carus remembered inventing a certain little clip, a circle with a watch-spring in the middle which, being placed over a bedroom electric button, caused it to ring till the waiter came. The thing in his breast was like that. But he would find out more from Tom that night. It would be pleasant enough. Vic was certainly a very handsome girl — dashing, excellent form, and a good sort. Why should he not go? Ethel might be angry — but, after all, that might

prove even more interesting. Miss Torphichan-Stirling did not consult him as to how she should spend her evenings. And — he would find out about Miss Martin.

Then a sudden thought crossed him. Why had Tom been so anxious to forward Vic's plans? The adage about 'two being company' and its annex were certainly firmly held by Tom. Could it be that he had been keeping dark — and that Miss Martin would also be of the party? What a simpleton he had been! Of course that was it! They could not go without Vic. They must have somebody to amuse the gooseberry. He was young and innocent, and Vic easy minded. Hence this sudden burst of friendliness on Tom's part. Well, he would go — (savagely) and if it should turn out to be as he thought...

He did not fill in the hiatus.

And it never struck Carus that, being supposed to be the property of Ethel in the Empress Gate house, all this was emphatically none of his business.

CHAPTER TWENTY SIX

HESTER HAS AN AUDIENCE

The party came off duly, but Carus had guessed entirely wrong. Tom and Vic turned up by themselves. The bond that was between them was of the strongest possible to brother and sister. They were the best of good friends, and Tom used to say that he would do more for Vic than for any girl alive — an opinion, however, which he did not state so frequently of late as he had been in the habit of doing.

It is difficult to say whether Carus was more disappointed or relieved. But Vic had certainly nothing to complain of in the attention of either of her cavaliers. Yet she did not flirt with Carus. Vic appeared to him more like a handsome younger brother, whom the young men were taking about town for the first time, than a girl of excellent parentage and upbringing doing an unusual thing. She was gay and bright, and Tom had much pride in her appearance. Only once was a word said which gave Carus the least opening to ask the question next his heart. They were watching a dance from which activity had emphatically banished grace. Vic looked over at Tom with a slightly teasing smile.

‘We know someone who could walk all round these people!’ she said.

Tom looked conscious, and a blush slowly mounted to his cheek.

‘Shut up, Vic!’ he said, quickly. ‘You know she would die of shame if she thought any one knew

about it — it isn't fair.'

'Who do you mean?' asked Cams, eagerly; 'is it — ah, Miss Martin?'

Tom took one look at him, choked instantly, and even Vic laughed merrily into her handkerchief.

'Yes—yes,' said Tom, when he could command himself, 'of course it is Miss Martin — Ha-ha, yes, of course! I say, Vic, no wonder Darroch has been so much at our house lately. He's been sneaking round to get a chance to mash Miss Martin in the schoolroom!'

But fate was kinder, or (as the case might be) more cruel, to Carus than his friends Tom and Vic.

On his return to his hotel that night there lay a large square letter upon the table of the sitting-room. The size of the missive and the huge angular handwriting, like a paper of pins or rather a battalion of trees laid over by a storm, betrayed her Grace of Niddisdale.

'Grandmother always writes as if she had a spite at the pens and paper!' said Carus, smiling as he took the massive British square of envelope in his hand. In one place the pen had cut right through the sheet, and in another there was a perfect inky bombshell where the hard-driven nib had exploded with great slaughter.

'Carus,' her ladyship began, as usual without address or ceremony, 'I am coming up to town. The garden is at a standstill, and I defy even a scientific Scotch gardener to make any mistakes for the next two months. So I will run up and see whether or not you are behaving yourself, and if you have taken my advice — about, you know what! I daresay you walk every day in the park with the Old Adam. Ugh, the

wretch! Asking your pardon, Carus, I couldn't help your being his son. I can see how he looks about him as if every woman were an aboriginal Eve. But I will teach you something better when I arrive. You shall squire me to the park and see your grandmother cut your father dead. That will be a new sensation for a son and should be valuable to an amateur in impressions like yourself!

'How about the divinity of Empress Gate? Have you done your duty there, and found it a pleasure? I hear she is both a pretty and a presentable girl. I must see her. Call on me tomorrow morning at Scotstarvit House about eleven, and if I am not down, wait for me!'

The note ended suddenly without signature as it had begun without formula. Carus smiled again.

'Grandmother is uncomfortable — she wants to find out what my father is up to, and to appraise the Torphichan household for herself.'

However, he was up betimes the following morning, and instead of sending flowers of penitence to Ethel, with whom he had parted coolly the night before, he must needs call round at Scotstarvit House, and send a bouquet up to his grandmother with a card. Carus knew well that she would scold him for the extravagance, but that the old lady would be pleased all the same.

So he spent part of one of her own banknotes on the prettiest bouquet money could buy at Solomon's in Piccadilly, and strolled westward with it in his hand, not a whit ashamed as he had been of Ethel's much inferior bunch, but openly smiling at every acquaintance he met and, as it were, courting their comments.

'Hello, Darroch, have you been out getting a special licence as well?' cried his friend Archie MacCulloch, from the steps of the Orchid Club, which he was in the habit of decorating for the best part of the day.

'No,' said Carus, sweetly, 'I am taking these up to my grandmother!'

And he went on his way, enjoying his friend's loud unbelief hugely.

At Scotstarvit House he scribbled on a card, 'With loving greetings from Carus to his oldest and only sweetheart!'

'Will you wait for an answer, sir?' said the man.

'Oh, no, James,' said Carus, who was beloved of all servants everywhere, 'I am coming back at eleven to attend her Grace!'

'Thank you, sir!' said James the formal.

Punctually at eleven Carus stepped out of the hansom at his grandmother's door. The old lady was not yet down, so Carus was shown up to her boudoir. Here he waited, looking over some of the full-flavoured French novels which lay about on tables and couches, mixed with Dean Hole 'On Roses' and copies of The Gardener's Chronicle. Presently he heard the voice of her Grace of Niddisdale, as the stage directions say, 'without.'

'If I don't box that silly boy's ears — wasting his money, and most likely my money, on flowers for an old woman as blind as a bat, with a nose that is good for nothing except poking into other people's affairs. Wait till I catch him!'

The door opened and his grandmother entered, scolding all the time at the top of her voice.

'Ah, you rascal,' — she stopped at the threshold

and threatened Carus with her bony forefinger — ‘you thought to catch an old bird with chaff, did you? I know very well what to think when young men spend good red guineas on flowers for their grandmothers — they think they are casting bread upon the waters. You want something, you vagabond. Come, give me a kiss, and let me pull your ears, then you can tell me what it is. Have you spent all I gave you already? And now you want more? What, it’s not that! Then you can tell me what it is. Been making a fool of yourself and want me to help you out? Well, I’ll do my best. The only thing I bar is having to be civil to the old.’

‘No, no, granny,’ said Carus, laughing; ‘indeed, I don’t want anything in the world, except to have a good long talk with you. You are better worth talking to than any chit of them all — you know I always have thought so.’

‘Don’t perjure yourself overmuch, boy,’ said her Grace, highly pleased; ‘remember the Recording Angel is not taking a holiday, if you are! Now tell me, how goes the love affair? Tell me all about her, and no more compliments to a wizened old woman with a false front, and less than half-a-dozen practicable teeth in her head!’

Had the invitation been given twenty-four hours sooner it might have at once pleased and embarrassed Carus to answer. But now he was perfectly cool.

‘It is true, grandmother, that I have been often at Empress Gate, but that is honestly all,’ he said, smiling; ‘it is a pleasant house, and the girls are all pretty in their way. I like Tom and...’

‘You put up with the baronet and the mother-in-

law! Well, but what I want to know is, have you pleased your father and fallen in love with the right girl.'

'I have not fallen in love in the least, grandmother,' said Carus, 'neither to please my father nor yet to displease him. I like Miss Torphichan-Stirling very much, and she is most agreeable to me. I have certainly seen more of her than of any of the others.'

'I suppose the baronet arranges that, or perhaps the lady herself. Has it ever struck you, Carus, that you are a very proper young man of your inches — and you have a goodly number of these?'

'Glad you think so, grandmother; I don't care what any one else thinks.'

'No more flattery, sir,' cried the old lady, shaking her finger at him again; 'and then you have an excellent title, better than half-a-dozen mushroom earldoms and political marquises. Why, it is older than Niddisdale's! A good many mammas would jump at you, Carus!'

'Do you think they would come to Tattersall's if I put myself up — in flocks, I mean? Something like this, 'For sale, the only son of a Scottish peer, old creation, pedigree guaranteed, no vices, broken to harness, single or double, any lady may drive him, warranted sound in wind and limb!' That would draw 'em, eh, grandmamma?'

'Well, I don't know,' said the old lady, 'you might do worse. But see that you don't enter into any contract with the diamond merchant's daughter till you see the settlements. Remember that your father has only his debts to settle on you. So if the pair of you want to have anything to live on, you had better

make sure of it before marriage!’

‘What a mercenary old lady!’ said Carus, smiling fondly at her. ‘It is a pity that it says on the flyleaf of the Prayer-book that a man may not marry his grandmother. If it hadn’t been for that I’d have married you, certain sure, grandmother, and never looked at any contracts.’

Her Grace tweaked her favourite’s ear, and when Carus pretended to wince, she said, ‘I told you what would happen the next time. But to be serious, I must see this Torphichan household. I declare, the sooner the better. I will go with you this afternoon and call on the girls. Come back for me at five if you have nothing better to do.’

‘I could have nothing half so good to do,’ said Carus, gladly. He really loved the outspoken and eccentric old lady. She had been the only friend and confidante of his youth, his loyal and silent helper out of many a schoolboy scrape, the benevolent fairy who supplemented his meagre allowance at college, so that he could boat and belong to those clubs and associations which make all the difference between being of a good college and at it.

So promptly at five Carus was again at Scotstarvit House. His grandmother sat ready for him and the carriage was in waiting. Carus, who hated four wheels, would have preferred a hansom, but at the first suggestion my lady of Niddisdale flared up.

‘Do you think,’ she cried, as she ensconced herself comfortably, ‘that I am going to trust my old bones to one of those gimcrack, two-story, one-shaving-thick, standing-on-end things, that the bottom may drop out of any minute and strew you all along the street like spilt straw out of a waggon?’

Besides, Carus, your new diamond-and-pills baronet won't object to the Niddisdale colours being seen opposite his door! I know these creatures!

Timson it was who opened the door. Being a man of many services he knew the Niddisdale liveries, and was well acquainted with the person of her Grace. He was, however, somewhat flustered by her ladyship's quick, imperious address. He started hastily to show Carus and his grandmother upstairs.

'Now, my good man,' cried the lady, 'not so fast. When you are as old as I am, you'll begin to think on your latter end when you go upstairs quickly!'

So it came about that the party mounted very slowly, and Timson, anxious that the best apartment in the house should receive such a guest, and seeing a light in the great drawing-room, threw open the door, and then quickly catching sight of what was going on at the other end, he would even more quickly have closed it again.

But her imperious Grace of Niddisdale put him aside, at the same time motioning him to be silent. Under a couple of tall lamps, which shed a lustre down upon her head, a young girl was dancing alone on the little band platform. A little behind, and screened by the lamps, the shrunk shanks of an aged man twitched and skipped as if their owner longed to join so fair a partner. The music-master's chin sunk on his breast nuzzled the violin to whose music the girl danced. Daintily yet with full abandon and verve she danced, with all the innocent delight of perfect physique and admirable training. It seemed a kind of unconscious rejoicing in life and youth. Yet there was 'something conspicuously

virginal and pure about the performance, and in all the lightning pauses and poses, through all the mysteries of waving lines and woven paces, there went the sense of childish happiness in a glad and pure thing. Even so Nausicaa's maidens danced on the beach unseen of any man, while the waves of the Midland sea broke about them in foam less white than the feet they bathed.

Carus looked over her Grace's shoulder. He breathed quick and short as he watched, and his heart beat violently. The Fates had been kind indeed, this was the girl he had seen on the stairs in the dusk. Presently, with a quick flourish of flying bow, and a twinkle of dainty shoon, the lesson was over.

'Brava!' cried the little Frenchman, gallantly, and taking his fiddle and bow both in one hand, he dropped a little stiffly but still cavalierly on one knee, 'I make you my most sincere complements. Mademoiselle. I can teach you no more. Permit me to kiss your hand. It is pairfect — magnifique!'

'Brava! Brava indeed!' chimed in her ladyship from the dark of the door where the visitors had stood concealed. She came forward as she spoke, holding out her hand.

'I did not think there was an amateur in London who had so much spirit and grace — why, you are a beauty, my' dear, or will be very soon. Is this your Miss Ethel, sirrah?'

She turned upon Carus, who stood dumb for a moment without finding any answer. 'No, grandmother,' he managed to stammer at last, 'it is Miss Martin — the governess, I believe!'

'The governess!' cried her Grace, 'ah, you rascal!

You dog! But all the same she is a charming girl.'

Meanwhile, the old Frenchman had been making obeisance after obeisance. He also knew the Duchess of Niddisdale by sight, having in days long past taught the present Duke his steps with exceedingly incomplete success.

'I craif your Ciracc's pardon,' he said, 'but this so talented young lady is not Mees Martin, but Mees Hestaire Stirling, zee cozin of zee young ladies of this house!'

'What, my dear,' cried the impulsive old lady, 'are you Isobel Stirling's daughter?'

'I am her granddaughter,' said Hester, quietly.

'But bless me, bless me, what are you doing here?' she continued, looking at her flushed cheek and the little foot which continued to show agitation by tapping quickly on the floor.

'Lady Torphichan-Stirling is my aunt, madam,' said Hester, hoping soon to get away; 'her husband is my guardian. Until not very long ago I was brought up by some kind people in Scotland. But I have been here nearly three years now — my uncle sent for me to come, and I have the best masters. It is a great advantage.'

'But I have never seen you before,' interposed Carus; 'you cannot be the little Hester Stirling I used to see with the minister of St. John's Parish. How you have grown! And where have you hidden yourself whenever I came? Did you not want to recognise an old friend?'

'I am mostly in the schoolroom with the children,' said Hester, shyly, 'but I have seen you several times — at a distance!'

'My dear,' said the Duchess, 'you must come and

see me at once — I will look after you for your grandmother's sake. She was my very good friend. And besides — well, wait till I have the dressing of you, that's all!

The last sentence was said so low that only Carus heard it.

CHAPTER TWENTY SEVEN

VIC GETS EVEN

'I beg your Grace's pardon,' put in Timson, at last finding his opportunity, 'but the young ladies are waiting your pleasure in the Blue Drawing-room!'

'Come along with me, my dear,' said the Duchess, putting her hand on the girl's shoulder; 'I want to talk more to you!'

'I think they would not like it if I came up,' said Hester; 'and oh, please don't say that you have seen me dancing!'

Hester was now crimson from brow to neck.

'Very well, little one,' said the Duchess, amiably; 'I am no tell-tale; go off and make yourself look like a school-miss again, and then I will get them to send for you.'

Hester went off so quickly that she seemed simply to fade out of the room, so swift and noiseless were her motions. Then something rustled in the hand of the Master of Darroch. It was another of his grandmother's banknotes.

'And don't you say anything of this either!' he whispered to Timson.

'No, sir — thank you, sir!' said Timson, the well-trained, as something crisp crackled in his palm.

'Her Grace the Duchess of Niddisdale and the Master of Darroch!'

Ethel was sitting by the tea-table, and she rose involuntarily at the names. Claudia had assumed her best pose by the mantelpiece. Vic was sitting, the image of sullen despair, on the ottoman, her

chin sunk on her hands. She had been haled down at the first news that a carriage with the ducal liveries had paused before the door.

'Ah, my dears,' said the Duchess, after she had shaken hands all round, 'let me sit down, and give me a dish of good strong tea. Your stairs are somewhat long for an old woman like me. I can walk with any one of my age on the level, but going upstairs is not for me. Let me look at you — yes — yes, you are all three pretty girls, as pretty as girls have any right to be. You, my dear, and this tall young lady by the mantelpiece are Torphichans, I must suppose. You are not like any Stirlings that ever I saw, nor like your grandmother's people on the Stirling side. But you, young lady,' nodding to Vic, 'are a true Stirling, temper and all!'

Instantly Vic forgot her sulks at being haled into the presence of the great. She smiled, and in doing so showed her wide, well-formed mouth and fine white teeth.

'I have a temper, but I don't keep it up long,' said Vic, gratefully.

'You didn't want to come down, eh!' guessed the old lady, gleefully; 'you thought that I would turn out to be a meddlesome old frump!'

'Something like it,' quoth downright Vic; 'besides, you know, I was with Tom up in his den, and didn't want to have to come.'

'You have been with some Tom — or Toms — you smell sadly of smoke, my dear,' said the Duchess.

Claudia signalled furiously to Ethel. 'Did I not tell you she would disgrace us?'

'And, now,' continued her Grace, 'tell me which of you is Ethel.'

'I am,' said that young lady, with a slight blush. It was evident now who Carus Darroch had been talking about to his distinguished relative. The Duchess looked a little disappointed, as if she could have wished it had been Vic. But she turned to the girl with the greatest good humour, and began telling her about the ball she intended to give in honour of the coming of age of Niddisdale's eldest son, young Lord Kipford.

It was pretty enough (and Carus would have thought so if his heart had not been elsewhere) to watch the interest kindle on the girls' faces at the mere mention of a ball. Ethel looked at Darroch to see if he were elated, but he was somewhat moodily pulling his moustache. It struck her that he was disgusted with them all on account of Vic's forwardness.

'You know, poor dear Niddisdale's wife died young, and he never married again, so we all want Kipford not be too long in throwing the glove. I for one shall not be sorry to see him settled. A young man is always best married early to a good girl, when he can afford it. And when your turn comes, don't you say him nay if he's a good man, my dear!' continued the Duchess, touching Ethel's pretty chin.

'My father and mother will be sorry not to have been at home when you called,' said Ethel, certain that she was not acquitting herself well, but not knowing what to talk about. She was never at a loss with men, but with such a very unconventional aristocrat as the old Duchess of Niddisdale, it was not so simple.

'Oh, don't trouble about that,' said the easy Duchess, 'I will come again soon. I want a

subscription for my Children's Hospital. That's the way we fleece one another, you know. Has your father been buying another estate? I hear he is possessing himself of all the countryside. He had better have stuck to his diamonds. Clods don't pay nowadays, except in cemeteries!

Then she looked round the room as if missing something.

'But where is my little Hester? I hear that you have her stowed away somewhere! She is an old friend of mine. In fact, I believe I am her godmother, as well as her father's' (the Duchess had an imagination). 'I want to see her. Will you let Carus ring and send for her?'

There came an instantaneous cloud on the faces of Ethel and Claudia. Indeed the elder began, 'Your Grace, I am afraid Hester is not prepared. She did not know of your coming. She is very young, and remains mostly with the children!'

'Oh, nonsense, my dears,' said the Duchess; 'I am not a Gorgon — send for her this minute. I want to see if the child is pretty. She must come to my ball.'

'I do not think that she can dance,' said Claudia, 'and I am sure she would feel most uncomfortable.'

At which statement Vic pouted her mouth as if she were going to whistle, but instead of doing so she jumped up and said heartily, 'Don't ring; I will run and fetch her myself!'

Whereat Ethel glared at her younger sister with daggers flashing steely from under her eyelids. But as Vic passed behind the two visitors, she caught Claudia's expression of disgust, and most rudely put out her tongue, as much as to say, 'Now I will serve you back for making me come down!'

Carus caught Vic's gesture in a mirror, and laughed aloud. His grandmother gave a little jump.

'Why, laddie, don't do that—what is there to laugh at? Some byplay, I suppose. It is very rude of you — and remember, I am not nearly so blind as you give me credit for. Carus, you had better begin to make sure of your dances now when you have the chance.'

So stimulated, Carus could not do less than ask Ethel if she would keep the first round dance for him. But Ethel answered a little tartly that she would wait till she saw the card. For which answer the Duchess applauded her.

'Make them fetch and carry, my dear,' she said, nodding brusquely; 'they are happier so, and don't get tired so soon. I have tried both ways. Ah, here she comes. You have been good to her, surely,' she added, turning round to the Torphichan girls; 'you have not let all the country bloom go out of her face.'

'We have tried to make our dear cousin happy,' cooed Claudia. Ethel, being a little more straightforward by nature, said only, 'She has plenty of exercise and seems to keep very well in London.'

'Come and give me a kiss, my dear,' said the Duchess; 'why, you are as like your grandmother as pea is like pea; but why this black dress, are you in mourning?'

'Oh, no,' said Hester, quietly.

'Mamma says black lasts longest,' said Vic, frankly, 'and at least those little ruffians, Stanny, Lot, and Grubby, won't pull it to pieces quite so quickly.'

'You teach the younger children then?' asked the Duchess, with a warning chill in her voice.

'Not exactly,' interposed Ethel, without giving

Hester time to answer; 'my cousin has lessons along with the younger children.'

'Rats!' declared Vic, smiling broadly; 'she sees that they do theirs — that's more like it!'

'I love children; it is no trouble at all,' said Hester, willing to throw oil on the waters; 'and I am quite happy and deeply grateful for all my opportunities of study!'

Carus thought of the last study he had seen her engaged in, and wondered if this demure slip of a girl in the black stuff dress could indeed be the swift-limbed Grace of the ballroom platform.

'Some of your studies are pleasanter than others, eh?' said the Duchess, smiling meaningly.

At which Hester could only blush and glance appealingly at her.

'Oh, yes, I should rather say so,' cried Vic, leaning on the elbow of a chair and trying vainly to dangle her long legs; 'Mr. Clarence Shillinglaw never takes his eyes off Hester all the time — I daresay he makes love to her when none of us are by!'

'Indeed he does not! He never speaks to me except to scold me!' said poor Hester, her face crimsoning under its healthy brown.

But Vic laughed scornfully, and Carus began to conceive a hatred for all Scotch tutors, especially those privileged to spend hours a day in the society of Hester Stirling.

'You are to come to my ball,' said her Grace, who still held Hester's hand; 'no, you must not say you have nothing to wear.'

'Your Grace, my cousin is not out yet,' began Ethel.

'Now, my dears, don't be tiresome!' interrupted

the imperious dame, 'it is one of the few privileges of a Duchess of Niddisdale that she does as she likes in these little matters. And if Hester does not promise to come — why, I won't give the ball at all, that's all!'

At this the girls' faces promptly fell.

'Of course, what Ethel says is nonsense,' cried Vic. 'I can easily fix up something for Hester. She and I are about the same height, but she will need to take in a reef or two at the waist. I am built like a pillar letter-box.'

'You are a good girl,' said the Duchess, approvingly; 'you must come and see me some day — indeed, you are all to come. But not in an army corps. Come one at a time, and then I shall really get to know you.'

She patted Hester's cheek as she rose.

'But you, first of all,' she said, 'I want you for your grandmother's sake and your father's. A little rascal he was, too. It was the year my own little boy died that he was born, and your grandmother often let me nurse him. Then I cried my eyes out going home in the carriage every night. But I always went back again the next day! Good-bye, my dears. Don't think too much about the ball. And be sure you get your beauty sleep. Good-bye! Good-bye!'

And the old lady went out leaning upon the strong arm of Carus Darroch.

But as soon as she was fairly gone from the door the tempest broke.

'Minx!' cried Ethel, advancing as if to inflict personal chastisement upon Vic; 'I shall tell mamma you have disgraced us. And as for that charity-girl over there, I will not live another day in the same

house with her! And so I shall tell my father as soon as he comes home!’

‘No more will I,’ agreed Claudia as bitterly; ‘you are in league, you two. With that little cat’s blushing and looking down, and ‘her Grace’s god-daughter,’ if you please — and ‘every one to be very kind’ to her, as if she was a queen and we so much dirt beneath her feet.’

At such times the veneer of Empress Gate wore decidedly thin, and the aboriginal Torphichan emerged.

But Vic only laughed the more.

‘It is you who are a pair of jealous old cats,’ she cried, defying them; ‘you want all the men and all the attention, and you think the way to get both is to sit and prettify yourselves here, like tabbies upon cushions, with ribbons round your necks. Why, I am not nearly so good-looking as either of you, but I could give you ten yards’ start in the hundred and beat you romping! And what is more, so could Hester — that is, if she were only decently dressed and knew how to make use of her eyes! So there! Um-m-m! That’s what I think of you! Cats!’

CHAPTER TWENTY EIGHT

A FAIRY GODMOTHER'S CATECHISM

Letter from her Grace the Duchess of Niddisdale at Scotstarvit House, S. W., to Lady Torphichan-Stirling, of 1, Empress Gate, W.

Dear Lady Torphichan-Stirling, — It was such a pleasure to me to see the dear children yesterday (Georgina Niddisdale ye are an old humbug!) especially to see them all possessing so much of your own characteristic Stirling beauty (Sarah was aye for a' the world like a pin-cushion out for a walk — her mother was a beauty though). When can your husband and yourself come to lunch? You must dine as soon as my son Niddisdale returns to town. And the dear girls must look in and see me some day during the week (Neale can always say I am not at home). I am an old woman, but I like to be surrounded by bright young people. Very truly yours,

‘Georgina Niddisdale.’

P. S.—I had almost forgotten. I must carry out my promise to your mother and be a real, if rather belated, godmother to our poor little Hester. Will you let her come to me early on the evening of the ball? It is such a good opportunity, dear Lady Stirling, to impress the young heart — on the occasion of a girl's first entrance into the world, as it were.’

The Duchess sat back in her seat with a smiling groan as she wrote the last words.

‘As it were’ she murmured, pleased with herself.

‘If that does not fetch the apothecary's wife, then I

don't know what will. It is so exactly her dear husband's style! 'Dear Sylvanus — he is so good, so wise' — Ugh, the dreadful woman! — I would not touch her with a ten-foot pole — except for Carus's sake I would not care.'

But it is not at all necessary to state the infinitesimal amount of strictly non-legal currency the vigorous old lady did not care for the friendship of the Torphichan-Stirlings.

'Now for my little Hester,' she said; 'she's worth all the ruck of them. It is a blessed thing, though, that Carus is in love already. He likes pretty blondes, at any rate. Sometimes I think — no, that's not fair. Carus is no milksop, but — he does seem to have something of my poor dear Sophia about him. Well, well, he won't fall in love with Hester — and if he does, well, I can drive him on the curb. Here goes!'

The Duchess dashed off another note.

'Sweet little Hester, — I've asked your aunt to let you come to me on Tuesday. I have never heard you your catechism, so see you come prepared. I have promised, also, to give you some good advice and perhaps something a trifle nicer. I never was fond of good advice all my life — not even of administering it. Come early — by seven at latest — I want you to help me about the flowers and things. Your loving (and repentant)

'Godmother.'

Hester was in the schoolroom when Vic brought her this note.

'Oh, I say, Hester, you owe me a pair of gloves,' cried that impetuous young lady, 'you were nearly in a proper fix. Mamma came as near as a toucher to reading your letter, and Ethel and Clau are just

scratching mad because the Duchess has written direct to you. So before they could make up their minds I snatched it and came. You should have seen their faces. And now you must tell me what she says!

By this time Hester was reading the widespaced sprawly characters, staggering 'reel-rail' over the pages. A quick fear took her by the heart, followed by joy as fleet-winged. She could not go. She was going. She dare not face everybody. She knew she was — well, if not exactly ugly — at least plain-looking. What would Revvy think — and Megsy? Oh, and what could the Duchess want — to scold her about the dancing lesson? Her aunt would never let her go. And oh, how ugly the evening frock was her aunt had had made for her. She had seen Ethel's!

And tears came into the dark cool eye-depths and pearly upon the long lashes, as when upon the swallow's wing the drops glisten after he has dipped full-flight in the mere.

'Hester, Hester, what is wrong? Let me see. Does she say you are not to come? (Here Vic snatched the letter which Hester had held tremblingly.) U-m-m-um, I can't read it — 'catechism,' 'come early,' 'good advice.' That's all rats. She wants you to go and have a good time all by yourself, you little silly. That about catechism is just to green the mater, don't you see? Tom and I often get round her that way. It's a blessed thing Eth didn't get hold of this. She would have blown the gaff. For she is on to the game, too, starchy as she looks. But, I say, we'll read this to ma this afternoon when Eth and Clau are out at the matinee and all the frowsy tabbies and things are swilling away at their cups of tea. I

know the mater will say out loud — 'What, another letter from the dear Duchess!'

Vic will never get advancement because of any literal respect for the first commandment with promise.

My lady had indeed been living in a kind of devout reverie upon the Duchess's letter all day. Happily for her peace of mind, she did not hear the significant comments with which its composition was interlarded.

It chanced that the 'tabbies' were in great force that day, and Sir Sylvanus, that eminent scientist and politician, moved about among his guests with smiling deference, thinking what a diplomat was wasted in himself, and buckling and unbuckling his large pasty-white hands, 'like half-readied soda scones,' the country-bred Hester thought. Nobody took any notice of the demure little figure in the worn brown dress that followed so quietly in the turbulent wake of Vic's passage, as she scattered Timson and a stray guest or two out of her path toward her mother, who, in the farthest corner, sat simpering and bowing as if specially fitted inside with clockwork for that very purpose.

My lady toed the line of her daughter's expectation to a hair's-breadth.

'What,' she cried aloud, 'not another letter from that dear, dear Duchess? How pressing she is. I have already written to say that she may expect to see you all tomorrow afternoon. This is no doubt for the purpose of appointing an hour. About Hester Stirling, did you say? Surely not! What can she want with Hester?'

'Shall I read it aloud, mamma?' came the clear

voice of Vic.

'No, no, dear,' said her mother, in a low tone, dropping her exclamatory method, 'it is not necessary. But what can her Grace want with her? There must be some mistake. I will write and say that I shall send Ethel instead. She has so much taste in flowers — and, besides, it is more suitable altogether.'

She was going to say, 'because of Carus Darroch,' but she caught herself up. She could not quite announce that yet, except by hints and becks and meaning smiles. 'Well, dear, of course you know there is absolutely nothing in it — at least, as yet. Nothing settled, that is. But, of course, young people, you know! And it is obvious to every one how much he... But Ethel is a dear girl, and would ornament any sphere, however exalted. Of course you must not mention...'

Vic broke, in remorselessly on the pleasing meditation.

'Is Hester to go or not, mamma? She has to write and say so.'

'Well, dear, as I was saying, I think she had better stay at home. I do not see how I can well spare her. But I shall write to the Duchess myself.'

'Then Hester is to write to Lady Niddisdale and say that she can't be spared out of the nursery till Lottie and Grubby are bathed and combed and put to bed; is that it, mamma? She'll think we can't afford to keep a nurse.'

'Hush, child,' said her mother, looking hastily around, 'no, of course, if the Duchess makes a point of it, as she seems to do, Hester must go.'

'That's all right, mamma! That's what we wanted

to know. Come on, Hester, and get the letter off before the 'cats ' come home!'

Lady Torphichan-Stirling sighed as Vic disappeared through the doorway, elbowing Timson, a tray-laden image of astonishment, against the lintel as she did so, with a resounding bang.

'Dear Victoria is always so impetuous,' she sighed in a delicately fatigued manner to her nearest neighbour, a stout and positive old lady interested in the Ten Lost Tribes and the Literal Interpretation of Prophecy; 'so rough, you know, and takes such strange fancies! Sir Sylvanus and I would be quite anxious about her future did we not know that the children of the elect are specially cared for!'

'Ah, dear Lady Torphichan-Stirling,' cooed the other, 'do not forget that all things are ordained, the woes, the wrath, the judgments, and that, long before the dear girl can be any cause of anxiety to you, the Sixth Vial will have sounded, and we shall all have gone, as the Scriptures say, to our own place — I mean into Abraham's bosom! It is such a comfort!'

The old lady sometimes got pardonably mixed among the horns and vials and trumpets, in the absence of her favourite prophetic expositor with his gaily-coloured charts and little historical handbook. But this was not in the line of Lady Stirling's thought.

'Yes — yes,' she said hastily, in the tone of general religious agreement common to the serious tea-table enthusiast, 'but dear Vic already gives us great anxiety. She takes strong likings and dislikings. For instance, we have a Scotch cousin in the house, a kind of poor relation whom the

Duchess has taken an interest in for the family's sake — so condescending of her Grace. And this girl — yes, that was she in brown, who came in with Victoria just now — she is in danger of having her head turned — so bad for one in her position, don't you agree with me? Well, Victoria absolutely rejoices in crossing me, in exalting this girl whom we took out of pure charity into the house, and especially in annoying and vexing her sisters. But I am powerless, you see, dear; I dare not tell Sylvanus, or he would turn the ungrateful minx instantly out of the house. And I should not like that, you know. I should feel it on my conscience if anything happened afterwards to the girl.'

The prophetic old lady raised her eyebrows at the emphasis. She thought she was on the edge of a scandal, and (next to the fulfilment of prophecy, and pending the destruction of all things) nothing delights the waiting faithful so much as a little spicy mundane gossip. Let but a dozen seasoned veterans get together, and even the Ten Lost Tribes are not nearly so much lost as the characters of all their (absent) friends, when the time comes to close the sederunt with a few words of prayer.

'Oh, no,' said her hostess, hastily, a little heart-stricken, as she noticed the eager expression on her friend's face, 'Hester is quite a good girl. But her father...' Here she lowered her voice and for a happy five minutes the apocalyptic old lady had her fill of scandal. 'Yes, indeed, dear Mrs. Gunther-Lestock, dreadful, wasn't it, for his family? It nearly killed me. Of course he went abroad immediately afterwards and his child...'

Another pause — many flutterings of uplifted

hands, a continuous purr of virtuous tongue-clicking, the clashing of black head-bugles. 'Dear, dear, who would have believed it possible! But you know such things occur in all good families. Why, there was my poor sister's husband's brother who...'

The subject of the sister's husband's brother proved so interesting (from a prophetic and philanthropic point of view) that the other tabbies had begun the premonitory rustle of departure before it was finished. The beaded nodding heads came closer as if they had been two of the ten horns about to engage in a personal conflict.

'Good-bye, dear Mrs. Gunther-Lestock,' said the hostess of Empress Gate; 'so, now you do not wonder that I consider it my duty to protect the daughter of such a father and such a mother from herself. And such a pity that the Duchess!'

(Closed with prayer.)

CHAPTER TWENTY NINE

THE SCRATCHING OF THE CATS

Meanwhile in the room above (very high above), which was Tom's sanctum, among a 'clutter' of tobacco jars, Oxford framed photographs of ladies of robust charms, coloured hunting scraps pinned askew to the wall, broken tops of fishing-rods waiting (and waiting in vain) to be spliced, and in the heart of a prevailing blue haze, Vic was assisting Hester to pen her letter. She was balancing herself precariously on the back of a chair, and looking over Hester's shoulder. Tom, Carus Darroch, and young Kipford (who had been Carus's fag and answered indifferently to the name of 'Waffles' and 'Dukey') were seated about a small fire of wood— for, by one of the extraordinary changes incident to the climate of London, it had grown suddenly chilly as October.

It was a dead secret in the lower parts of the house that Kipford ever came to Empress Gate. He had run down from Oxford to see Carus, and he was particularly anxious that his father should not know of his escapade. Consequently he was Mr. 'Waffles,' a friend of Tom's. Only Vic, who of course was a 'fellow,' and did not count, was 'in the know.' Even Hester was entirely innocent, and, indeed, had hardly so much as looked at the closely-cropped young man who stroked his delicate and indeed invisible fair moustache so often, and said 'H-m-mm' before every sentence.

'Thank you very much shall be sure to be with you early hope you will not be disappointed in me.'

Oh, you needn't have put that — but I suppose as you are a 'bud' it's all right. No, don't call her 'your Grace,' she won't mind. She gets plenty of that sort of thing downstairs I wish you boys would make less noise. Tom, for goodness sake don't laugh like a hyena. Carus, make him behave! There's a cricket stump in the corner. Such ongoings are not good for little boys like Waffles!

'H-m-mm — oh, I say. Miss Vic — toria!' said the 'boy,' caressing his moustache.

'Oh, call her 'Vic' like the rest of us and be done with it. She is neither a Camel nor a Hun,' said Tom, lolling upon his shoulder-blades and blowing rings towards the ceiling. 'Ha, hit him in the bull's-eye that time!'

Vic spun round on the chair-back, miraculously preserving herself from falling, and shook a very fairly solid fist under the young man's nose nearest to her. He put up an eye-glass and regarded it stolidly.

'Why, what would you do if he did call you 'Vic?'' cried Tom.

'Do!' said Vic, sharply, 'why, tell his father on him of course — have him spanked and sent back to school!'

Mr. 'Waffles' was immensely delighted.

'No, you wouldn't really — not really, you know,' he said. 'I'm going back on Wednesday, you know. But I had to have some clothes, and I really can't miss the ball. Besides, it's 'Long' anyway, and I'm just up swotting for a beastly exam. My father says I must do decently in the schools so as not to disgrace him. It's all your fault, Carus, and precious hard it is to come immediately after a clever beast like you.'

Still, there's always the river, and generally enough fellows about to make up a scratch crew!

Tom patted Kipford on the back.

'Bravo! Dukey; you'll come out a double first, I bet my boots, and then the Master's eye will be out. Never mind what she says. Call her 'Vic' It sounds too much like 'sixty years of glorious reign' when you call her 'Victoria.'

'There now, Hester, all done! Let me lick the envelope for luck. Got a stamp, Carus? Tom, I know, never has — raids mine when my door isn't locked!'

'Well, I like that,' began Tom.

'Thank you, dear boy — shut up, Tom, you know it's true. Will you post that, Carus? It is to the Duchess about the ball, and very important. So don't forget, as Tom always does. That's the reason you never got my apology for calling you 'Waffles.' It is, indeed. Tom posted it in his second-best overcoat pocket, left-hand side. It's there now!'

'Waffles will take the letter direct, and then I can't forget it,' said Carus, smiling; 'he is stopping at Scotstarvit House.'

'With a rope ladder out at the bedroom window in case his father should arrive in the night!' put in Victoria, looking down at the young man. 'Will you be responsible for it? Swear to deliver it! On your knees. Waffles!'

'Pon my honour, I will think of nothing else till it is in the hands of...'

'Rats!' cried Vic, 'I know something better and safer than a cartload of you fellows' promises. Stand up!'

'I never forgot a letter you gave me to post,' said Carus, demurely.

"Liar and Slave," quoted Vic, melodramatically, 'last Monday at dusk as ever was — but no matter! Stand up, Waffles. Did you hear me speak?'

The young man stood up, smoothing his invisible moustache. Vic spoke the last words a trifle indistinctly. She had a large safety-pin in her mouth. She caught hold of the lapels of his coat.

'Now, put that envelope in your breast pocket,' she commanded, sternly. And when the young man had obeyed with a kind of a pleased and yet shamefaced sheepishness, she deftly caught his coat and pinned the safety-pin through cloth and letter.

'Ouch!' said the youth, involuntarily, when the pin was about half through.

'Was that your waistcoat?' inquired the operator, with much philosophy.

'Yes, my under-waistcoat!' said 'Waffles,' who had not been Carus Darroch's fag in vain.

'Ah, then,' retorted Vic calmly, 'that will ensure that you do not forget. Nothing like jogging a young man's memory nowadays!'

'With a brass pin!' murmured Waffles, sitting down on his chair with a certain careful solicitude.

'Now, mind, you know nothing about any letter, you fellows, if the girls come up. Hester, let's vanish. They'll be here in a jiffy!'

Hester had not said a word, feeling herself very young and simple. She could not stand up to Vic's slangy banter. She had another style, however, learned from Revvy and her own swift-flowing fancies. But just now the life in her was all beaten back by the dulness of her surroundings, and she felt awkward and tongue-tied.

'What a stupid he will think me,' she said to

herself as she went out; 'I could not say 'Boo' to a — not that it matters, of course '

But all the same she heaved a sigh as she left Vic at the door of her own room and ran upstairs to 'tidy' before the hour of afternoon schoolroom tea, at which she presided with Miss Martin between her and the sofa, in order to protect that unfortunate lady from the attacks of Stanhope and the sticky fingers of Grubby.

Arrived in her garret (her aunt had taken her maid down to sleep in her dressing-room, and as a favour given Hester her room) she drew out the Duchess's letter, and first laughed a little, then cried a little over it.

'Oh, it will be dreadful, I know,' she said to herself; 'I shall be afraid of my own shadow, and I shan't be able to say a word to anybody. Oh, I wish I had never promised. I wonder if I could get the letter back?' She started to her feet. But when she thought of Tom's room, and of trying to explain under the quietly observant eyes of the men, she sat down again. That was not to be thought of. She pictured herself standing on the floor before the three of them, unable to utter a single word.

'I wonder why I am such a fool?' said little Hester. 'I didn't use to be like this!'

But Hester was not destined to be left long alone, which in her present mood was perhaps as well. She was inclined to be afraid of the Duchess and the ball, but with her next visitors she forgot all about that.

'Open the door — we want to come in!' It was Ethel's voice outside.

'Yes, at once! Do you hear?' Claudia called out,

still more emphatically. Hester cast a hasty glance about the room to see that she had left nothing on the table that she cared about and opened the door.

Ethel and her younger sister entered and confronted her.

'Now let us see that letter,' said Ethel, her eyes flashing fire and her small hands clenched at her sides. They had come straight up to Hester's room without waiting to take off their things.

'Yes, and we mean to have it, too!' said Claudia, marching over to Hester as if to overawe the girl with her superior stature.

'What letter?' said Hester, faintly.

'Oh, you know very well,' cried Ethel; 'you can't play pretty little Miss Innocence with us. The letter you had from the Duchess, that Vic bullied mamma into letting you answer for yourself.'

'Yes,' said Claudia, sniffing, 'and you've been into Tom's room, too—I smell the smoke. What business had you there? I shall speak to papa!'

'I shall not give you the Duchess's letter, and if I went with Victoria into Tom's room to answer it, what business is that of yours?' said Hester, with spirit.

'Went into Master Tom's room with Miss Victoria, please, ma'am!' mimicked Claudia, ducking a curtsy; 'that's the way you ought to speak, charity-girl!'

Claudia's warlike methods were at once simpler and cruder than Ethel's.

'Give me the letter!' said Ethel again, more fiercely than before.

'I will not!' said Hester, firmly. 'It has nothing to do with you!'

'Then I'll get it for myself—here it is!' cried Claudia, making a dart at one or two papers lying underneath the little rickety circular table which had been given to Hester because nobody else could be induced to give it house-room.

Before Hester could prevent it her cousins were reading each a letter — Ethel had that of the Duchess, and was holding it scornfully. "Sweet little Hester!" — she looks it, doesn't she? She looks what she is, a nasty, spiteful little toad! A charity-girl!' (Her amiable cousin conjectured rightly that that word would hurt worse than anything else.) 'Come early, not later than seven — to help with the flowers' — I should like to see you dare, and us not invited! 'Your loving and repentant Godmother'— silly old woman; she must be in her dotage. We'll teach her!

'Now sit down and answer it as we tell you.' Ethel, as usual, had taken command of the situation.

'I shall do nothing of the kind,' said Hester, indignantly. 'I was instructed by my aunt how to answer it, and the letter has already gone!'

'That is a lie,' said Ethel; 'we know from Timson that no letter has been posted from the box in the hall, and it isn't there now — I looked!'

'What's more,' cried Claudia, looking up from the paper, 'neither you nor Vic have been out. So sit down and write as we tell you!'

Hester again refused, repeating her statement that the reply had already been despatched.

'Well, who has taken it? — tell us that.'

Meantime Claudia had gone over to the little roof window and was reading another letter which she had been holding behind her back. With one glance

Hester saw that it was from Megsy, and she tried to snatch it away.

'Give it me,' she cried, almost in tears; 'that is a private letter with which you have nothing to do. Oh, how mean of you!'

'Sweet little Hesters should have no private letters in other people's houses, which the people whose bread they eat must not see!' mocked Claudia, holding the letter at arm's-length, while Ethel interposed between them.

'Oho! just listen to this,' she cried, from behind Ethel's back: 'Revvie thanks you for the stockings and the snuff. He begs (she spells it with two gs) you not to send him any more, as he has plenty and it is not good for him.' (Who is the dirty old man?) 'We are both weel, but oh, lassie, when will you come hame? The hoose is lonesome withoot ye!' Why don't you go, ours would not be lonesome without you, I can tell you that, Miss Charity!'

'I daresay she was kitchenmaid and scrubbed the floors in her last place,' said Claudia, reading on. 'Hear what the woman says next: 'I am gled that the Duchiss has been kind to you. She was fell fond o' your grandmither, the bonny lamb! And I doubt not that she sees through thae Torpheechns, the cruel wulfs that hae robbit my dentie o' her inheritance!'

'Ethel, do you hear that?' cried Claudia, whirling round the room triumphantly. 'She shall pack now — for a certainty. We will show this to papa, and I know he will never have the insolent creature in his house after this. Then we will see whether she will go to dine at Scotstarvit House or not!'

'Oh, no, you won't,' cried Vic, suddenly appearing from behind, at that moment, snatching the letter

out of Claudia's hand and standing on the defensive; 'you pair of sneaks and thieves. If you tell father a word, I'll swear till all's blue that you made it up — and so will Tom, if I ask him.'

Ethel and Claudia rushed at their sister to force her to give them back the incriminating document, but Vic thrust it deep into her pocket, and, lifting a hatpin off the table, stood at bay with it in her hand. Claudia made a dash forward, but was received with the point of the bayonet and promptly reduced to tears.

'You are an unnatural sister,' cried Ethel, 'and both father and mother shall know of it — how you take sides against your own flesh and blood.'

'Ugh, I don't believe you are flesh and blood! It's vinegar and sawdust you are made of, you horrid cats!' cried free-spoken Vic, 'and if you dare tell my father one word I will spoil your precious Blue Drawing-room games for you. I'll never go out when you want me to, and I'll tell every single man that comes to the house about your spitefulness and the bad tempers you have. The letter is answered and the Duchess has it by now. Hester is going where you were not invited, and you would give your eyes to be in her shoes — you know you would!'

'Her shoes!' said Claudia, recovering a little; 'she hasn't got any, except her street dumpers — she will look pretty at a ball in those!'

'I shall lend her a pair of mine,' said Vic, a little doubtfully.

Ethel laughed scornfully.

'Yours! — why, you know very well you never can keep a pair decent for more than a night, and your last ones did you all last winter!'

‘And even if she did go,’ said Ethel, ‘nobody will ever ask her to dance.’

‘No, indeed, not in the frock Read is making for her. Mother bought the material cheap at a removal sale, and it has been lying by,’ Claudia put in her contribution.

‘Of course not,’ coincided Ethel; she will be like Mabel Lyons at the Bachelors' Ball — do you remember, Clau?’

‘Rather!’ answered Claudia; ‘she was in a great state about going and got mother to chaperon her — like her impudence! And, of course, mamma had something else to do than look after her. And so she sat and sat, and watched dance after dance. And not a soul spoke to her. And nobody even took her down to supper.’ (Claudia stopped to laugh here — it was her idea of humour.) ‘And like that woman in Tennyson or somebody, ‘She was weary, weary, and wished that she were dead.’ And at two o'clock in the morning, when somebody did finally take pity on her and ask her to dance, she burst into tears before everybody, and cried like a great baby, till mother had to get her away somehow. And oh, it was so funny! That's just how it will be with the charity-miss!’

‘Never mind them, dear old girl,’ said Vic, standing on guard over Hester, whose face had grown tearful too, for she fully expected Mabel Lyons's fate to be hers; ‘you'll be all right at the ball. Cats can't help scratching — if only to keep their claws sharp. And if you don't get many dances, Tom will take you down to supper and talk to you. I'll make him promise. He doesn't dance, you know. He only hitches round like a poodle on its hind legs,

and looks just as happy when he does it, too!

After her cousins had gone, Hester threw herself on the little bed and gave way to a good cry. She did not often indulge the weakness, but this had tried her just a peg too high. Besides, though she had kept a brave face before them, she felt the sting of each taunt, of every carefully calculated unkindness, and it was not to be denied that Ethel and Claudia had on this occasion surpassed themselves.

Still there was not much time for sorrow. It was not long before Read, Lady Torphichan-Stirling's maid, rapped at the door with a message that her ladyship wished Miss Stirling to come down and help Miss Martin with the children's evening lessons. She had no more time to think over her griefs that night, which perhaps was as well. Vic looked in for a moment on her way up to the drawing-room after dinner.

'Here's your letter,' she said; 'they have not told. I bluffed them about their Blue Drawing-room games. They are no end frightened that I will go and stop there with them all the afternoon. But if I were you I would always burn your home letters when you answer them. The cats would think nothing of overhauling the whole place when you go out!'

And when at last, very tired and heartsore, Hester laid her head on her pillow, the consciousness returned to her of how steadily Carus Darroch's eyes had gazed at her as she sat writing with Vic looking over her shoulder. Of course, he must have been looking at Vic. Perhaps it was Vic after all, and not Ethel, whom he admired. What if he should marry Vic? The thought ought to have given her pleasure,

but, on the contrary, Hester was conscious that it sent a little stab of deeper pain through her breast. She could not sleep for three hours for thinking of it.

CHAPTER THIRTY

THE MAGIC WAND

The great day came at last. Hester woke in the morning to a sense of something pleasant somewhere. At first she thought it was the Darroch water singing down in the linn. She was paddling her feet in it and listening to the grateful hush of sound. But instead the sun was streaming in between the blind and the little red curtain which Hester had put up to give a homelike flavour to her dingy little garret chamber. The London sparrows were busy outside, elbowing and quarrelling with each other incessantly as they transacted their affairs domestic.

Hester lay listening. She tried to imagine herself back by the Darroch. Across the deep brown pool beneath the kirk-yard the Waterside kine were drowsing or standing kneedeep in the shallows. Was that Revvie up there, walking with his Greek Testament in his hand, to and fro along the minister's walk?

But no, it would not do. The real, which was so unreal, the New World, which was as old as Eve's Tree of Knowledge, soon ousted even the sweetest of day-dreams.

The morning of the ball! Hester had a vision of bright lights, of gay uniforms, of beautiful costumes, of linked arms and mazy dances. She had seen from the entrance door of the ballroom many such in the house at Empress Gate, but she herself had never been bidden enter into fairyland. The children's

nursery was her portion.

But tonight the New World was to be her own. Yet there on the old chintz of the wheezy armchair lay the frock of cheap material which Read had finished for her the night before, so that she might be able to give all her attention to making any changes in the young ladies dresses when they came home from the Court dressmaker.

‘Ugh, you are tight just where you ought to be loose, and loose just where you ought to be tight. I can't get you right!’ said Hester, looking at the cheap remnanted job-lot silk of the skirt. ‘But, after all, I ought not to say that, for poor Read certainly did her best. And Vic's slippers—she nearly cried that they were not better.’

And with that Hester got up and began to wonder if there would be a letter from Revvie that morning, and of all she would have to tell him when she came back out of the wonder-world into which she was adventuring.

The day passed slowly — indeed, as it seemed, interminably. It was half-past six before she could leave the day-nursery, where she had been superintending the children's lessons and helping with stray fragments of sewing, to rush upstairs to put on her frock. She had tried several times to improve Read's fit, but, she feared, with very indifferent success.

‘Oh, how I wish now I had done what Megsy wished me to do, and learned to sew like her. But I always liked going about with Revvie so much better.’ She sighed as the tears fell fast on the irregularly bunched seams about the waist. ‘And I am sure it does not sit right somehow. I know I shall

trip over the skirt if I try to dance, it is so long in front. Not that any one will ask me. Oh, I wonder if he will be there to dinner tonight!’

At last, all in a flutter of fear and excited expectation, she ran downstairs and let herself out without being interrupted. The girls were all busy in their rooms, and only the voice of Tom could be heard over the balusters, declaiming about a lost shirt stud. Hester summoned an ancient four-wheeler, which lurked habitually on a stand at the corner, and was somewhat dolefully trundled to Scotstarvit House, where, in spite of the prevailing bustle of preparation, she found herself at once in another atmosphere.

Upon the very doorstep, James the Statelie-then-usual smiled on the shy young girl. ‘Yes, her Grace had given particular orders that Miss Stirling was to be taken directly up to her as soon as she arrived.’ And with a quickly-beating heart the girl passed through the decorated halls and up a staircase as broad (so it appeared to her) as the steps of a church.

A light knock, a smiling maid, a warm delicious smell of roses, and Hester found herself standing trembling a little before her Grace of Niddisdale. She had expected that the great lady would be already gorgeous in her noblest silks and most magnificent jewels. Instead, the unconventional Duchess was attired in a dressing-jacket and yellow flannel petticoat. Her feet were thrust into red Morocco slippers without heels, and she had a dilapidated French novel in her hand.

‘My dear,’ she cried, without turning her head, ‘come round and let me look at you. You won’t mind

me not coming out to receive you. I am humouring my great grandfather's gout, and I want to be all right for tonight. Give me a kiss. There — why, child, what possessed you to let them dress you like a table-maid going out with her Sunday sweetheart? I just guessed what the old apothecary's wife would be equal to. Child, you simply can't go to the ball in a thing like that!

The tears sprang to Hester's eyes. Her lip quivered, and a great lump built itself slowly up in her throat.

'I was afraid not,' she stammered; 'I knew you would say so. But it was all I had. My aunt got Read, her maid, to make it up for me.'

And Hester broke down.

'Come, come, childie. Sit down by me, and perhaps we will find a way out of the trouble,' said the Duchess, kindly.

But Hester had found her tongue. She was already drying her tears.

'How silly of me! I did not mean to cry — but I thought — I won't mind about the ball this time. I will go back home and not mind a bit.'

'Yes, you will mind very much,' said the Duchess, taking Hester's hand and drawing her down upon a footstool. 'See, there is a stool I set for you before you came. Sit down on it, lassie. Do as your grandmother's oldest friend bids ye — she is the only one left alive, wae's me!

'Now,' said the Duchess, patting Hester's curls and bringing her head against her comfortable maternal knee, 'I want you to trust yourself to me tonight as if I were your own grandmother. This house is my house. This ball is my ball, and you are

my own dear goddaughter. Poor Niddisdale's wife is dead, you know. Kipford has not yet taken one. There is not a woman of my family that I have not quarrelled with. So my god-daughter must support me when I receive. I am going off to Homburg tomorrow. For tonight you belong to me. What do you say, little one?'

'I will do anything you wish,' Hester said, gratefully. 'No one has been so kind to me since I left Revvie and Megsy.'

'Tell me all about it,' said the Duchess, still with her hand on the girl's bowed head. 'But mind, no more tears. For I want your eyes to look their best. A tear or two does not matter—rather helps than otherwise, I used to think when I cared about these things. But you have cried more than enough already!'

So, without saying a word against even the bitterest of her persecutors, Hester told of her life in the North after her grandmother's death, of Megsy and of Revvie, of her coming to London, and of all the desolate loneliness of life at Empress Gate. And the Duchess listened and thought.

At last, quite suddenly, she jumped up and rang the bell vigorously. 'Now I am going to be the fairy godmother indeed,' she said, 'and you are to be good and do just what I tell you, not less and not more. I was your father's godmother, too, though Heaven forgive me, not a word of his catechism did I ever teach him. But I'm going to do better by you — that is, if you will let me.'

And her Grace pinched Hester's soft young cheek and pointed to a pink dressing-gown which was hanging limply on a hook.

'First of all, put that on, and then I shall begin to wave my fairy wand in earnest. First wave, enter Neale. Neale, ask Madame Celine's people to come this way!'

The maid departed, and after a moment or two returned with a couple of smiling assistants, who carried in their arms certain mysteriously swathed parcels. Hester stood up with a long sigh, and presently to her enchanted eyes a marvel appeared — all a-glister with sheen of shimmering white with a soft 'puff' here and there of lace, fine as sea-foam on the return wave, and, nestling shyly beneath these, half revealed and half concealed, the dearest and most lovesome knots of real white heather.

'Now, Hester, dear,' said the Duchess, looking very pleased and happy, 'on with it. I think it will do. That was Madame Celine herself who was here the last afternoon you took tea with me. She measured you with her eyes, and Madame does not usually make mistakes. But if there is any alteration these young ladies will do it in lots of time.'

The girl's hands were trembling so that she could hardly help the maid who, with a friendly pleasure in her eyes, as it were reflected from those of her charge, helped Hester to endue her slight young figure, for the first time, with a garment that enhanced its beauty.

Happily, Madame had proved worthy of her reputation and of the Duchess's confidence. The dress fitted to a marvel.

'How well the little one holds her head,' murmured her Grace to herself. 'I was not wrong. She will be a swan yet, and no ugly duckling.'

But the girl did not hear her. She was walking in

a dream. Something began to buzz in her head, and she seemed suddenly out of breath, like a bird taken in the hand. The silken rustle about her was music to her ears, and a kind of enchanted perfume exhaled from the very lace and ribbons. As she followed the Duchess to the great pier-glass she felt the air cold on her neck and shoulders. Involuntarily she put up her hands.

‘Oh,’ she thought, ‘I can never go into a ballroom with it open like this!’

‘It is cut very high, my dear,’ said the voice of the Duchess, who in looking round had noticed the action. ‘Madame objected, but I thought it most fitting for a young girl!’ Then Hester looked in the glass and positively gasped. She felt that someone else must be behind her, and repressed a tendency to turn round. This tall and — yes — beautiful girl could not be the same Hester Stirling who, an hour ago, had carefully wiped off her old brown house-dress the tea Grubby had spilt upon it. She saw reflected the image of a girl with a flush of colour in her cheeks, slightly parted lips, red as coral, and large eyes at once sparkling with excitement and dark with potentialities of passion and tears. It was all a realm of enchantment to Hester, and for once she seemed the changeling princess of her own dreams. Strangely enough, and even uniquely strange, there was no fairy prince to be the crowning happiness of this fairyland — only the joy of living, and the consciousness of having on, for the first time in her life, a perfectly fitting frock.

But something entirely mundane recalled her to herself. She saw Vic's old slippers peep from under the straight fall of the skirt. She slipped them back

at once, but not before the sharp eye of her Grace had caught sight of their condition.

‘Open the under door of that wardrobe, Neale,’ she said, smiling.

And lo! ranged in a glancing beaded row were a dozen pairs of shoes.

‘I had them sent up from Methven’s on approval,’ said the old lady triumphantly, enjoying Hester’s surprise with all the zest of a generous schoolgirl whose day it is to treat her companions.

‘And as for your flowers — all in good time,’ she continued; ‘that daft laddie, Carus, has had every gamekeeper and herd on all Darrochside quartering the moors for white heather. There will be a dearth of good luck in Galloway for the next ten years!’

It came to Hester with a sudden warm flush, spreading upward about her heart, that Carus would be there. Carus would see her like this. Perhaps she did not really look pretty. Very likely it was all in her own eyes, and at the thought she turned away her head quickly from the pier-glass, yet womanlike took just one last half-shy glance back over her shoulder.

Her Grace laughed, and, going up to the girl, pinched and kissed her on the cheek.

‘Do that tonight, my lassie, and you will break hearts!’ she said.

‘Do what?’ asked Hester, much astonished.

‘All too soon you will know,’ said her Grace, smiling; and shaking her head; ‘and now off with your finery and into that dressing-gown again! We may play later, but meantime, in spite of braw goons and new shoon, we must feed the inner woman. Come along!’

Then afterwards Hester had again to resign herself into the hands of Neale while the Duchess stood by and criticised.

'No one can do hair like Neale,' she said, 'but make her keep it simple — higher behind, Neale, to show the nape of the neck. Providence did not stick on your head with a screw-nail, my dear, and you must live up to it.'

So with all goodwill the swift-fingered Neale plied her task. Hester's abundant hair was piled high on her head, where, having never been so treated before, it constantly broke bounds in a ripple of rebellious ringlets, which shadowed the brow softly and doubled the effect of the long dark lashes of her eyes.

The Duchess clapped her hands as she watched.

'Was there ever such a fairy godmother out of storybooks? Why, our little Hester is transformed. You may not be quite a beauty yet, little one, but you are something better. You are the very image of what your grandmother was on her marriage day. There, sit down and read a book — no, not that one.' (She made a dash and picked up the yellow cover off the floor.) 'Now I must rush and get on my dowager's brocade. I will not take half as long as you — 'a bonny bride is soon buskit,' you know the old Scots proverb.'

Left to herself, Hester tried to fix her attention on the novel her Grace of Niddisdale had given her, but she seemed to hear nothing but the thick beating of her heart, and she breathed so deeply that the silk and lace on her bosom seemed to breathe too. The letters on the page grew curiously fluid. The words did not seem to mean anything, though here and

there in after years a phrase or a name stood out keenly remembered.

'I hope I'm doing right,' said the Duchess thoughtfully, as she submitted herself to Neale. 'What wonderful eyes! The iris seems to have expanded so as to cover everything right to the edge of the white. And such an eager yearning to be loved as is in the child's heart! Well, she has no mother, I must look after her, that's all. No, she may not be a beauty as two men out of three count beauty, but — she will wind the third man round her little finger.'

CHAPTER THIRTY ONE

CARUS IN LOVE

Hester never forgot the appearance of the ballroom at Scotstarvit House as she entered it for the first time with her Grace. The great ancient chandeliers, which dated from the time of Charles the Second, were brilliant with wax candles, and the floor of polished wood glistened emptily and, as it seemed, illimitably beneath them. There was the green of ferns and palms and foliage everywhere, and from beneath the wide arch of the conservatory there came the tinkling of tiny waterfalls.

It seemed to Hester that she must be temporarily somebody else as she stood near the entrance with my lady of Niddisdale. All her girlish fear had left her, and as the guests began to arrive she did her share, as the Duchess said afterwards, with the aplomb of an old campaigner.

Niddisdale himself, to whom ballrooms were anathema, had kept away on purpose.

'But then no one ever expected anything else,' said his mother. Kipford, however, was at hand and, taking time by the forelock, had written himself down on Hester's card for half-a-dozen dances. He smiled to himself as he took advantage of her inexperience to appropriate all the best round dances to himself. Kipford danced very well, and he had heard his grandmother rave about what she had seen when she surprised Hester's lesson with the old Frenchman who had taught his own father to dance in the first days of his long exile.

Carus also came up, eagerly soliciting the first dance, but his grandmother bade him be off. He had other fish to fry if he was to do his duty. She would see that he did not dance attendance on her god-daughter. Nevertheless, Carus had managed to outwit authority sufficiently long to whisper, 'Will you keep me the third waltz?' and Hester had nodded happily — not a bit because the prince had come, but because in the wonderful glamour of that first evening she did not feel the need of any.

Many looked at her as she stood behind the Duchess vivid with life, and with a kind of inner purity and freshness shining from her that was more than beauty. These were mostly men. The women wanted to get nearer in order to see the wonderful Oriental necklace of filmy gold chains, from which looked out the red eye of the ruby which her father had given her the day he sat on the stone seat by the sun-dial in the old garden at Arioland. It was the only spot of colour about her, and the Duchess had insisted on her wearing it.

'It is your father's blessing, my dear, and may some day be your fortune!' she said.

But the great event of the evening for Hester was at hand. The Torphichan-Stirlings were arriving, my lady gorgeous in black brocade of the stiffest, Ethel in pink and black, Vic in old gold, and Claudia the statuesque in close-fitting white satin.

Hester's aunt bowed low to the young lady at the Duchess's elbow without the least notion who she was. But Ethel recognised her at a glance, and stood like one stricken, the red and white striving and alternating on her cheek. She turned half round upon her cousin as if about to say something. Then,

recovering herself, she passed on, biting her lips. Claudia moved majestically past as if she had not seen any one but her Grace.

Vic, however, who came last, sprang forward with a glad cry.

'Oh, you dear,' she cried, with her arms round Hester, 'so you have been keeping all this up your sleeve. How sold the enemy will be! I would not have missed this for a thousand pounds!'

And Tom, his hand upon his moustache, hovered about like a dragon-fly round a gnat-haunted pool, afraid to approach too near for fear of catching the eye of the Duchess, and yet unable to leave such a wonder as this little Cousin Hester, of whom he had hitherto taken so little notice.

At last he got his chance. Carus had come again and had departed, looking very indignant. Tom slid in.

'Hester,' he said, in a low tone, 'I can't ask you to dance. I'm no good at that. But I want you to sit out a square dance or so with me. I've got something to say to you. And oh, I say, I just can't help telling you that you are a stunner. Where did you get that dress? It is the prettiest in the room, and you are the prettiest girl!'

'The Duchess gave it to me,' said Hester, demurely. 'Of course I'll sit out with you, Tom dear, whenever you like!'

As the young man turned away he quailed under his father's eye. The eminent physician stood by a palm surveying the changing group round Hester with a kind of tigerish look on his face. Tom slunk past meekly enough, but Sir Sylvanus did not even glance at him. His eyes were on Hester's necklace,

and he seemed fascinated by the red eye of the ruby in its network of golden chains.

He, too, watched his chance and approached Hester as she moved towards the orchestra with a message from the Duchess.

'Where did you get that?' he asked in a tone stifled and menacing. And as he spoke he laid a pulpy finger on the pigeon's blood ruby.

'My father gave it to me,' said Hester, blushing. For till tonight she had never taken it out of the little box in which Megsy had kept it. Indeed, it still retained a faint reminiscent smell of Megsy's tea-caddy, where it had lain so long, waiting for its mistress 'to grow up and play with it.'

'That is a lie!' said her uncle, in a low voice, and turned away with a countenance ashen white and hands that trembled.

'Her father gave it to her,' he said to himself; 'she has kept it all the time! What if that abominable old woman has put her up to this. She may suspect — every one knows that I made my money in rubies — let me think — let me think —!'

Thus the 'father's blessing' came home as a curse to one guilty conscience in that room. The dead hand gripped from afar. The girl's very innocence seemed unutterably dangerous, and Sylvanus shivered at the memory of his crime, as to a murderer the shadow of a wayside cross may shape out a gallows on the dust.

But even her uncle's half-heard words cast only a momentary cloud on the sweetness of Hester's dream. She was perfectly happy when she glided into the first dance with Kipford. It was scarcely a dance. Their feet moved without volition. They

seemed upborne on white summer clouds, and when the music stopped they found themselves suddenly brought to earth, and heard the hum of voices about them sound strange to their resentful ears.

Kipford emerged raving about his partner. There never had been such a born dancer as this girl his grandmother had taken such a fancy to — ‘Old family too, long-lost god-child — knew her by the catechism mark! And, by Jove, that ruby must be worth some tin — never saw such a thing. But her dancing — my dear fellow, it takes you clean off your feet!’

‘How about your head, Waffles?’ his comrades retorted.

And so after this, of course, Hester had no lack of partners. She could have filled her card half-a-dozen times over, till at last she was reduced to shaking her head and saying, ‘There’s my cousin Vic over there. She dances quite as well as I do and is ever so much nicer!’

For Hester did not forget her friends, and presently Vic also was entirely happy.

When Carus Darroch came for his third waltz he was furious.

‘Why, it’s all full,’ he said, ‘not a Jack one — well, I think you might have kept one or two for me, your oldest friend in the room by a great deal!’

‘I am so sorry,’ said Hester, penitently, ‘but you see I was so afraid that nobody would ask me to dance at all, like that girl Ethel Torphichan tells about.’

‘Oh, nonsense,’ said Carus, very rudely for him. For he, too, remembered the lesson with Monsieur, and had counted on this experience for a long time.

‘And, besides, you know,’ continued Hester, taking no notice of his exclamation, ‘I thought,’

She hesitated, and looked at her fan.

‘You thought what?’

‘I thought that you would be so much engaged with Ethel that you would not care to dance — with anybody else.’

‘Not care!’ Carus was gnawing the end of his moustache now. Yet for the life of him he could not get the next words out. He was quite unconscious of the curious look his father was bending upon him from behind a palm. Lord Darroch was merely putting in his time till a suitable card party could be arranged by talking to Lady Torphichan-Stirling about the game laws, and the necessity for ‘being severe with the fellows.’ He had just got a new gamekeeper on purpose.

‘It is time for our dance,’ said Hester. ‘Are you very angry with me?’

‘No,’ said Carus, savagely, ‘but I’ll take it out of that young dog Waffles when I get hold of him.’

They moved off. Carus was not a first-rate dancer like Kipford, but Hester seemed somehow to understand, and fell into step so wonderfully, that in a moment she had imparted to her partner some of her own consummate ease and grace. Carus had never been so near her before. A subtle essence seemed to breathe from her, as of the freshness of spring mornings, of linen clean and delicate, and of the charm of joyous girlhood. These came to him and well-nigh made his brain reel. He looked down at her with a sudden-springing tenderness.

‘Hester,’ he said, ‘just now you said I did not care,’ But he could get no further. Indeed, he did not

in the least know what he wanted to say.

She looked at him, and her eyes, large, dewy, and filled with the light of excitement and happiness, fairly dazzled him.

'I have not thanked you for getting me the white heather,' she murmured, and dropped them again. Carus did not try to speak again. He only let himself go till the music ceased.

'Do you know I have been steering you all the time?' she said, as he led her towards the conservatory.

'Oh! I only wish you could,' Carus began, with a very clear idea now of what he meant to say. But at that moment he saw his father watching him from the doorway.

'Yes?' queried Hester, quietly. Her heart was beating fast with happiness. It would soon end, of course, but meantime she would not think of that. And Carus — well, Carus was Carus, of course, and nicer than anybody else.

'I wish you would lend me your programme for a minute?' he said, without finishing his former sentence.

'I can't — my partner will be here in a moment for the next dance!'

'The next is mine, my young lady,' said Tom, coming up. 'What do you want with that card, Darroch?'

But Carus was gone.

He discovered Kipford talking to Vic on the other side of the room, and swooped straight down upon him.

'Did you see Lady Niddisdale looking for you. Waffles?' he said, shamelessly.

'No; where is granny?' said the youth, promptly, falling into the snare, 'Pardon me a moment, Miss Vic!'

Carus also murmured an excuse to Vic, and as soon as they were a few steps off he took his companion by the arm.

'See here, Waffles,' he said, 'you disgorge! You had no business to snap up all the best numbers on Hester Stirling's card when I was dancing attendance on the dowagers. Now I'm going to have the rest of these bar one, and you can sit them out with Vic over there. I don't think you'll mind much. You and she seem great chums all of a sudden.'

'I'll be hanged if I do,' said Waffles, rebelliously.

'Now, attend to me. Waffles dear,' said Carus, softly; 'I've licked you before, and I'll lick you again — yes, this very night, if I have to take you down to the billiard-room to do it.'

Waffles had not been a fag in vain, and he weakened.

'But how do you know that I can make it up with Victoria?' he grumbled.

'Because I have just seen her card, and I know she has the vacancies. Let me mark your tally for you. There you are, my boy. Go in and win! Bless you, my children.'

Carus was jubilant.

'Oh, you unutterable beast!' growled Kipford, staring at his mangled card. 'You've gone and nicked all the waltzes, except one!'

'Yes,' said Carus, mildly, 'too much candy is not good for little boys. Stick to pudding. Waffles — stick to pudding!'

Swiftly, all too swiftly, the tides of this New World

swept Hester onwards. The hours fled past.

'You are making a triumph, my dear,' said the Duchess, smilingly, 'and I am glad you are not dancing too much with any one man.'

Hester's conscience smote her a little. Carus had just returned her the amended list of her engagements. She blushed hotly at the thought. Still, after all, it was in no way her fault. He had done it without telling her. It is strange, however, that it did not occur to Hester to object to being made the subject of exchange and barter. There was something masterful about Carus Darroch always. She seemed to hear his voice as he carried her through the dark woods, and to feel the sickening pain in her lame foot. Again she thrilled at the touch of his lips as he extracted the thorn. Again she tasted the blessed relief of feeling perfectly safe in his hands.

Meanwhile many eyes watched the girl —none, however, so full of the gall of bitterness as Ethel's angry blue ones. In the whirl of every round dance she still kept an eye upon her cousin. She sat out the square sets with a heart that secreted ill-natured speeches. These she proved on Claudia, sharpening them upon that young lady's more selfish hatred, as iron sharp-eneth iron. But when she came to deliver them to Carus Darroch, somehow they seemed to fail of their effect. He had a grave air of preoccupation, and stared at Ethel with such lofty surprise, that she was compelled to turn elsewhere to give her malice vent. But acid and spiteful as the two girls were, there was something infinitely more deadly behind the dull leaden brow and lack-lustre eyes of the eminent physician and philanthropist,

Sir Sylvanus Torphichan.

Meantime, Hester danced on all unconscious. She seemed to herself as well as to others a different creature. Like a flower that bourgeons in the sunshine after genial rain, the girl actually seemed to alter visibly in this atmosphere of kindness and admiration. She was so glad to be able to please people, so innocently happy to be thought pretty. After all these dark repressed years it was wonderful to find that she had the power of making others happy with a smile.

But the time was growing terribly short. Dance after dance winged itself away. It was always Carus now. He had altered her card most unscrupulously, and Kipford, solacing himself with Vic, shook a surreptitious list at his cousin.

'I say, old man,' he whispered once in a pause, 'look out for squalls from your governor tomorrow — and, by the way, Sir Apothecary looks pretty dusty too.'

'Waffles,' said Carus, mildly, 'I thought that in time past I had done my duty by you, but it appears that I have not yet impressed upon you that it is your best policy to mind your own business. I shall try again and succeed, if you don't look out!'

'All right, dear boy,' rejoined Kipford over his shoulder, 'I was only warning you, that's all!'

But Carus did not want to be warned. He had taken the bit between his teeth. He did not care for his father or anybody's father. He was madly in love. He owned it to himself. It was pain to see Hester give even her hand to another man. How could she be interested in the inanities of this and that fool? —

'Do you like the floor? Are not the decorations

perfect! What very poor champagne they are giving — did you ever see the like? Have you been down to supper? (He thanked Heaven he had forestalled them there.) That idiot of a Tom — not Tom, but tomfool — what could she have to laugh about with him? What if they were in love with each other all the time! Tom never went to balls; why had he come to this and stayed all night? And so forth, and so forth. The pattern is constant with earnest young men, driven this way and that by the primal ardensities of love.

‘How could she appear so unconscious? Why did she never look at him? She was a hard-hearted little flirt, of that unconscious sort which is ever the most deadly. Pshaw! he would dismiss the matter — he would think no more about such a girl.’

But just then Hester, passing on Kipford's arm, lifted her eyes once to his as he stood gloomily apart. She smiled, and his heart went into his throat with the suddenness of physical pain. ‘What an angel! Was ever any one so lovely?’ He tingled to his finger-tips with desire to carry her off there and then — to the Pacific Isles, to Hampstead, to the North Pole — to any wild and desolate place where they would be sufficiently alone together for ever and ever. Yes, and he would do it too.

CHAPTER THIRTY TWO

THE WORM TURNS

When he came to himself he heard his grandmother talking quickly and persuasively to Lady Torphichan-Stirling. Her Grace of Niddisdale hoped that her dear friend had enjoyed the ball — at least, in the way in which seniors like themselves could expect to enjoy such things — finding enjoyment in seeing the happiness of the young. Yet she was forgetting — in comparison with her Grace, Lady Torphichan-Stirling was still among the juveniles. She must therefore humour the caprices of a really old woman. Lady Torphichan-Stirling would extend her kindness yet a little further. Tomorrow her Grace was leaving England for some time — ‘we must all patch up the frail tabernacle. Sir Sylvanus, must we not?’ — would Lady Torphichan-Stirling permit little Hester to stay with her that night? Perhaps on another occasion one of Lady Stirling's own beautiful daughters would take pity on a lonely old woman.

Carus picked up heart of hope. Here was an opportunity ready-made from the hands of fate. He would ask Kipford to put him up at Scotstarvit House for the night. He listened eagerly for Lady Torphichan-Stirling's reply.

That excellent lady was obviously in a difficulty. She had had her instructions from Ethel and Claudia, who were raging jointly and severally to fly at Hester's throat as soon as they got her away.

But the Baronet himself struck in over his wife's

shoulder.

'Certainly, certainly, my dear Duchess,' he said in his softest manner, 'it was indeed most kind that your Grace should interest yourself in the child. Her life till lately has been such a sad and unfortunate one. She succeeded to a heritage of disgrace. I am sorry to speak of a relative of my dear wife's in this manner. But Sarah will bear me out that nothing else does justice to the facts.'

So no alternative remained to Lady Torphichan-Stirling but to collect her brood and make ready to sail down the stairs of Scotstarvit House. Hester came up with Vic, feeling that now indeed her fate was come upon her. But her aunt received her with an ominous chill and an intimation that at the request of the Duchess she was to remain the night at Scotstarvit House. Hester thanked her aunt falteringly, and then turned to say good-bye to Vic.

'See you tomorrow morning, old girl, and get all your news about everything,' was that off-hand young lady's reply. 'Nicest ball I ever was at, don't you think so?'

'I never was at any other, you see,' said Hester, smiling, 'but it has been very nice.'

'You will have to stiffen your back tomorrow, little girl,' whispered Vic, 'Eth is as sulky as a bear with a sore head. Look at her face now. Pleasant, isn't it? She won't be any better in the morning. But never mind, dear, Tom and I will pull you through somehow! And I'll send you some of your ordinary togs for the morning.'

'Thank you, Vic, dear; you are always kind,' said Hester, giving her friend an impulsive little hug at the head of the stairs.

'Now I'm off to be the pariah of a virtuous establishment, all the way home in that horrid old carriage!'

The Baronet smiled upon his niece as he went out, and Hester looked up at him even gratefully. But there was something in the unsmiling eyes at once so baleful and so threatening that Carus's vague instinctive dislike for the distinguished physician changed into frantic hatred upon the spot.

'Thank heaven, that's over,' sighed the Duchess sinking into a chair in the cardroom, where a fire had been kept up by the whist party under the auspices of my Lord Darroch. 'Hello, Carus, what are you doing here? Why haven't you gone off to your rooms with the rest?'

'I wanted to see you all safe to bed,' said Carus. 'I've been having the painters in, and Kipford is giving me a bed in his dressing-room till the smell goes off a bit!'

'How wonderful is a kind Providence,' sighed the old lady, 'it is simply beautiful, the fitness which arranges that these dispensations shall always take place when I have a pretty girl staying with me. But I will see to it that you do not profit by the Providence which rules the outgoings and incomings of painters. You have not behaved at all well, sir! I am not pleased with you. Why did you not take the apothecary's daughter down to supper as was your bounden duty, sir? You know your father was watching you like a lynx, and he will excite himself over it when you meet — which is bad for him, seeing that his heart is so weak.'

Carus muttered the first excuse that came into his head.

'No, you can't get out of it that way, Master Carus.

I saw you a moment before when I was talking to the mother. Now I do not care a biscuit whom you marry, but I am going to see that you do not make my sweet little friend unhappy till you have got your Lord-High-Masterly mind made up!'

And she nodded to Hester, who, under the escort of Kipford, was watching with interest the contractor's men putting out the candles and removing the decorations of the ballroom.

'You wrong me, I would not make her unhappy for the world,' Carus began, and then he stopped. He had some vague idea of confessing his love and throwing himself on his grandmother's goodwill. But somehow he could not muster the courage. Her Grace had always been good to him, but he had always known that he must marry money. His father had told him so a thousand times with brutal frankness. Niddisdale had impressed the need upon him with dignified clearness. His-grandmother jested continually about it, yet with an air that told how thoroughly she understood the necessity. The opportunity passed. Hester came up with Kipford, and was promptly whisked upstairs by the Duchess out of his sight.

Kipford led the way to the smoking-room, Carus gloomily following in his wake.

The former made no remark till he had opened a new box of his father's cigars, and let the gas escape from a soda-water bottle with a loud report.

Then he spoke, without looking at his friend, apparently to the long tumbler with the ice tinkling in it.

'No end of a fine girl that, Darroch — pity her people are not more — eh?'

He stopped in surprise, for Cams had turned the face upon him with which he used to lick him in the days of his fagship.

'Her people are as good as yours — better than mine!' he said, fiercely.

'Don't jump down a fellow's throat, Carus,' said Kipford, laughing a little uneasily, 'you know yourself you don't much cotton to that sanctimonious doctor humbug?'

'And what has he to do with her?'

'Why, he is her father!'

Carus looked at Kipford as if he had suddenly gone crazy.

'Of whom have you been talking all this time?' he asked, coldly.

'Why, Vic Torphichan, of course!' Kipford broke into a laugh. 'Oh, I see! And you of that little girl granny has swept off upstairs with her. Go slow, old man, go slow! You know you danced with her far too much tonight. And pray how often did you dance with your Ethel?'

Carus muttered a fierce rejoinder.

'Yes, it is my business, Carus. You were too far gone to see your governor lying off in the wings, and the medico-Baronet watching you both with a face on him like death and hell following after. But I saw, and, if I mistake not, unless you look out, you will not only get into a jolly mess yourself, but what may weigh with you more, you will get that sweet little Hester into trouble.'

Carus tried a counter.

'And how about Vic? What will your father say to

the shameless way you have been conducting yourself with that young lady all the evening?’

‘No good, Carus,’ said Kipford, lighting a cigar, ‘it isn't your case at all, my boy. First, Dad wasn't there to see. Secondly, except for the Oxford business, I should not have cared a domino if he had. Thirdly, they are all in such a hurry for me to marry, that I am pretty well sure they will give me my head in the matter. You see I don't need to go in for dollars as you do, Carus. Fourthly, and lastly, my dear friend, listen to the words of wisdom from the lips of the aged. Vic is a jolly girl, a good fellow, and does not care a rap whether she ever sees me again or not. Now if that little Hester of yours were to fall in love, she would put her last copper on the board. Amen. Now I'll take up the collection, if you please!’

Carus smoked furiously, but did not reply.

Kipford threw himself on a lounge and elevated his feet over the back of a contiguous chair.

‘It sounds jolly cheek, me ragging you about a girl — you can tell me to depart to the shades of the unsainted dead, or you can jolly well kick me down my ancestral stairs. But unless you mean — well, standing up to the whole wolf's pack, do, like a good fellow, leave that little girl alone!’

Carus threw his scarce-lighted cigar in the fire.

‘My wig,’ cried Kipford, starting and rescuing it, ‘you are in a bad way. That's one of the governor's best regalias! They stand him in about ten bob apiece. Jolly good thing he didn't see you do that, my fine young man!’

‘Look here., Kip,’ said Carus Darroch, turning upon his ex-fag, ‘you know me pretty well — I do mean to stand up to the pack. My father and my

grandfather have played the deuce with the property for their own pleasure. I don't see why I should sacrifice myself to it. If I can make that little girl love me for myself, I am going to do it. And if I can make her love me, I am going to marry her in spite of fifty fathers and all the apothecaries in creation!

Kipford threw himself out of his lounge with a bound. He extended a hand across the little old-fashioned knife-box which held the decanters.

'Shake!' he cried, cheerily, 'I'm wid yez, me boy! Count your Waffles in!'

After this there was a long silence, and Kipford arranged himself to listen at his ease till far into the night when Carus at last began to talk on and on about little Hester Stirling. First he told of the night in the wood when he had carried her home to her grandmother. Then he narrated at inordinate length everything that had occurred since, till Kipford began to nod and wake up again with a jerk (as it seemed, after the interval of many years) to hear the voice of his friend still proclaiming, as though it were a newly-discovered truth, that 'In all the world there never was a girl fit to compare with her!'

At which, finding himself directly appealed to, Kipford nodded for the fiftieth time and relapsed into unconsciousness.

Meanwhile, up in her Grace's boudoir, Hester was back in the pink dressing-gown and assisting the weary Neale to prepare the old lady for bed — in so far as that energetic dame would permit of any interference with her toilet.

The Duchess had been making a proposal to Hester which set that young woman's eyes fairly aflame anew. This was no less than that she should

accompany her Grace to Homburg as her companion, and this without waiting a day longer. In fact, they must start the following morning.

It was a hard task for Hester to refuse. But she felt that she could not thus run away from those who, if she owed them little kindness, had at least given her both a home and an education during three years. She could not go away without consulting Revvie and Megsy. Also, and a flush came upon her cheek as she confessed it to herself, she did not really want to leave London just then. It was foolish, of course. He could never be anything to her, but during the last dance he had asked her to be his friend. And in fact she did not want to go to Homburg quite so much as she had thought when first her friend mentioned the project.

Her Grace of Niddisdale sighed.

‘Well, I suppose I am a selfish old woman,’ she said, ‘and your impulse to stay is right and creditable. But it does not seem to me that you owe these people a penny-piece. They have made a nursery-governess of you, neither more nor less, and so saved themselves the trouble of looking after their children. That is how the matter strikes me. But never mind — you can write me if you change your mind, my dear. And now off with you to bed! I am not so young as you, and if I am to cross tomorrow, I must get some sleep before starting out to catch the mid-day mail.’

CHAPTER THIRTY THREE

THE TWO CAST-IRON MEN

It was on the stroke of noon when Hester rang the bell of the house in Empress Gate. She had seen the Duchess start for Dover, and had gone straight home from Charing Cross. Timson opened to her and stepped back instantly.

'Good morning, Timson!' said Hester, brightly, and tripped into the hall with her usual dainty swiftness, removing her gloves as she did so. Very carefully Timson closed the great door behind her, and then with the step of an avenger of blood he preceded the girl to the little back room still called Sir Sylvanus's study. It was mostly sacred to the vagaries of subcommittees from the philanthropical general meetings held in the great drawing-room. Hester's heart was beating quickly, but she had no premonition of any particular trouble in store for her.

Timson opened the door and she found herself confronted by her uncle and two men clad in grey, with large, clean-shaven upper lips, and with a general sense of cast-iron about them. These three were standing about the table in constrained attitudes, and in an armchair by the fire her aunt was rocking herself to and fro with a handkerchief to her eyes.

Hester looked about her bewildered. She knew well that for the happiness of the past twenty-four hours she must pay by enduring the wrath of the Blue Drawing-room, and possibly the coldness of

her aunt. But that there could be anything worse than that in store for her, she did not dream.

‘Good morning, uncle,’ she said, brightly; ‘I beg your pardon. I did not know you were here with any one. Timson showed me in by mistake.’

Sir Sylvanus did not answer directly. He was holding his head a little more erect than usual. It was, in fact, the manner he cultivated for addressing his constituents. This, as it were, released another fold of chin, and was accompanied by that haughty throwing forward of the left knee which one sees in political statues, in company with a togaesque frock-coat and a roll of papers held in the left hand. This was, in fact, the ideal which Sir Sylvanus kept before him.

He did not answer Hester directly. He only indicated her with his hand.

‘This is the unhappy girl,’ he said, solemnly. And at the words a kind of whimpering sob burst from Lady Torphichan-Stirling, and she rocked herself to and fro faster than ever.

‘My dear,’ said the baronet, turning suavely round to his wife, ‘this is a very painful matter, and perhaps — perhaps it would be better if you did not mix yourself up in it. Had you not better retire for a time to your own room?’

‘Yes, Sylvanus, certainly, if you think so,’ said this model wife.

‘What is it, aunt?’ cried Hester, now thoroughly bewildered, ‘why are you crying?’

And in the pity of her heart she would have accompanied the lady as she went out, but her aunt snatched away her arm, and caught up her skirt with a gesture which said as plain as print, ‘Avaunt,

toad!

Even then Hester would have followed Lady Torphichan-Stirling from the room, but with the most noiseless of footsteps and quite unobtrusively, one of the cast-iron men in grey moved to open the door for the lady of the house, and, as if it had been accidentally, he interposed his body between Hester and the last trundling rustle of her relative's silken train.

'What is the meaning of all this?' asked Hester, turning to her uncle. Sir Sylvanus still maintained his attitude of the incorruptible tribune.

'It means,' he said, forensically, 'that you, Hester Stirling, are accused of stealing from a cabinet in this room a certain gold necklace of Oriental workmanship with ruby clasp of the value, considering the central stone alone, of twelve hundred pounds!'

Hester did not faint. She did not even feel the dreadfulness of her position. The accusation did not seem a real one. Without doubt, all could be put right by a simple explanation.

'Why,' she said, 'do you mean this?'

And she took a little brown leather case out of her pocket. The Duchess had asked to look at the ruby when Hester took it off the night before, and had lifted the case from her own dressing-table and given it to her to keep the necklace in.

Hester opened the brown morocco, and with a kind of interested indrawing of the breath the two men came forward to look. The elder of them took the necklace in his hand, and pulling a little glass out of his pocket, minutely inspected it. He pointed out something in an undertone to his companion,

and then he in his turn stuck the glass in his eye.

'Why,' cried Hester, smiling, 'you cannot be serious, or else you are dreadfully mistaken, uncle. I have had this ever since I can remember. My old nurse, Megsy Tipperlin, told me that my father had brought it from India, or somewhere, and given it to me 'to play with when I grew up,' he said. She kept it in her trunk, however, lest I should lose it, and only gave it to me when I came to London three years ago!'

'Will you, Sir Sylvanus, be good enough to repeat in the presence of this young person, what you have already told us?'

The elder of the two cast-iron men spoke for the first time. He held the Duchess's brown morocco box in his hand, and snapped and re-opened the catch in an absent-minded and mechanical way. Sir Sylvanus cleared his throat.

'This young woman, Hester Stirling, is my wife's niece, the daughter of a brother who was expelled the house and disinherited by his father. Three years ago Lady Torphichan-Stirling and I received her into our house out of charity. She has never shown herself in the least grateful for anything that has been done for her, being naturally, so my wife and daughters inform me, of a spiteful, peevish, and malevolent disposition.'

Sir Sylvanus was lengthening his periods, but the cast-iron man opened the brown case and held it in plain sight — like one who would say, 'Cut the cackle and come to the point.' Sir Sylvanus accordingly proceeded more succinctly.

'Various articles have been missed from time to time, but nothing that we could be definitely sure of

without a shadow of mistake. However, last night, at a ball given by the Duchess of Niddisdale, I saw the ruby which you hold in your hand worn as an ornament by Hester Stirling, and recognised it at once as the missing one of a set of six, all exactly similar, which has been lost ever since the first month she spent in my house.'

'Had you no suspicion of the young woman before the ball?' said the younger of the two men.

'Suspicion — yes,' said the baronet, as if the iniquity of mankind saddened his heart, 'but not enough to go upon, and besides one is naturally very slow to harbour so terrible a doubt concerning any one connected, even remotely, with one's family.'

Hester was about to speak, but the man with the ruby held up his finger.

'It is my duty to warn you,' he said in a severe official tone, 'that anything you say will be used in evidence against you. You may if you like answer my questions. Is there any one in London to whom you have shown this necklace, which you say has been in your possession ever since you can remember?'

'No,' said Hester. 'I do not think so. Indeed, I forgot all about it till the afternoon of the ball, just before I went out to the Duchess of Niddisdale's.'

'A very likely story,' said Sir Sylvanus, contemptuously, 'to keep a jewel worth twelve hundred pounds in an unlocked school chest, and never either wear it or show it to any of her cousins — or to Miss Martin, the resident governess, in whose company she has been all day and every day for three years!'

Sir Sylvanus had, of course, first made sure of his facts.

Then the elder man spoke again.

'Can we see the other similar necklaces — the five which, with this one, make up the set?'

'Certainly,' said Sir Sylvanus, with grave and sorrowful urbanity. And forthwith taking a bundle of keys out of his pocket he selected one and opened a little wallpress. From this he drew out a tray. The men gave an involuntary start and bent down their heads eagerly. There lay five beautiful replicas of Hester's jewel, each occupying its place on the white velvet, while in the middle there was a vacant place.

'You will observe that the numbers run continuously,' said Sir Sylvanus; 'at the bottom of each indented division of the case there is a little ticket — 65, 66, 67, 68, 69, 70. These numbers are also on the back of the setting of the clasps; it is 67 which is wanting. Now you have seen, gentlemen, that I have not even touched the jewel, which you received from the hands of Hester Stirling. Will you be good enough to examine the marking on the back of the setting and see if you can discern anything?'

The more important of the two men took out his glass again, and screwed it into his eye.

'I see some faint marks very delicately done, of foreign appearance and quite unintelligible,' he said, 'and a little lower down the number 67 more roughly scratched in English figures.'

The younger of the cast-iron men stood erect and thrust his hand into his overcoat pocket. Something metallic tinkled there. His senior turned about quickly. 'I don't think that will be necessary, Davies,' he said. Then he addressed Hester, who was only now beginning to realise her danger.

'I am afraid that I must ask you to accompany

us,' he said, kindly enough. 'Davies, get a four-wheeler. I will also be responsible for this tray with its contents, if you, sir, will give me a piece of newspaper in which to wrap it.'

'Now, miss,' said the detective, when this was accomplished, 'be good enough to come along with me. Anything you have to say you can say to the inspector at the station or to the magistrate in court, if he is still sitting.'

Timson and his companion stood to attention in the hall as the sad little procession filed out, with noses in the air, and a general appearance of saying, 'We expected nothing else ever since the first day we set eyes on this young female!'

Nobody else was to be seen anywhere, though a distant tittering intimated to Hester that Ethel and Claudia watched from an upper landing.

'I think I will follow in a hansom,' said Sir Sylvanus.

He did not relish sitting opposite to the pale set face of his niece, even for five minutes. The senior detective looked quickly at him.

'Very well,' he said. 'Davies, accompany Sir Sylvanus Torphichan-Stirling to Ebury Street.'

He opened the door of the ancient and battered four-wheeler and showed Hester in very respectfully. Then he held the handle while he directed the very deaf old cabman, who the night before had driven Hester to Scotstarvit House, how to go to the police-station. This he did with the same nonchalance as if it had been to Westminster Abbey or the nearest music-hall.

At the Ebury Street police-station they found a bluff inspector busy with a multitude of papers. He

looked up in surprise as his eyes fell upon a pale interesting face. The inspector winced. He had a girl of his own about her age. Hester's lips were quivering, and she clasped and unclasped her hands piteously, but so far she kept a brave grip upon herself.

With a face which gradually hardened to the official look of cast-iron the inspector listened while Sir Sylvanus reeled off his well-prepared narrative. He was touched by Hester's face, but he had the ingrained respect of all officials for members of the Lower House, the House with the hands upon the purse-strings. And the M. P. told his tale well. He did not betray the least animus. He spoke quietly and to the point — more in sorrow than in anger. He did not wish to prosecute if the girl would confess and restore the jewellery. This would doubtless prove a lesson to her. He did not wish for publicity on his wife's account. Here, however, he received a sudden backset.

'Then why did you send for us?' asked the senior detective quickly.

'Because,' stammered Sylvanus, 'I knew from the character of the girl that no milder course would be of any avail. She would only deny and continue to persist in her denials, as she has done before in other matters.'

'What have you to say in answer to this charge, young lady?' said the inspector, quietly.

Hester repeated her statement that she had possessed the ruby as long as she could remember, and that Megsy Tipperlin, her old nurse, could prove it. She, indeed, had had the custody of it till within the last year or two.

'The woman referred to, I may say, is a dismissed servant of my wife's,' interrupted the baronet; 'she is quite untrustworthy and is, not improbably, in league with the girl.'

'Do not interrupt, if you please,' said the inspector; 'you will have an opportunity of adding anything you may think necessary to your statement afterwards.'

The inspector carefully examined the jewels, and verified the markings.

'You deal in precious stones, sir?' he asked, looking up.

'I am largely interested in them,' said Sylvanus, reddening, 'it is well known that I have been so for many years, in rubies especially.'

This was not a question he cared to be exact about, though, for that matter, he knew that his secret was perfectly safe.

The inspector bit the end of his pen and gazed meditatively out of the window.

'Well,' he said, sighing, 'it is not a matter I can settle. I am afraid. Miss Stirling, that I shall have to detain you in the meantime. But if sufficient security be forthcoming I may admit you to bail. For this purpose you are permitted to communicate with your friends. Any letters you may write will be forwarded at once. Riswold, No, 5, if you please!'

And so with appalling suddenness Hester found herself alone in a prison-cell, the best and airiest, certainly, that Ebury Street could boast, but still so far as plain wood and bare boards were concerned merely a whitewashed prison-cell. She sat down stunned and dazed, her spirits far below the point when she could have wept because of this awful

thing that had befallen her. She did not feel angry with her uncle. The horror of the fact was enough to blacken all else. In the village of St. John there was a police office. It had certain barred windows far round at the back, and the more daring boys used to rattle upon them with a stick and then run away. Such were felt to be already far down the broad road. But within the memory of man no inhabitant of the parish had ever seen the inside of one, and once when a travelling tinker became outrageous in the abuse of marital privileges so that he had to be locked up till he sobered down, the whole countryside talked about the matter for a month.

It was this inconceivable disgrace, and no fear of the result, that struck Hester dumb, so that when the police inspector followed in a few minutes to ask if she had finished her letters, he found her sitting blankly upon the one chair, and staring at the writing materials with which she had been supplied by Riswold.

'Have you not written to your friends?' he asked, shortly enough, but with a kind accent. Hester looked at him vaguely, as if she did not understand the question.

'My friends are far away — in Scotland!' she said.

'Have you no friends in London — the lady of rank in whose house you stayed last night, for instance?'

'She has gone abroad this morning!'

'Do you know no one here to whom you can appeal?'

The idea shot through Hester's brain — 'Carus!' He had helped her before; he would help her again, as he had done in the Darroch woods.

I know the Master of Darroch, Lady Niddisdale's grandson,' she said. The Scotch title of courtesy sounded strange to the policeman. But Hester remembered the address of his rooms, and sitting down at the table she wrote simply: —

'Dear Carus:—There is some dreadful mistake. They have taken me to this place. I would have asked Lady Niddisdale what to do. Perhaps you can tell me. They say I have stolen the ruby I wore last night, which was my father's. Please come to me as soon as you can.'

She was still sitting with the pen in her hand when Carus entered, a white and furious anger in his heart, which, after the manner of his race and caste, expressed itself by an unusual particularity of address and calm of manner.

'Hester, what is this?' he said, holding out both his hands. She gave him hers without a thought, save that all would now be right, her eyes shining gratefully up at him.

'Who has done this?' Carus demanded, and the look on his face boded ill to the man or woman whose name he was to hear.

'My uncle Sylvanus!' she said, and then, becoming conscious that her hands were still in those of Carus, she drew them away slowly. It seemed not to matter at all that a policeman stood watching them curiously.

'Can you tell me all about it?' said Carus. 'Sit down and take your time. We will soon have you out of this place!'

He had ascertained that two London householders would be accepted as bail in such a case. The inspector had told him this on his way

through the office. Hester then related the story of her leaving the Duchess at the railway station and going directly to Empress Gate. He nodded his head as she proceeded, taking the points like a lawyer. 'You have had it three years and have never shown it to any one in London. You wore it at the ball. It bears a running number with the rest of the set in the possession of Sir Sylvanus — that will be their case. On the other hand, we have in Scotland a witness who can not only prove absolutely that the ruby necklace has been in your possession since childhood, but that it was given to you in her presence by your own father. Is not that so?'

'Yes,' said Hester, 'Megsy knows that. She always kept it for me. It was in the bottom of her trunk, and she used to let me look at it as a favour after she had dressed me for church on Sabbath mornings.'

'Well,' said Carus, smiling, 'we must get you out of this place first, and settle about the rest after. I am going off to get bail. I am not a householder, I fear, but I know those who are. I shall not be long.'

CHAPTER THIRTY FOUR

THE TELEGRAM ON CARUS'S TABLE

'Sir, you are a fool,' cried Lord Darroch, furiously. 'I will have nothing to do with the disgraceful affair. And I forbid you to mix yourself up in it. Think of what will be said, of what every one will think.'

'I thought you were a gentleman, my lord,' said Carus, his face turning an ugly kind of greyish white.

His father took a stride forward as if to strike him.

Carus did not lift his hand in defence, and Lord Darroch fell back.

'If you throw away your only chance,' he cried, 'I swear that all you will inherit from me will be an empty title. You have a chance to marry a good girl, a pretty girl, with such a dowry as would make all your life easy, and you choose to throw away all that for the sake of a thief— ah-h-h!'

In this futile manner ended Lord Darroch's denunciation of the folly of youthful quixotry. His son had choked off the rest of the sentence by compressing his father's throat with both hands before flinging him down on the sofa, where he sat long dazed, his ears ringing with the tumultuousness of his son's departure. My Lord Darroch went about for several days with a pain in the region of his Adam's apple.

Carus sped next to Scotstarvit House as fast as a hansom would carry him. Yes, his Grace was at home — would see him.

'Why, Carus, what's the matter? Sit down, my

boy. What, that pretty girl! The nostrum-vending scoundrel! My mother has told me all about her. Bail? — of course I will, dear boy — unto the half of my kingdom. Won't your father come along? No — hem-hem, just like the old—yes, yes, Carus, my boy, I will meet you at the station. I think we had better take James Chetwynd with us in this, though. I will bring him. Yes, yes, he will be the other security. He and I generally hunt together!

'Thank you — a thousand thanks, uncle!'

'Not at all, I assure you, dear boy. I'm almost sorry your friend is innocent. It will be too much plain sailing for Jim Chetwynd.'

When Carus returned to the Ebury Street office he found that Hester had two friends already with her. A vague sense of disappointment seized upon him when he found that these were Tom and Vic Torphichan. Vic's face was swollen, and her eyes red with crying. Tom looked as if he were about to fight a duel and had determined to kill his man.

It was Vic who was speaking as Carus entered.

'I won't ever go back — I told them so, the beasts (sob) — Tom did too. I have money of my own (sob) and we will all live together — in a cottage with roses (sob) and Devonshire cream, oh, and such a dear pony to ride to meet on. But I've thought of something, Hester. I'm going to swear (sob) that you showed me the ruby, the very first night you came and made me promise not to tell! There — I will!'

Hester was smiling now.

'Oh, no, you must not think of such a thing, dear Vic. We will all tell the truth, and they cannot harm me. Why, Carus, are you back already?'

'Perhaps we had better adjourn into the office,'

said the voice of Inspector Greig, at this point; 'there are two gentlemen waiting there — I presume on the matter of bail.'

They all went out, and the Duke came forward and took Hester's hand, smiling.

'There, there,' he said, 'don't cry (Hester had not cried at all); it will soon be all right!'

The Duke's voice sounded just as if she had been a little girl who had fallen down in the mud and hurt her hands.

'This is his Grace the Duke of Niddisdale, and my name is Chetwynd — James Chetwynd,' said the second man. He was tall and athletic in figure, and his whole appearance betokened the sportsman, the hard rider, the keen-bitten follower of big game — rather than, what was the truth, one of the most famous criminal lawyers of the day.

'Certainly, Mr. Chetwynd,' said the inspector, 'I will admit the young lady to bail, but, as you will see, the figure must be heavy. The charge is a very grave one. I fix the amount at two securities of a thousand pounds apiece.'

'Very well, Mr. Inspector,' said Chetwynd, promptly, 'his Grace will make one, I will be the other!'

Tom Torphichan stood apart, gloomily biting the fingers of his gloves. Vic was still crying softly and holding Hester's hand in hers.

Presently they all stood outside the station in the gathering dusk, and looked at each other with a kind of embarrassment. It had not occurred to them that some place must be found for Hester to remain overnight. Scotstarvit House had no lady at the head of it since the departure of the Duchess. Carus and

Tom were momentarily without suggestion.

'I am deucedly sorry my wife is out of town,' said Mr. Chetwynd; 'perhaps we had better take you to an hotel!'

Help came from Vic.

'I have a friend,' she said, 'Madame the Countess Saucy les Ecouis!'

Even Mr. James Chetwynd sighed a sigh of relief.

'It is not far — in the Albert Bridge Road. Tom will take us!'

'Remember, then, we must be in the court by ten tomorrow morning,' said James Chetwynd. 'It will almost certainly end in a remand — to allow us to procure our Scotch evidence. That will give me time to look into this whole business. It is either a mistake, eked out by spite, or — as I am more inclined to think — a thorough-going black-leg conspiracy.'

Carus walked south-westward with Vic and Tom. Vic chatted incessantly. She was in the highest spirits. She had drawn Hester's arm through her own, and now held her fingers whilst she stroked and patted the back of her hand. The two young men strode behind, gloomily silent, each vaguely resentful of the presence of the other.

In this order they reached the corner of the bridge. The river lay in a purple and russet gloom beneath.

'Now, Tom, you are to go straight home,' said Vic, — 'I can't let you come any further — so that you can say at home that you don't know where I am.'

'I can say that in any case,' said Tom, sullenly. 'Yes, I know,' said Vic, 'but when it is true you can say it with so much more elan, you know.'

'No,' said Tom, 'there you're clean off the eggs. It's always when I am telling the gospel truth that I don't get believed.'

Hester held out her hand to him.

'It was kind of you to come, cousin Tom,' she said, 'but you must not get into trouble for me. Your father has made a mistake. But no doubt he thinks he is acting rightly.'

'Thank you, Hester,' said Tom, 'I will try to believe so. If you want to know what I think, it's all the fault of that beast Eth. That's my opinion.'

It struck Carus that there was not a great amount of family affection abroad amongst them, and he wondered vaguely how my Lord Darroch's throat was feeling.

'And thank you a thousand times, Carus,' said Hester. 'I don't know what I should have done but for you. Stayed in prison, I suppose.'

'It was good of you to think of me first,' he said, keeping her hand jealously. Vic directed Tom's attention to a passing barge. Tom growled.

A quick sob shook Hester from head to foot. Tears flooded the dry, smarting eyes, making them large and of the deepest blue.

'Whom else could I ask?' she whispered, looking up at him.

Vic had turned at the first sound of the sob, and now she caught Hester swiftly by the arm and drew her away.

'Hester!' said Carus, in a deep, suppressed tone. He had forgotten about Tom and Vic. He only saw his love going apart from him.

'No more tonight,' said Vic, waving him off with her disengaged hand, but all the same smiling at

him encouragingly over her shoulder.

The two young men stood watching the girls till they disappeared round the corner. Then Carus turned to Tom.

'Good night!' he said, 'I suppose I shall see you in the morning?'

'I am coming with you,' said Tom, who appeared determined that his friend should take no unfair advantage. For strange things were working in the heart of Tom Torphichan. He had not, so far as he knew, cared much about Hester before. But now the glaring injustice of which she was the victim, and the consciousness that Carus had done more for her than he could, had roused a tumult in his brave, brusque, inarticulate soul. For three years it had been 'Hester' and 'Tom.' Who was Carus Darroch that he should come between them? It was the bitterest of Tom's meditations that he should only now have found out that he cared for Hester Stirling. He had felt it as a possibility before, but vaguely. Furthermore, he had had a cheerful sense that he had only to speak in order to end the uncertainty.

He could have Hester for the asking. There were smarter girls but — Hester was Hester. There had been a kind of patronage in his quiet assurance, some laziness also. On the whole, it was rather good of him. Hester, he knew, had never had a sweetheart. She was a nice little thing, pretty too, and in time — when Tom got ready, she should have her reward.

The ball and Hester's shining success changed all that. He did not dance, yet he never once left the ballroom. He stood in a corner watching Hester as she fluttered around with flying feet, Madame

Celine's chiffons floating about her like butterfly's wings.

Hester nodded happily as often as she noticed him.

He thought that her shoes scarcely touched the ground, so lightsome they were. Why were all dancing men such fools? That ass with the hair parted down the middle; what a smirk he wore on his face! He would like to kick him.

Tom wished he had learned to dance. What an idiot he was, to have had the chance of Monsieur Saucy and

Meantime Vic and Hester were receiving the welcomes of that fine old French gentleman, one of the distinguished exiles sent out of the country by Napoleon the Little.

'We are glad to see you; we make you welcome, Madame la Comtesse and I. Allow me to present you — Mees Hestaire Stirleeng, Mees Veectoria Torphecchan-Stirleeng — Madame la Comtesse de Saucy les Ecouis!'

A little dark lady, bright-eyed and practical-looking, such as you see at many a bourgeois pay-desk throughout France, rose smilingly to receive them like long-expected guests.

'We have come to cast ourselves on your mercy,' said Vic. 'I have left home because they have been cruel to Hester. But, thank goodness, I am twenty-one, and I have money of my own that Aunt Victoria left me because I was called after her. They can't touch that!'

And sitting down, she told all the story to these sympathetic French people. Monsieur was hugely indignant. He paced the floor. He sent in

imagination a dozen 'cartels' to 'Sir Torpheechean.' Meanwhile Madame came quietly over and sat between the girls, murmuring sympathy in every pause.

'I will sent Sir Stirleeng my cartel. I will fight him. I will inform him what I think of him,' cried the little man, ruffling his grey crop with a nervous hand till it bristled like a docked horse's mane. 'Mademoiselle is an angel. She dances with her soul. For me, I will never sully my hand with their money again.'

And Hester and Vic had reason to believe, from certain toilet accessories left on the tiny dressing-table, that the little old dancing-master count and his lady wife had given up their own chamber to their guests, and bestowed themselves elsewhere in the tiny Albert Bridge house.

For high courtesy and the natural consideration which comes of gracious nature and good breeding no princely pair in the world could have excelled this extruded count who taught dancing and his countess who did her own housework.

It may be noted that it was Vic who rested little, while Hester, weaned with the strain, slept profoundly. Vic leaned on her elbow, and watched Hester in the morning light which filtered in across the river. She was lying with her cheek on the palm of one hand.

'Yes, you are—' she said, nodding her head cryptically, 'and if I were a man...'

But curiously enough, Vic did not finish her phrase in either case.

Since no better might be, Tom accompanied Carus up to his rooms in Dover Street, and there, lying on the table, the latter found a telegram. All

the way back through the wide south-western squares they had been saying to each other, till it had become a commonplace, that there would be no difficulty in proving Hester's innocence.

'I can't think what's got into the governor,' said Tom, 'he is generally not such a bad sort. I think it must be that devil of a sister of mine — oh, but I forgot!'

'Go on,' laughed Carus, 'there is no occasion to mind me. I have done some very considerable smashing of the fifth commandment today myself.'

Carus opened the telegram and stared at it blankly. It came from Cairn Edward, the furthest point to which the electric wires had then penetrated.

'I will come at once. Margaret took shock yesterday. Too ill to be moved. — Borrowman.'

CHAPTER THIRTY FIVE

ON BAIL

The police magistrate was a youngish man, recently appointed, and above all things anxious to avoid responsibility. Also he was in a strait betwixt two. He was impressed by the immense respectability of the well-known Parliamentarian and philanthropist, who was Hester's accuser, and also to some extent intimidated by Jim Chetwynd, that famous lawyer.

But the lack of any direct evidence in favour of Hester, the doubtfulness of the supposition that a young girl could have had in her possession a valuable ruby all her life without knowing its worth, and, still more, that she should have kept it three years in her box in London without showing it to any of her girl cousins, the similarity of the markings and numbers upon the jewels, done apparently by the same hand, decided him to remand the prisoner for a week, increasing the amount of bail to; £4,000, an amount which, with the concurrence of the Duke, Mr. Chetwynd immediately provided.

There is no need to dwell on the long-drawn pain of this time to Hester, the sordid surroundings of the lawyer's offices, the anxious waiting in halls and courts. Though Vic, renouncing all her relatives, went everywhere with her, and Carus followed her like her shadow, though Revvie came up looking pale and anxious, in spite of all these things, or rather because of them, Hester suffered intensely. There was no hope of bringing Megsy. She was too ill

and weak to be moved, let alone to give evidence.

Mr. Chetwvnd advised that no resistance to a committal to trial be offered, on condition that the bail be continued. The magistrate gladly assented, eager to rid his own bounds of so complicated and extraordinary a case.

The date was fixed far enough ahead to allow of Megsy's evidence being taken on commission. It was, indeed, taken down with a fine directness by the procurator fiscal of the Stewartry, who made a special journey from Kirkcudbright for the purpose, and its accuracy was borne witness to by a pair of local justices of the peace.

The progress of the record was hindered and diversified by the attempts of Megsy to import her opinion of Sir Sylvanus and all the family of Torphichans unto the tenth generation into the text of Mr. Nigil Williamson's affidavit.

'The man was a liar from the beginning (pit doon that!), a fause loon, an ill-conditioned thief, that never had a guid word o' ony and gat his siller (aught that ony body kens about) by cozenin' auld silly wives to leave him their money on their daith-beds.'

The fiscal quietly left out much irrelevant matter, so that, when the completed evidence was read over to her, Megsy declared that it was the truth, indeed, but very far from being the whole truth. 'A fushionless thing. Fiscal,' she said, 'what for did ye no write it doon that I wadna believe the craitur if he cam' in and telled me that it was rainin'?'

Of a similar mind also was Georgina, Duchess of Niddisdale. That lady wrote from Germany (where she had been very ill) to say that if the trial could be

put off for a fortnight she would come home for it. 'I have been thinking over a great many things here since I was taken ill on my arrival' (she was writing to Carus), 'amongst others whether it might not be possible to show the apothecary that there are more theories than one which might possibly account for the similarity of the markings on these Indian jewels.'

This somewhat mysterious paragraph Carus showed one day to Jim Chetwynd, with whom he rode in the park every morning.

'Whatever is the old lady driving at?' he asked.

'Ah!' said Jim Chetwynd, thoughtfully, 'there may be nothing in it, but at any rate it's not half a bad cross-examining idea.'

'Tell Niddisdale' (so the letter went on) 'I am very pleased with him. I do not tell him so often. And as for you, Master Carus, I suppose it is too late to stop the mischief. You are in a pretty hole, young man. If you don't marry the apothecary's daughter, your father will disinherit you. If you do, I will. This comes of disobeying your grandmother!'

During these days of waiting Carus was exceedingly severe with himself. He would have given his ears to have spent the time with Hester, but he felt that she would probably like to be alone. He went, however, religiously to Jim Chetwynd's office every day, where he never failed to see Vic and Hester, with Tom or Kipford in attendance. Carus felt more than a little out of things, but he was comforted by an occasional grateful glance which Hester gave him out of her dark eyes.

On one occasion, it happened that he was at Chetwynd's office when it became necessary to

obtain Hester's signature. Carus volunteered to go round to the old Frenchman's house at the Albert Bridge and obtain it. In the little parlour Carus nearly stumbled over Kipford, who sat with his head thrown back, playing waltzes to Madame la Comtesse de Saucy les Ecouis.

Carus was introduced promptly by the little lady with the sloe-like eyes to M. le Marquis de Keepvort.

He longed to ask his ex-fag what the devil he was doing there. The girls were nowhere to be seen, but when Carus propounded his errand, their hostess offered to go in search of them.

A moment after, Vic came dashing in, her hair about her face.

'What do you want with Hester? You can't see her—you must wait. I am just trying on. So there — we will be back in a moment. Waffles, have you wound that spool? Then do it. Don't waste your time, if you will be in the way!'

All this without a moment's halt or grace for reply.

Carus intimated mildly that he had brought a paper for signature from the lawyer's office.

'Then give it to me!' she cried, snatching the document from him.

'But it is necessary that it should be witnessed by two persons!' he protested, feebly.

'Then I and the Marquise will witness it —that will do, won't it.'

'I daresay it will,' said Carus, rather crestfallen. It might indeed satisfy the claims of law, as represented by Chetwynd's head clerk. But he had not come all the way from Lincoln's Inn to Albert Bridge to listen to Kipford murder 'The Beautiful

Blue Danube.'

Vic brought back the paper duly signed and witnessed as indicated by the aforesaid head clerk's pencilled tracing.

'There,' she cried, 'we are busy. We cannot ask you to stay, and please be good enough to take Waffles with you. He is only in the way.'

'Oh, come now,' protested that youth, 'I've done a lot of things for you all the morning, Vic, and I've nearly finished this confounded spool — you are not grateful one little bit!'

'Take him away and give him some bread and milk, well boiled — it is good for boys of his age,' said the mistress of ceremonies, ignoring his fervid appeals.

'Kippy, get out!' said Carus, shortly.

And having been a fag, and well trained, Kipford rose to make his adieus to his hostess. Vic beckoned to Carus mysteriously behind his cousin's back.

She peeped experimentally into a little room on the right, and then, opening the door wider, she permitted Carus to see Hester in a plain black dress adjusting a broad collar of lace about her shoulders. She was looking in the glass, and Carus never forgot the pretty turn of her head as she tried the fall of the points this way and that. The next moment, warned by some flash of reflection in the little mirror, she turned and saw Carus stand silent in the doorway. A vivid tinge of red overspread her face.

'Oh, Vic!' she cried reproachfully.

The door shut to. The vision vanished.

'There — all over for this time, ladies and gents!' said Vic, waving her arm after the manner of a showman, 'now, wasn't that nice of me?' Kipford

came out of Madame's parlour and their vigorous conductor saw them to the door.

'Good-bye,' she said; 'now mind me, don't come back till you are sent for, Waffles!'

'Vic, you are a good sort!' said Carus, gratefully.

'Yes, I know!' Vic agreed, smiling.

And as they turned away, both Kipford and Carus felt that they had not come in vain.

CHAPTER THIRTY SIX

THE CASE FOR THE PROSECUTION

It is not given to a mere layman to describe the most commonplace of trials. Hester's was not distinguished by any very sensational incidents, though the witnesses and friends of the accused made a somewhat remarkable show as they stood together in the Old Court of Bailey waiting to be summoned into the New. First, there was his Grace the Duke of Niddisdale, tall and bluff, a man of the heather and of the woods. He talked freely to M. de Saucy, his old dancing-master, on the common platform of ancient lineage and mutual sympathy. Vic stood beside Carus, marking her faction by refusing to see her sisters or in any way recognise them as they passed and re-passed arm in arm.

'I've made Hester look just as well as she can,' Vic was confiding to Carus, 'and if that does not do as much for her with twelve intelligent jurymen as the slimmest of Jim Chetwynd's tricks — why, I'm a Dutchman, that's all, and the country is going to the dogs!'

The Old Bailey looked grim and dismal enough that autumn morning. The Court which knows no long vacation was in session, and Hester, standing in the dock, did not for a long time dare to lift her eyes. She pleaded 'Not Guilty,' however, in a clear voice, and the advocate for the prosecution opened the case against her.

At last Hester mustered up courage to look for Revvie. At least so she told herself. She saw him. He

was smiling placidly. Then she caught Vic's eye. Vic nodded encouragingly. Carus came next. He neither nodded nor smiled, but from that moment Hester was conscious of a certain definite support, which, however things went, would never be taken from her. She knew that his eyes would never leave her face. She knew that his whole being was bent to help and strengthen her in this her day of anguish and utmost need. For these good friends she thanked God, and took courage.

It was some time before she could look up at the bench on which a row of gorgeous figures sat like gods on Olympus. In the centre was a kind of throne, and on it sprawled rather than sat a figure clad in fur robes and gorgeous in blue and gold. A chain was about his neck, and over his head a golden sword was suspended against a scarlet hanging. This splendid personage appeared to pay no heed whatever to the prosecuting counsel. He held something in his hand which appeared to be a large official document (it was, in fact. The Times of current date). He stared at Hester through a single eye-glass and appeared to scrutinise her every movement. Two other gentlemen in Court suits (sheriffs they) sometimes sat down and sometimes passed noiselessly out. But nobody seemed to pay much attention to the evidence — except one man, clad in red, a little stoop-shouldered man, with a keen face, who sat unobtrusively on one side of the splendid central figure and wrote in a book. He kept his eyes on the speaker. He followed the witnesses, as if to catch the very words before they left their lips. He turned over every statement as a man may who receives doubtful change for good silver.

He spoke to no one on the bench, and none uttered a word to him. Now and then the little red-gowned man interjected a word, clean and clear-cut, a query with a rasp to it. Then when he had got his answer, he would shift his gaze, quick as a fencer shifting from quarte to tierce, to the jury-box to see how it affected its occupants. This was one of Her Majesty's judges of the High Court doing quietly the whole work of the sessions. All the rest was but the lust of the flesh and the pride of life—ex-Lord Mayors and High Sheriffs most honourable, but of no more practical count in the administration of justice than the flies that blackened the ceilings of the Court of Old Bailey.

As the case was being opened, blacker and blacker on Hester's soul fell the darkness. The lawyer who was speaking seemed to bind the terrors about her. Her hands shook on the rail. She felt that she must faint. The jury-box began to go round and round. In an instant the restless eyes of the little dark bird-like man were upon her.

'A chair!' he signalled to some unseen attendant. And in an instant Hester was sitting down, and a glass of water was being held at her lips.

The witnesses for the prosecution were, first. Sir Sylvanus himself, who spoke under the influence of strong emotion; Ethel, who had made her most attractive toilet; Claudia, clean and spotless in white from top to toe, looking so pure and innocent that it seemed as superfluous to swear her to tell the truth, as if she had the wings of an angel from heaven folded becomingly down her back.

Sir Sylvanus felt his position keenly. He said so himself. Only the utmost sense of public duty could

have induced him to prosecute. It was, after all, a first offence. Yes, it was true. Other things had been missed, but of small value. No (in answer to the birdlike red judge), none of these had been found in the prisoner's box. There was no doubt that the jewel belonged to his set. It had always occupied the centre place in the case made for them. He had missed it some months ago, before the ball, but long after Hester Stirling's coming to London. He had been thunderstruck to see it on the neck of the prisoner that evening. No, he had said nothing to Hester Stirling on that occasion. She was with her Grace the Duchess of Niddisdale, and he felt that it was neither the time nor the place to create a disturbance. The judge had another question: 'Did it occur to you that it was a curious thing for a thief to wear stolen property in a place where it must be seen by the owner?'

It had struck the politician as strange. But, he submitted, it was quite in keeping with the prisoner's character, which was vain and unstable to the last degree. In fact, it was obvious from the first that she had made up the tale she meant to tell, and was resolved to stick to it at all risks. He submitted that vanity, and not a desire for gain, was the motive of the theft. The prisoner had, so far as he knew, made no attempt to sell the necklace.

At this point Jim Chetwynd uprose to cross-examine.

'Would Sir Sylvanus state the precise circumstances in which he became possessed of the set of six gold neckbands with ruby clasps?'

'Certainly,' said the baronet, promptly. 'As is known to most people, I have all my life been much

interested in precious stones. I took these in exchange for some valuable diamonds about fifteen or sixteen years ago, in a transaction with the firm of Metzinger and Co., now extinct.'

'You possess, of course, a record of the transaction?' 'I have brought it with me,' said Sir Sylvanus, promptly, and put his hand into his breast pocket. The 'record' was part of a list of jewels written in a bold and clerky hand upon paper headed Metzinger and Co., Nieupoort Street, Amsterdam. The description seemed clear enough.

'Six (6) Burmese collars of fine goldsmith work two inches wide, clasped at the front with ruby clasps in Burmese or South Chinese gold setting — open. One pigeon's blood ruby to each collar — six in all, best colour. Marked in cipher, and with late owner's running number.'

'Thank you,' said Jim Chetwynd, calmly, 'that is very satisfactory in so far as it goes. Can you inform us exactly what you gave Metzinger and Co. in exchange?'

A kind of angry spasm crossed the baronet's face.

'I cannot,' he said, 'and for this reason. In diamond dealing of the highest kind we do not give and take receipts as if we were buying and selling pounds of butter over a counter. It is so entirely a matter for dealers as between man and man—your taste and skill against mine, your knowledge of your customers against my knowledge of the market, that it has been largely my habit to dispense with any such record, especially in cases where no money has passed between parties.'

'Just so,' said Jim Chetwynd; 'I shall call the attention of the jury to Sir Sylvanus Torphichan-

Stirling's account of this transaction at a later stage of the proceedings. Thank you, that is all.'

The baronet descended from the witness box with large beads of perspiration standing on his brow. Ethel took his place. She and Claudia had not much to tell. They had often heard Hester Stirling say that she possessed no jewellery of any kind. They had repeatedly seen the six ruby necklaces in their father's possession. They had also observed that their father, if called away while working among his jewels, would go out leaving the door of the safe unlocked, or simply closing it and turning the handle. They had often seen Hester Stirling going into that room, and had objected to her habit of doing so. They saw the ruby collar on Hester Stirling's neck on the night of the ball, but did not recognise it as belonging to their father.

Charles Timson had seen the young woman in most suspicious circumstances coming from Sir Sylvanus's room on the pretext of carrying out a tray, which it was no part of her duty to do. Had often seen his master looking at and arranging his collection. Hester Stirling was very fond of bad company and spent hours unbeknown-to his master and mistress, learning dancing from a foreigner calling himself Mossy Saucy, which showed what kind of a young lady she was — this, at least in his 'umble opinion.

The judge, who had been biting his quill, bade Timson confine himself to answering the questions put to him.

CHAPTER THIRTY SEVEN

THE CASE FOR THE DEFENCE

Evidence was then led for the defence. His Grace the Duke of Niddisdale testified to the high character of the accused, who was a personal friend of his mother's. He considered it an impossible thing that a girl should wear such a jewel at a ball, openly, in the presence of the man from whom it had been stolen.

'Thank you, your Grace,' said Mr. Chetwynd. The counsel for the prosecution forbore to cross-examine.

Carus Darroch, called the Master of Darroch, testified that he had known Miss Hester Stirling from childhood. She was perfectly incapable of any wrong action. At this point the red judge glanced at the jury sternly. A smile had passed along the front row and been handed over to the back like an offertory plate in church. It was now returning to the foreman. It was a smile, however, which did Hester no harm.

Remembered the night of the ball at his grandmother's, Lady Niddisdale's. Saw the ruby necklace on that occasion. Miss Stirling wore it openly and seemed perfectly unembarrassed. Of her own accord she told him that it had been given her when a little girl by her father, that her nurse, Megsy Tipperlin, had kept it for her in her trunk till she (Miss Stirling) had come to London, and that she had forgotten all about it till that night when she had taken it with her to show to Lady Niddisdale.

The Duchess had made her wear it, she said, but now she wished she had not. It made people look at her so, she thought. Witness did not agree with her in this.

Down went Carus, leaving behind him a pleasant atmosphere of fresh directness and youth.

Thomas Torphichan-Stirling, eldest son of the prosecutor, had never seen any of the necklaces. He did not believe that his sisters had either. His father never exhibited such things. Had seen the ruby in question on the night of the ball. His cousin, Hester, wore it quite openly. Saw his father looking at it, and thought there would be a row next day. Did not believe for a moment that Hester Stirling had taken it. There was a mistake somewhere, he was sure.

Victoria Torphichan-Stirling did not see the ruby till the night of the ball. Did not believe Hester had stolen it — knew she had not, in fact. It was just all spite. (Here she glared at her sisters.) Her cousin did not need to steal an ornament. She herself had offered her the choice of a drawerful on the night of the ball. The Duchess of Niddisdale had given her cousin the dress in which she appeared on that occasion, and would have lent or given her anything she wished in the way of ornament. She knew very well what the whole thing meant.

'Thank you. Miss Victoria,' said Jim Chetwynd, who was afraid that in her zeal this witness might say too much.

Nigel Arthur Algernon Rollo, Lord Kipford, had seen the stone on the night of the ball — had asked to be allowed to look at it. Miss Hester seemed glad to talk about the jewel, told him that it was the only memento she had of her father, who was lost in

Burmah. He had been out there himself last year, on a tour round the world. He noticed the writing on the back, thought he had seen something like it — in fact, so impressed was he that he had intended to bring his friend, Mr. Min Alomprau, secretary of the Burmese Embassy, to call on Miss Stirling and see the jewel for himself. Owing to circumstances, however, he had not been able to carry out this intention. Miss Stirling wore the stone in a perfectly open manner, and talked of it willingly. He thought people who made such accusations against their own relatives should be kicked

‘That will do,’ said Jim Chetwynd, hastily. (Not cross-examined.)

‘Call Mr. Min Alomprau of the Burmese Embassy,’ said Jim Chetwynd, quietly.

A small, thick-set man, clad in semi-Chinese fashion in violet-coloured silk, and wearing a silk cap, appeared, and bowed very low to the judge.

Mr. Min Alomprau declared himself a Buddhist, but did not object to be sworn upon the sacred books of the Christians. He was Secretary of the Embassy of the King of Burmah. He knew, of course, the language of the Burmese, as well as that of the Shans. He had been ten years in London.

‘Would Mr. Min Alomprau be good enough to examine the ruby collars, and state what he thought about them?’

The witness stated that the central ruby was one of the finest colour. It was a hill, not a plateau, ruby — that is, it did not come from the Mandalay ruby plateau, which was a royal monopoly. The other five (handling them and examining with a lens) were similar. They had all been set by Chinese

goldsmiths, probably from the Yang-tze country, and had most likely reached the sea by that river.

'Would Mr. Mill Alomprau examine the lettering on the back, and give a translation for the benefit of the jury?'

The little Burman in the violet silk screwed the magnifying lens into his eye. Then he turned the stone into a good light, took a long look and smiled.

The judge craned forward like a hawk on the pounce. The jury put their hands to their ears so as not to miss a word.

'He say, 'David Stirling own me. Chin Lin of Li-Kiang set me, saving much filings.' There is also a number in the usual foreign figures.'

There was a murmur of voices. The little judge wrote vigorously. The jury conferred under their breaths. Mr. Min Alomprau stood smiling. Only Jim Chetwynd was unmoved. A ghastly pallor had fallen upon Sir Sylvanus.

'Will Mr. Min Alomprau similarly examine the other five, find translate the writing upon them?'

The Burman turned the broad bands over on their faces, and passed his lens along the reverse of the setting. His smile broadened.

'Chin Lin of Li-Kiang he make great deal of gold filings. He say the same words on each.'

'Be good enough to repeat them!'

'David Stirling own me. Chin Lin of Li-Kiang set me, saving third part of gold filings' (Cross-examined.)

'He had never heard of David Stirling before. He knew that there had been unlicensed mines of rubies in the Yang-tze mountains. The King of Mandalay had once sent a force to take them, killing

the prospectors. The writing was plainly written, not in Chinese character, but in Shan, probably by a Chinaman who had lived long there — as he might write a private note in English which he did not wish people in his own country to read.'

'Why should a Chinaman do this?'

Mr. Min Alomprau smiled, and hinted that Mr. Chin probably took other people's gold filings as well as those belonging to David Stirling.

Called Mr. Victor Rose Noble, of the Oriental Department of the British Museum. He was acquainted with the Shan language. He examined the productions. He read the inscription in the same sense as his friend Mr. Alomprau. The sense was quite clear, but the apocopation of the syllabification showed traces of Chinese influence, tending as it did to a perpendicular mode of arrangement upon the setting.

Called M. Lascarnet Champollion, Professor at the Sorbonne, Paris. He agreed with his distinguished colleague, adding that the writing partook more of the nature of 'graffiti' than of that of set writing—being, in fact, a memorandum on the part of a dishonest tradesman of the amount of his speculations.

Then Margaret Tipperlin's evidence was read, as selected and edited by the Fiscal from Kirkcudbright. She remembered the visit of Mr. David Stirling to his mother in the summer of 18—. She had received him and conducted him into the garden, where she afterwards saw him take the ruby necklace from a handbag and permit his daughter to play with it. Afterwards, a similar bag stood for a long time in the parlour cupboard in the house of

Arioland. She had never seen it since the death of her mistress. Sir Sylvanus and Lady Torphichan took possession of the whole house then. After Mr. David Stirling's departure, she had seen Hester playing with the necklace, and finally, finding her in the field with it, she had taken charge of it, wrapped it in a newspaper, and locked it in her trunk. There it remained till Miss Hester went to London to stay with her uncle. She had then given it to Hester, thinking that such an ornament might be useful to her in the city.

The newspaper in which it had been wrapped for many years was produced. It was *The Drumfern Standard* of date July 15, of the year in which Mr. David Stirling made his visit home.

The Reverend Anthony Borrowman, minister of the parish of St. John in Galloway, had never seen the ruby, nor yet heard either Margaret Tipperlin or Hester Stirling speak of it. Yes, it was true that he looked upon the latter as a daughter. He remembered the visit of Mr. David Stirling, in the summer of 18—. The late Mrs. Stirling of Arioland was accustomed to consult him on matters of business, and he saw her the night of the visit. She seemed depressed, and said that she would never see her son's face again in this world. She also stated that he had placed a great responsibility upon her — by which he understood her to mean the care of his child, Hester. The witness had brought up Hester Stirling as his own daughter from the age of eight years, and had never known her to be fond of dress — though goodness knew fond enough of getting her own way.

'That is our case,' said Mr. Chetwynd. 'I do not

propose to address the jury. It is obvious that we have clearly proved how the jewel came into the hands of Miss Hester Stirling, and the right she has to retain it. How it comes to pass that the other five are in the hands of Sir Sylvanus Torphichan-Stirling, bearing the name of David Stirling, my client's father, may form the subject of a future investigation.'

And he sat down.

The counsel for the prosecution rose, after a brief colloquy with his principal. He did not mean to reply to the last unwarrantable imputation; it was indeed nothing short of a threat, and he wished the jury to take note of that. The character of Sir Sylvanus was too well known to need any vindication. He had shown himself most kind and generous to the prisoner. He could have no motive, save a love of abstract justice, in thus exposing himself to the vilest insinuations. The evidence of the Burmese gentleman and of the experts was inconclusive and incomplete. Even if accepted as correct, their translation did not prove more than that a certain David Stirling had once possessed the jewels. The name was a common enough one, and this supposititious Stirling may very well have sold them to the notable firm of Metzinger and Co., of Amsterdam, from whom Sir Sylvanus received them. It had been clearly shown that Hester Stirling had, on more than one occasion, been seen entering a room where the stones were kept, without any cause or excuse for doing so. On these occasions the safe was often unlocked, if the prosecutor happened to have been working in his study.

The evidence of the old Scotchwoman, Tipperlin,

was suspect, both because she had recently had a shock and was therefore not in full possession of her faculties, and also because, having brought the prisoner up, she would naturally think it her duty to support her charge through thick and thin. They had all heard of Scotch clannishness. He left his case with confidence to the good sense of an intelligent jury of householders and property-holders. If this sort of thing were to be passed over in silence, their clerks might ransack the safe for anything of value to wear as a breast-pin, or their very maidservants take out their wives' diamond rings to adorn them in the park on Sunday afternoons. In fact, to find Hester Stirling innocent was striking at the root idea, the foundation of all the security of the well-to-do in the enjoyment of those things Providence and their own industry had procured for them.

And he sat down.

There was a pause while the judge arranged his papers — a great bated hush in the midst of which he began to speak.

'This is a case,' he said, with a certain incisive cameo-like clearness of speech, 'which ought never to have been brought before this court. I prefer not to characterise the conduct of the man who, seeing a jewel resembling certain others in his possession on the neck of an orphaned girl and a ward of his own, at a ball given by a lady of the highest rank, flies at once to the conclusion that she is a thief, and then, having passed over the matter that night, has her arrested on her return to the only home she has in the city, taken to a station-house, and left to be bailed out by the good offices of comparative

strangers.'

'All over except the shouting!' whispered Jim Chetwynd to the Duke; 'old Scratch has got his claws full out — no great judge is Old Scratch, but, Lord, what an advocate!'

If the jury believed it possible that this young lady had risked opening a safe, after entering a room in which she had no business, for the purpose of abstracting a necklace to wear in the presence of the owner of the stolen property, undoubtedly they must find the prisoner guilty. But first they must agree to disbelieve the distinguished Secretary of Embassy who had given evidence, before them, also the two notable experts in Oriental languages. They must reject the evidence, clear and untraversed, of Margaret Tipperlin and the minister of the parish where Hester Stirling formerly lived, as to the time and place at which the young lady came into possession of the stone. On the one side, therefore (that of the defence), there were clear facts not seriously impugned. On the other, only malice and insinuation. The jury were perfectly free to choose between these alternatives. If, however, they decided against the obvious weight of evidence, he would know what course to take.'

The bird-like head nodded solemnly twice at the twelve attentive jurymen, as much as to say, 'If you dare!'

The twelve heads bent together. The foreman seemed to run along the double row with a question.

One head after another nodded assent.

Then, rising suddenly, the foreman turned sharp on his heel, and stood waiting for Mr. Justice Scratchard.

‘Are you agreed upon your verdict?’

‘My Lord, we are!’

‘Do you find the prisoner guilty or not guilty?’

‘Not guilty, my Lord!’

The applause broke out irrepressible, overwhelming.

Mr. Justice Scratchard rose, looking about him fiercely the while.

‘Silence in court, there, or I shall have it cleared!’

Then he turned to the prisoner in the dock.

‘Hester Stirling, you have been the victim of a great wrong. You leave this court without a stain upon your character. Your lawyer will advise you as to any further steps which, in his opinion, may be necessary to safeguard your interests.’

CHAPTER THIRTY EIGHT

THE TONGUE CAN NO MAN TAME

Silence filled the Glen of Kells. Silence was in the deep defile of the Darroch Glen. The little white manse of St. John glimmered beneath the stars amid the trees that overtopped it with their umbrellas of inky shade. Hester stood at the door looking down at the water slipping past beneath. She could just discern the grey band, flung, as it were, carelessly athwart the water-meadows like a sash of pearl-coloured silk which some one had flung off in haste.

During these days it was a heavy little heart that Hester carried in her bosom, and the eyes that had been dry in the time of her sore trouble, were often enough wet now when there was none to see save God and the stars.

Hester had been four weeks at home with Revvie and Megsy in the manse of St. John. Yet somehow the old happiness seemed gone for ever. The new had not yet come. She thought kindly, however, of all the friends she had left behind her in London.

'I will never see them any more,' she said, sadly, to herself. 'I have come back to hide my head, and now I make even Revvie and Megsy to be ashamed. What shall I do— what shall I do?'

Yet what joy there had been in the manse when first the lost one returned, a fairer flower than had ever been seen within its walls! How Revvie could scarcely let her out of his sight, and how Megsy, still weak from her illness, would creep along and open

the door of the little parlour, which was Hester's, just to be sure that she was still there. It had all seemed so sweetly restful, and the folk at the kirk door that first Sabbath — they were more than kind. So Hester rejoiced with a great joy that she had won home again to simple love among simple folk.

Her heart was indeed a little sore about Carus. He had been so good and so tender in the day of trouble, and yet somehow after the trial and while they were still in London, he had seemed cold and constrained. They were staying, Revvie and she, at Saunders McDougal's Hotel, in Portland Street, off the Strand, a hostel much tasted by the ministers of the kirk who were compelled to adventure southward into the strangers' land. Revvie had taken up his quarters there, and thither Hester had accompanied him the night after her triumphant acquittal. They stayed a week in London before returning to the manse in the the vale of Darroch. Each day Revvie went out in search of second-hand bookshops, finding them, however, as he patriotically declared, a 'poor and beggarly lot,' compared with those of Edinburgh, where between Lothian Street and the Mound you may acquire for a modest figure all the literature of the world.

Each eve Anthony Borrowman returned, bringing his sheaves with him. Grimy with dust, ring-streaked and spotted with mildew and worm-holes they were. Each treasure, however, was more precious than the last, for Revvie hardly liked to possess a book that was not as he said 'fattened with the crumbs of time.'

There was, for instance, 'Boston's Autobiography,' 'wherein, sir, is the young green Paradise of a

faithful soul faithfully portrayed,' as he would say sententiously.

'And all for sixpence — and six shillings would have been asked for the same in the South Brig any lawful day!'

He obtained, in addition, Dugdale's Monasticon, the Reliquiae Baxterianæ, Baillie's Letters, Fountainhall's Decisions, the Presbyterian Eloquence — all for a few pieces of silver.

'This is fair robbery,' said Hester to him one evening, humouring him.

'Nay,' answered the minister, 'only honestly spoiling the Egyptians of their unappreciated fleshpots. But, after all, of what account are such fine marrowy books to those who all day run hither and thither and take no rest day or night.'

For the pour of midnight traffic along the Strand and over the Thames bridges used to fetch Revvie out of his bed that he might see it.

'The souls of men, blown with a mighty wind to and fro, from the four airts of the heavens,' thus he described it in a sermon preached after his return.

During these early days Hester had been happy. Empress Gate was an ill dream, the trial a nightmare, even the ball far away in some other sphere of existence, she herself infinitely older and wiser. She saw Carus every day, and walked with him and Vic in the park. To them upon occasions were joined Kiptord and Tom.

Still it seemed that Carus was always silent and constrained, and more than once it was on the tip of Hester's tongue to ask if he were angry with her. But when she would have spoken, the words would not come, and the time went by. At last they must say

farewell. Vic had already gone to Homburg to her Grace, since Hester could not leave Revvie, and yearned to be at the manse to comfort Megsy. Niddisdale having done his part was seen no more — modest, unaccountable man that he was. But the three young men, Tom, Kipford, and Carus, were there to say good-bye, waiting Hester's cab under the great gloomy arch, and then at the last moment to them Jim Chetwynd added himself, cool and casual as ever, dropping his words like precious liqueurs and sweetening them with a rare-coming smile as often as he spoke to Hester.

It chanced that Chetwynd drew Tom's arm through his at the moment when the minister and Kipford were deep in converse as to the last production of the Historicity Club, of which, needless to say, Kipford had just heard for the first time. Hester and Carus found themselves momentarily alone. A strange constraint seized upon both of them. Hester almost wished that she could run to Revvie and plunge into the midst of his conversation with Kipford.

'I wonder when I shall see you again,' Carus said at last, not looking at her, but away down the platform to the place where Tom stood viciously digging the ferrule of his cane into a crack in the flagstones while Chetwynd talked.

'I suppose when you come to Darroch,' she said; 'that is, if you have not forgotten us by that time.'

'I shall not come any more to Darroch,' he said, simply.

Hester looked up in surprise.

'Why?' she asked.

'I have quarrelled with my father,' he said.

A slow blush mounted upward to the girl's cheek as Hester's heart quickened its beating.

'I hope he is not angry with you because of what you have done for me,' she murmured. 'If that be so, I shall be sorry that I let you do anything. I shall not forgive myself that I thought of you in prison — wrote to you!'

'No,' Carus broke out with a kind of gulp, 'you must not say that — anything but that — that is all that makes my life worth living!'

But Tom had broken away from Chetwynd and now burst in upon them before another word could be said.

'I say, Hester,' he said, 'I brought you these; I hope you will like them!'

He had just taken a basket of beautiful fruit from a boy, and dismissed him. 'You will need them on the journey, you know.'

And so their chance passed, and the words on the young man's lips remained unspoken.

And so it was that this night by the door of the manse, alone in the silence of the wide valley, Hester wondered what Carus would have said to her if it had not been for Tom's basket of fruit.

Now, greater than all else save religion (and more immediate than that) is the power of the influence territorial in Galloway and the Glen of Kells.

If a man have in his possession land which his father had before him he may be a sot or a bully, a cypher or a scamp, yet hold in his hands the power of public opinion. He commands a well-drilled little army of gamekeepers, gardeners, watchers of fishing, subservient shopkeepers, farmers a little behind with their rent, and local tradesmen, all with

a keen sense of the side on which their bread is buttered.

So it came to pass that after a week or two, mysterious whispers began to pervade the glen. These concerned Hester Stirling. She had been tried in London for stealing (so the whispers said); she had barely escaped penal servitude. She had been imprisoned. She had been turned to the door by her own uncle and aunt. Lord Darroch had quarrelled with his son because of her. It was easy to be seen that her modest airs were only a sham.

Through all the countryside the murmur ran, fanned judiciously by the presence of Ethel and Claudia at the new house of Arioland. Their custom was a first consideration alike to the village shopkeepers and the more distant town tradesmen. And so it came about that good wives at whose firesides Hester had been accustomed to sit and drink tea, now hurried indoors at the first sight of her. At church she found herself curiously isolated as she walked homeward. For Megsy was not yet strong enough to accompany her, and Mr. Borrowman was busy with session business.

It was this which saddened the girl.

‘I am hurting Revvie and Megsy,’ she said. ‘I must go away again.’

Yet where to go or what to do did not at once appear. She wished she had taken the Duchess at her word, but now Vic was with her, and she had no need of another companion. She sighed and went indoors without coming to any conclusion.

CHAPTER THIRTY NINE

GRUMPY GUDDLESTANE

On the morrow she took her book and went out, meaning to sit awhile and read in the warm sunshine of the late autumn, in one of her favourite haunts — the ivy-clad porch of the ruined Castle of the first lords of Darroch. The new building — which had been new, that is, some three hundred years before — was situated on a lofty eminence overlooking the loch. Higher up, on wide, pleasant holms, stood the 'Auld Castle,' now a picturesque ruin, mostly ivy-clad and crumbling, but with staircases and garrets still fairly intact, and with the arms of the Darrochs of Darroch above the door. A little lower were brown pools where the salmon lurked head to the stream during the hot summer days, and all about spread the Darroch Woods, bird-haunted, fragrant, fanned and cooled by the breezes which blew up and down the strath.

Thither, with a heart heavy within her, Hester took her way. The leaves, getting dry a little, rustled under foot. The air coursed keen from the North, and the power seemed to have gone out of the sunshine. But Hester was glad to be alone. A sense of the peace which God has poured out on the world began to seek inward to her soul. The grey turrets of the castle towered above her, stately and reverend. Under this archway Darrochs of old, knightly and gallant as — she did not continue the comparison — had ridden with their squires at their beck. Across that shining water they swam their horses when

they went forth to the King's wars. She thought of Carus and smiled. He would have looked as gallant as any of them. After all, it was a good world to be alive in—if men and women were unjust and unkind, at least she could escape so swiftly into the solitude.

But Hester had reckoned without a certain 'Grumphy' Guddlestane.

The reek of a foul pipe stole upon Hester's sensitive nostrils as she sat reading under the ivy. She looked up, and there before her stood my Lord Darroch's new gamekeeper, a gun held slouchily under his arm, a battered hard hat too small for his flattish porcine face, cocked at a knowing angle over a left eye that leered, and his black 'cutty,' turned bowl downwards, protruding from his mouth like a boar's tusk. Well was he named Grumphy Guddlestane.

For some months before Dickson had been found wanting. He had proved too kind and complaisant for my lord. He had not been severe enough with trespassers. He had even been known to speak civilly to visitors to the glen, wishful to view the ancient castle of the Darrochs. So these things came by the usual underhand methods to the ears of my lord, and Dickson had leave to go. Whereupon, to the little lodge by the gate came 'Grumphy' Guddlestane, who had been a kind of dog-breaker and stable-sweeper on Lord Darroch's estates in the north, and knew as much about gamekeeping as about Sanscrit.

'Grumphy' he had been named at his first appearance at the Kirk at Clachan, and the name had stuck to him ever since. Rough by nature,

brutal by training, foul-mouthed by choice, a coward at heart and a bully always — such was Grumphy Guddlestane. With men, especially if they had money or drink to offer, he could be sycophantish enough, but woe betide the woman upon whom he could vent his spite. For the very earth seemed fouler when Grumphy spoke out that which was in his heart. And three times woe to the wandering bairn, with purple lips bramble-stained, whom Grumphy caught about the precincts of his master's woods.

'What are you doin' here — you have no business here. We want nane o' your kind hereabouts!' said Grumphy without removing the pipe from between his teeth, as he stood glooming and glowering at Hester Stirling, the reek of his very presence poisoning the wholesome air.

'I beg your pardon,' said Hester, rising to her feet. 'I did not know I was doing any harm. I have always come here ever since I was a little girl, and nobody ever said a word to me before.'

'Weel,' growled Grumphy, 'you move on oot o' this, an' mind, dinna let me see ye here again, that's a! — If ever I set e'en on ye on the estate I'll hae ye sent back to the jail again, where ye came frae sae lately. Oh, I ken ye brawly, ye fine madam. Ye are the lass that stealed the necklace and got off because ye could twine silly young men roond your finger. Ye will find that ye canna twine me! Sae oot o' this wi' ye!'

Hester did not answer. She quietly gathered up her shawl and books, and with a suddenly whitened face took her way by the path down the riverside.

The noble victor followed at her heels, swelling

with triumph.

‘Come back oot o’that amang the game — ye.’ Grumphy shouted the oaths in his most brutal tones; ‘gang up by the stables, or I’ll set the dowgs on ye. We dinna want characters like you aboot the place!’

Grumphy was thoroughly enjoying himself now. He had a woman to bully, and best of all, one who had no protector and did not answer back. It was one degree better than beating a dog nearly to death with his dog-whip, which hitherto had been his beau ideal of happiness. If he could only have lashed Hester across that white face of hers, he would have been perfectly happy.

Thank God, there are few Grumphy Guddlestanes within the bounds of Scotland, but I have known one here and there, and these things are written to their address. I have many friends among gamekeepers, and they are one and all open-hearted and manly fellows, generous and brave. I have sat in their kitchens and tasted their good cheer. Better comrades can no man have. I drink to them health and happiness and the finest seasons, with birds plenty and strong on the wing. Such are ninety-nine out of the hundred of the gamekeepers of Scotland, and any ill report they may have is only because oftentimes the public, indiscriminating as usual, lays on them the weight of the boorish brutality, the callous cruelty, the stupid ignorance of Grumphy Guddlestane, the hundredth man. I will therefore, once for all, write down Grumphy clear and mark him with a mark, that he may be known whenever found, and that his comrades be not blamed for his sins.

Let him be called a 'Grumphy' and a gamekeeper no more— for true gamekeeper he is none.

So Grumphy thoroughly enjoyed himself all the way through the policies to the high road. He shouted after Hester every foul name that enters into the heart of such a man. Blessed are the innocent, for mostly Hester had not the least idea what he meant. Grumphy's small pig's eyes twinkled with happiness. His purplish, sodden, unshaven face, jowled like a mastiff, marled with potations like ill-baked dough, fairly shook with pleasure at the pain he was inflicting. He permitted his slouching ill-bred dogs to growl and sniff about Hester's skirts in the hope that they would thoroughly frighten this girl, alone and unprotected, upon whom he felt that he had his master's permission to exercise all his brutality and spite. Grumphy Guddlestane was not a brute upon compulsion. He was a brute for pleasure. And it was a source of rare satisfaction to him, that for once in a way he could speak out all the sullen devildom of his nature without fear of consequences. He was not often in agreement with public prejudice, and he made the most of his opportunity. Half an hour afterwards, Megsy, going carefully about the manse, with a staff in one hand and the other pressed in the small of her back, found Hester weeping in her room.

It was almost exactly one week later that the manse housekeeper found Grumphy Guddlestane. It happened on the eve of Market Monday, when the farmers were putting their gigs up at the Cross Keys for an hour's rest, and when there was as great a concourse as is ever brought together in the little upland village of the Clachan of St. John.

Grumphy stood with one elbow on the doorpost and bughed. He had been drinking, and the tongue in his mouth was furred with foulness. Before him suddenly uprose Megsy Tipperlin, and power was given to her.

'Stand ye there, Grumphy Guddlestane,' she cried, shaking her stick in his face; 'stand there, ye peetifu' walstrel, and as sure as my name is Margaret Tipperlin, I will tell your name and character amang a' the folk. You that never faced a man, stand up and face a woman of three-score years and twa. You that shamed the innocent, stand up and I will make you ashamed, if an ounce o' shame is left in your shakin' carcass.'

Grumphy made a remark here in his usual bullying style, but it fell flat.

'Na, an' I will no get oot o' your road — ye peetifu' cooard, ye pasty-faced, dottle-nosed vaigabond. If I were a man, I wad tak' the whup oot o' your hand and dress ye frae your cloured hat to the boots that ye hae never paid for. I kenna what the Almichty is thinkin' on to permit sic a thing as ye to crawl on the face o' this bonny earth, blackening the verra licht o' the sun, and fylin' the clean mools as ye walk the fields. But He that made the taed an' the asp and the ether (adder) kens what for He made the like o' Grumphy Guddlestane! Ye wad break the heart o' my innocent bairn, wad ye — the only child o' the only son o' the ancient hoose o' the Stirlin's o' Arioland, that were here afore there was ever ony Lord Darroch to uphaud ye in your wickedness — aye, and shall be here when baith you an' he are forgotten aff the face o' the Glen Kells, and when the wanderin' messan whaulp fyles the nettles and

pushionous paddock-stools abune your graves.

'Na, an' I haena dune wi' ye yet, Grumphy Guddlestane. Keep haud o' him, lads. Let him hear this, Nether Airds, let him hear the last word o' Margaret Tipperlin. If he willna come to the kirk to hear the word o' God, a faithfu' sermon he will never forget shall be preached in his lugs the day. Rest in the Glen Kells shall he get nane frae this day onward. Forth shall he gang wi' the mark on him — like unto Cain. But feint a sicht o' the land o' Nod shall he ever see. For the ban of Megsy Tipperlin shall be upon him, and on a' that consort wi' him. Men shallna drink his drink for the fear o't. Woman shall dwam at the sicht o' him, and the verra bairns on the streets and lanes shall cry oot, 'Hide your head, Grumphy Guddlestane.' Ye could shame a lassie that never did ye ony hairm, but ye daurna face a man wi' his neives shut a' the days o' your life.

'What, is he gane, and left the collar o' his coat in your hands, Nether Airds? Whatever has ta'en him awa' in sic a hurry — him that had sae muckle to say to my puir bairn. I wasna half through wi' him. I hadna weel stanit to tell him what the countryside thocht o' him. Gin I had had ither five meenites I declare I micht hae said something he wad hae mindit.'

'Ye are no canny wi' your tongue, Marget,' said Nether Airds, a tall, gaunt, thoughtful-looking man; 'certes, it is weel ye didna mairry. For if ye can put a man that's nae kin to ye through the threshin' mill as ye hae dune Grumphy the day, what wad ye no hae dune wi' your ain guidman—that is, in a mainner o' speakin', delivered bound hand and foot

into your pooer?’

Megsy turned upon him.

‘It wad hae been tellin' you, Nether Airds, and the meal ark in your kitchen, and the account ye hae in the Cairn Edward Bank, gin ye had a wife like Margaret Tipperlin to come home to. Certes, ye wadna hae stood sae lang haudin' up the doorposts o' the public-house at this time o' nicht!’

There was a vacancy where Nether Aird had stood.

The doorpost of the Cross Keys stood there lone and deserted.

‘Aye and you, Ironmannoch, that stan's nicherin' there like a calf lookin' ower a yett for the lickin's o' the parritch pat, it wad set ye better to forswear the company o' a' sic dour-faced, ill-hearted wratches as Grumphy Guddlestane, and gang hame to your wife and bairns that ye are no worthy to creesh the clogs o'. Guid peety them! Gin I win at ye wi' a stick, my man, ye shall lauch on the wrang side o' your face, and girn like a foulmart in a trap. Up, man, an' ower the hill, like Tod Lowrie, wi' the dogs after him! And gin ever I catch yin o' ye again consortin' or colloquin' wi' the like o' Grumphy Guddlestane — weel, I micht be temptit to forget mysel' and say somethings that ye nichtna like!’

In this fashion was ended the reading of the second lesson from the epistle general of Megsy, the daughter of Tipperlin. But long before her voice ceased the congregation had dispersed from about the doors of the Cross Keys.

CHAPTER FORTY

NAOMI TURNS THE TABLES ON RUTH

'Dearie, dearie, ye canna leave us—ye shallna. Even as Ruth said to Naomi, 'Whither thou goes,' there will Megsy gang, and 'where thou lodgest' she will lodge — aye, though we hae to big us a boo'er by yon burnside, like unto Bessie Bell and Mary Grey, an' dootless twa limmers they war to do siccan a thing!'

'But, Megsy dear,' answered Hester with the tear in her eve, 'I am but a shame and a speaking against to you and Revvie. What am I that I should stand in the way of those I love?'

'Stan' in their way, bairnie — havers, juist havers!' cried Megsy, knocking her iron-shod stick on the floor to enforce her words, 'what maitters it that thae lein' Torphichans — the foul fiend ride them! — hae raised this sound o' talk. As there is a God in heaven the truth will come to licht, and the wicked be turned into the ill Bit. Hasten the day — back the fires an' heat the bing red-hot for Sylvanus the Thief—Sylvanus the Liar — Sylvanus the Supplanter.'

'Oh, Megsy, what dreadful things you say.'

'Dreadfu' things, indeed; no half ill eneuch,' said Megsy, scornfully, 'after what they hae dune to my bairn. Ye little ken what it is to hae a guid-gaun tongue. Faith, if Megsy let hersel' say the thing that is in her heart she might come ower a word or twa that she wad be sorry for. But the pittin' up o' a bit peteetion like that — it's neither here nor there, in a

manner o' speakin'.'

'But, Megsy,' Hester reverted to the first subject, 'I can see all this is hurting Revvie. Did you hear him sigh when he sat down to take the Book this morning? And when he read the words, 'Plead my cause, O Lord!' — did you notice that he said by mistake, 'Plead her cause'?'

'Aye, did I no,' said Megsy, 'but whatna precious and comfortin' psalm o' Davvid's was that. Ah, he was the graund man, Davvid. Ye speak about puir Megsy Tipperlin, but ye canna blame her about her tongue, as lang as yon is within the leds o' the Bible. Harken to Davvid. 'Let them be confounded and put to shame. . . . Let them be turned back and put to confusion. I'm wi' ye, Davvid,' says I, 'and when ye are at it dinna forget that their name is Torpheechean. Chaff before the wind let them be. Let their way be dark and slippery, and let the Angel o' the Lord chase them.' (Torpheecheans, hear ye that — I'll hae Gawbriel himsel' hard on your tail afore I hae dune wi' ye!')

'Megsy, Megsy, I wish you would forgive them, as I am sure I do with all my heart.'

'Forgie them —ow aye, I dare say. It is like your ain sweet sel', my bonny lamb. Ow aye, Margaret Tipperlin will forgie them — when she watches their funerals daunerin' kirkward doon the glen.'

She recurred to the words of the Psalmist in that pleasant and comfortable Psalm from which she had been quoting.

'For they hid their net for my bairn, and without cause false witnesses laid to her charge things she knew not.' Oh, Davvid, Davvid, though ye were a terrible chiel among the lasses, ye had the root o'

the matter in ye, and wi' a fu' heart and a willin' tongue auld Megsy will pray your prayer: 'Rescue my soul from their destructions, and my darling from the power o' the lions!'

It was indeed small wonder that Megsy Tipperlin preferred the Old Testament for her private reading.

So for a time things remained, Revvie going about his duties with a heavy heart, feeling for the first time in his ministry that there was a cloud between him and his people, yet fixed in his mind that on no consideration would he abate anything for landowner or sycophant, for cold -shoulder, lying tongue, or jealously averted eye.

But as the days passed on Hester grew more and more set to get away, and eagerly scanned the advertising column of The Caledonian Mercury for anything that might give her a home and work. Yet still for Megsy's sake she did not go, but ever put off, hoping against hope that this people among whom she had been brought up would again look upon her with friendly eyes.

It was, strange to say, Anders MacQuaker who came to the rescue. From the first Anders had upheld the cause of Hester, and with tongue and strong right arm had in all matters approven himself a worthy champion of the oppressed. It chanced that he came one night to the kitchen door of the Manse. It was the early gloaming, and he heard the sound of voices from within, and, having no fine scruples as to listening, he heard most part of the conversation which has already been given. Then, with a cough and a ceremonial cleansing of his feet on mat and scraper, he ventured in with even more than his usual humility.

Megsy received him austerely.

'Maybes I sent for ye, Anders,' she said, 'but if I did, I hae forgot it!'

'No, Margaret,' said the fisherman, 'ye didna, but I thocht I micht venture. And it is a providence that I did, for the Lord has opened up a way.'

'Dinna swear, Anders MacQuaker, in the hoose o' God's minister!'

'I am no swearin', Margaret, but as I passed the window I heard ye speakin' aboot this young leddy gangin' awa' till the truth be made plain.'

'Anders, ye listened, or ye could never hae heard that, ye miserable, crawlin', creepin' blastie!'

'Na, Megsy, ye do me grievous wrang. I didna so muckle listen as juist incline my ear. And ye ken that's commandit in the Bible itsel!'

'Dinna blaspheme the Holy Buik, Anders MacQuaker, wi' your unhallowed jibes!'

'An' it cam' into my head that I kenned a way oot. Ye hae heard me speak o' my bit cottage that I biggit when I was head game-watcher to his Grace. It is nae mair than a butt an' a' ben. It stands in the lee o' the Tap Rig o' Bennanbrack. It is a denty bit spot, wi' a troot burn rinnin' caller and clear a bowshot aneath the door. There's nae company up yonder but the whaup gaun whurly-wurly doon to his nest in the heather, and the snipe and the plover winnowin' the air abune. But Buss-o'-Bield is a bonny name an' a bien bit hoose, weel plenishcd wi' gear an' the best o' Scottish blankets on the beds. Noo, gin you, and the bit lassie, Megsy, wull gang up there a wee till the shoo'er be slacked and the storm wind lowns, the heart o' Anders AlacQuaker will rejoice within him.'

'A likely story,' rejoined Megsy, ungratefully, 'an' tell ye me what's to become o' puir Maister Borrowman, honest man, left a' his leevin' lane in this great muckle shell o' a Manse!'

'I hae thocht o' that, too,' said Anders the provident, 'ye see a man like me has nocht else to do but think. And though ye scorn me, Megsy, there is but yin in a' this warl' that the heart o' Anders MacQuaker.'

'Gin ye hae ocht sensible to say, Anders, my bonny man,' said Megsy, stopping in front of him with the porridge spurtle poised in her hand, 'say on. But if ye wantna this gie us nae havers about your heart. Faith, when a man nearin' the three score an' ten speaks about his heart, it is time for his friends to be seein' about the condition o' his head!'

'Well,' said Anders, unabashed, 'hear what I hae to say at ony rate. I am a man that can keep hoose like ony woman (barrin' yoursel', of course, Megsy). Weel, I'll come and ready the minister's meals — aye, an' see that he tak's them, too. And mak' his bed, and brush his claes, and set him on his beast, and mind him o' baptisms and burials, an' to pit his sermon in his pooch on Sabbath mornin's. And if there be ony ither duties that ye shall be pleased to lay upon him, Anders MacQuaker will faithfully perform them without fee or reward.'

Megsy looked at him a long time in silence. Then she turned to Hester.

'There's something in what the craitur says, too,' she remarked, as if Anders were deaf, 'ye wad wonder what sensible thochts come aneath that hoolet's hassock o' hair at orra times. Glimmerin's o'

sense the craitur has — blinks o' insight. Faith, I'm an auld dune woman, and no fit company for ony young thing, but ye are plainly pinin' here, and we will e'en try this bit cot up among the muirs o' Bennanbrack.'

CHAPTER FORTY ONE

THE FIRST HESTER

The Scot has the primitive instinct of nomenclature. When his name does not begin with 'Mac,' or end in 'son,' he is generally a Wright, a Herd, a Shepherd, a Crock-herd, a Smith, a Black, a Brown, a Grey, or a Reid. His houses, when not named imaginatively but obscurely in the aboriginal Gaelic, are Blinkbonnies, Buss-o'-Biels, Hermitages, Glower-ower-'ems, Cuddlecozies. Beyond the Dungeon o' Buchan, the Black Craig o' Dee looks to the Three Cairnsmores, and the most northerly of these passes on the regard to the Hill o' the Windy Standard. These are picturesque compounds, mostly of Saxon speech; the others, that is nine out of ten place names in Galloway, are still more sonorous and imaginative in Erse.

Listen! Ben Gairn and Ben Yelleray, Duchrae and Craigronald, Neldrichen, Mulwharchar, and the Rig o' the Star, Loch Macaterick and Loch Enoch, Loch Valley and Lonely Loch Moan — it is as if the grim primeval spirits had sat, each on his own particular mountain top and bandied polysyllables instead of bombarding each other with granitic boulders.

But the story waits. To Anders MacQuaker's house of Buss-o'-Biels, in the little ferny cleuch which opens through the rough heathery moors of Bennanbrack, went Hester and her Megsy. Anders drove them in what was then known as a tax-cart, that is, a spring cart upon which government duty had been paid. The minister walked sedately beside

them the first part of the way, silent mostly, but sometimes talking blithely to Hester, or bidding her take care of the tall old Chambers's 'Journals' and closely-printed Hogg's Instructors which he had placed for her reading in the bottom of the cart. He was wae to part with Hester and Megsy, he said, but he comforted himself by the thought that both of them would soon return to the Manse by the Water of Darroch.

It was dusk when they arrived at their destination, the lucid grey-purple dusk of an autumnal day when the heather is browning on the hills, the green bracken searing to russet, and the birches standing ladylike and flame-coloured in every glade. Anders unlocked the door, having tied his beast to the gate-post. In a minute he had a fire licking briskly up the chimney, and the pale blue wood-smoke scented all the cleuch and hung over the cot till it thinned itself out among the rough heather of the Rig of Bennanbrack.

Megsy lit the lamp and went from room to room with her nose in the air. Of these there were but three — the kitchen, wide and blue-flagged, its beams rough and hung with hams, and with shining utensils on the wall. A tiered and many-plattered dresser climbed to the eaves, gay with blue willow-pattern. Strings of onions and dried herbs wavered in the dusky V of the roof where the wood-smoke hung. Then there was the 'room,' where a white bed, turned down to show pillows and linen sheets like the drifted snow, waited their pleasure. A new 'register' grate in the fireplace told that Anders had been at Cairn Edward, and had left some of his hard-earned 'siller' with the local ironmonger.

There was even a carpet in lurid hues on the floor, and pictures on the walls representing incidents of the chase in scarlet and grass-green. A great family Bible, bound in what must indeed have been 'whole calf' (if not cow), lay on a worked wool-mat on the chest of drawers, to represent the outlook upon the spiritual, and on the table general literature was represented by a fishing-book of wonderfully dressed flics.

At the back a little room opened off, just affording place for a bed, a round table, an oaken chest, and one chair. In this Megsy, without a word, bestowed her chattels. After she had finished her inspection, during which she had said no word of praise or blame, she turned to Anders, who had followed her from room to room with anxious brows of suspense.

'It'll do,' she said, generously, 'it's nane sae ill — for a man.'

Anders MacQuaker's spirits instantly rose to their zenith.

'I am richt glad to hear ye say sae, Megsy,' he said. 'There are mony things that ye wad baith be the better o', but ye'll juist hae to excuse Anders till he can find oot what they are. Surely, ye will ken noo that he can be trusted to look weel after the minister!'

But Megsy had reached the limit of praise. More was not good for Anders, who, like all men, was in the opinion of Alarget Tipperlin 'an upsettin' craitur.'

'We'll see that in a month or twa,' said Megsy, coolly, 'but in the mean time gang your ways back to the manse and serve the supper. For weel do I ken that neither bite nor sup will Maister Borrowman tak' till ye bring him the news that we are safe and

soond. Guid nicht to ye, Anders, and mind and warm the minister's boots on the 'hud' before he puts them on.'

So Anders MacQuaker drove away, and left Megsy and her young mistress alone in the deep encompassing silence of Bennanbrack. He had brought a basket of trout carefully prepared and leaf-wrapped along with him in the tax-cart. These Megsy 'readied' for supper, Hester helping as diligently as the somewhat imperious mood of her companion would permit.

'Do ye think that I am an auld dune woman?' she would demand, when Hester ran across the kitchen floor to lift the frying-pan off the fire for her, 'gae wa' wi' ye, lassie! Read your book and let Megsy Tipperlin, that 'readied' meat for your faither and your faither's faither, do her duty by Anders MacQuaker's pair silly bits o' burn troots.'

Afterwards, the washing up having been carried through on a compromise and Megsy established by the fireside with her knitting, Hester went to the door and listened to the large silence which at that hour falls upon the hills. At first, coming out from listening to the purring exudation of the sap from the beech-logs Anders had cut for them, and the hum of the kettle she herself had hung high up to boil easily for Megsy's good-night glass of invalid toddy (the 'invalid' strongly protesting to the last sip), Hester could hear nothing. The silence seemed absolute. By and by, however, a world of sounds came to her one by one, as it were disengaging themselves singly and stealing upon the ear rather as the perfume does than with the rude assault and battery of a sound.

The booming of a dor-beetle, swooping in some irregular comet-like orbit overhead, droned across her, waxed louder and then thinned out rapidly. A fox barked on the opposite hill. The brack burn murmured low under its bracken coverts down in the glen, a mere humming runnel of water now, where in the height of the later rains a month hence a torrent would be roaring red.

Hester thought steadily of Carus Darroch. It was indeed a place in which to resolve entanglements and to come at the meaning of things, Down at the Manse she had had many matters to occupy her mind — specially as to what she should do in the future, and how relieve Revvie of the burden which (as she conceived it) her presence was laying upon him. But here on the high Rig of Bennanbrack she would have time to think, and out of thought would come counsel and the vista of a plain way for her feet to tread in, as down an avenue.

So first of all she thought of Carus. In the hour of her need she had turned to him, and right faithfully had he kept the bond of ancient friendship. Almost too well, indeed, for his eyes had said more than his tongue had confirmed. But Hester was glad—yes, she was glad that he should not think of her. Only she could not bear that he should care for Ethel Torphichan. Yes, she was thankful that he would go no more to Empress Gate. But further than that, he was free. He could be nothing to her, this poor shamed Hester Stirling. He was the son of a lord. He would be a great man some day. He was clever — oh, very clever — and; — he must marry some one worthy of him, a great lady — some one with money and tame and beauty—not a poor little nursery

governess — like — like Miss Martin.

‘Come your ways in, bairnie,’ the voice of Megsy reached her from the kitchen, ‘dinna stand there to get your daith o’ cauld. What — no greetin’? Hoot-hoot (Hester had hastily put her official drying-apron to her eyes), this will never do! Tak’ your Buik, bairnie, and read me a lesson. There shall nae harm come to my wee lass sae lang as Megsy Tipperlin can hirple upon the face o’ the warld, whilk is the footstool o’ the Lord.’

And so with all her honest soul aflame at the injustice that had been done, and in womanly understanding of the heart of one little more than a child, Megsy compassed Hester about with observance, putting her to bed almost as if she had been, indeed, once more the bairn she still called her. And as the rough old Scotswoman bent over to kiss her darling good night, suddenly Hester threw her arms about her neck, and in an agony of sobs whispered in her ear.

‘Oh, Megsy, I love him—I love him. He must never think of me or guess that — that I love him so. But I cannot help it, Megsy. I am so ashamed. I cannot help it. He made me!’

‘Bairn, bairn, wheesht then, speak not so. He is no worthy man, whoever he may be, or he wad never hae spoken of love, and then,’

‘But he did not, Megsy, indeed, he did not,’ Hester interrupted, eagerly. ‘It was all my folly. But all the rest were so horrid, and he — well, he was great and kind, and oh, so different. And I could not help it, Megsy. What shall I do? What shall I do?’

‘Is it some one in London, bairnie?’

‘No—yes, he is in London, Megsy. At least, I think

so.'

'Tell me, tell Megsy, bairnie. Megsy that loes ye better, far better, than she loes her ain soul!'

'I cannot, I cannot. There is nothing to tell.' But the sobs went on, and Hester thrust her face closer into the loving shoulder of her first and only nurse. Megsy petted her, her toil-hard hand growing soft as satin with love-yearning. But as the sobs grew fewer and stronger, the anger of the old woman flamed out suddenly.

'The curse of the deceiver licht on him, whaever he may be! The curse of the false tongue that spak' the words of love when there was nane in his heart!'

'Hush, Megsy! No — no — you do not understand. He never said a word. It is not his fault. It is all mine. I imagined it every bit. Just because he was kind when every one was cruel. It was all my own folly. But oh, Megsy, I am so miserable!'

Then Megsy said nothing for a long time. She sat with Hester's hand in hers, and an arm about her neck. She watched her bairn keenly, moving her hand in the little touches of sympathy, which more than all else still a woman's heart when it rises volcanic within her, and the fountains of the great deep are broken up.

Then at last she said, 'Bairnie, did ye ever hear about your ain mither?'

Hester shivered a little within the circling arm. She sat up on her elbow, with the drops still falling freely on the lace of her snowy night-gear.

'No, Megsy,' she said, 'at least only what my aunt Torphichan cast up to me when she was angry.'

'Heed not that, dawtie,' said Megsy, soothingly, 'I who kenned the matter from the beginning to the

end, swear to you that there was no shame, I will tell you the story of your mither. Ye are like her, bairnie, sae like that my heart yearns for ye. I had never meant to tell you the tale. But now I must — it is laid upon me for the sake of the dead and because of the love heritage they have left behind them!’

Again Megsy was silent a while, as if deciding where to begin.

‘Ye never mind o’ your mither, bairn, and so can never ken that like she was when first I saw her. Ye favour her in the features, but ye hae the Stirling e’en and the Stirling hair. You have grown some-deal taller, too, like the Stirlings. But your mither, Davvid’s wife, I can see her noo — a creature sae denty, flichterin’ like a butterflee frae floo’er to floo’er, her hair yellow as gowd about’ her face, her e’en sparklin’ wi’ an inner licht, half o’ love an’ half o’ mischief, Hester Stirling (that had been Hester Greyson) was a veesion to turn the auld heart young again.

‘Aye, Hester she was, for ye were caaed for her, as ye had a guid richt to be. She was the dochter o’ an auld pernicketty cat-witted Englisher that cam’ to the Assembly Rooms o’ Drumfern to learn dancin’ an’ deportment to the burgher bairns and the sons and dochters o’ the country farmers. Simeon Greyson was his name — a great man to blaw about everything that he could do, and about the great man he had been before his misfortunes. What they were he never would tell, but as he spent maist part o’ what he made in public-hooses, guessin’ was easy. In his orra time he wad gather a company o’ play-actors frae Guid-kens-where and travel the countryside playin’ ‘Paitie an’ Roger,’ and ‘The Curse

o' Scotland '!

'But Hester Greyson—judge ye what a stirrin' there was amang the young callants o' Galloway when she cam' first amang them — her e'en glancin' in her held wi' mischief and youth. But innocent and unspoilt, kepted in safety by the mere swarm o' her admirers, there was nae sweeter maiden in the kingdoms three. The fame o' her gaed abroad fast, an' far and mony there were that sought her out. Mony drank wi' her auld donnert vaigabond o' a faither for the sake o' bein' askit to gang back to the lodgin's that she made sae bricht. For she loved the worthless deboshed auld guid-for-naething, and worshipped him like a saint — a' because she had as yet had naething else to love. And her heart couldna do without that — like you, my bairn — juist like you! God help a' lovin' hearts in their sair need. It's them that will need it!

'Now it fell oot that amang ithers, Davvid Stirling, your faither, as brisk and handsome a lad as ever set leg ower saddle, was in Drumfern learnin' the land surveyin'. For his faither had him taught a' thing, because he was his only son and a clever lad, very gleg in the uptak'.

'But when Hester Greyson cam' on the scene, I misdoot me that Davie gied little o' his attention to the measurin' chain and level. For it was the auld scoundrel's plan to bring his dochter to the dancin' academy, and gar her learn the beginners their steps and whiles be partner to them that were farther on in their learnin'.

'Like a feather in the wind Hester Greyson danced, and because she was sae lightfit and denty they caaed her the Snawflake. She was the finest

dancer that had ever been seen in thae pairts, and even them that was coontit high gentrice cam' frae far to see her.'

Hester began to understand how it was that she had pleased M. de Saucy so much, and how he had made his teaching of the Torphichan-Stirlings short and perfunctory that he might have time to teach Hester Greyson's daughter all the mystery of his art.

Megsy went on after a little pause for thought.

'Noo, I kenna what Davvid Stirling said to Hester Greyson, nor how he got a chance to whisper in her ear amang a' that multitude of suitors for her favour. But oor Davie was ever a determined callant frae the time he was denied access to the garden in the berry-time, and broke a hole through the hedge and climbed the six foot wa' by the nicks he set his bare taes into. At a' events there were looks gi'en to him that werena' for ithers — a hand mair warmly pressed in the dance; and maybes — I am an auld single woman, and ill-versed in sic things — a bit kiss in the bye-gangin' at the dark places o' the stairs.

'But it cam' about that amang the ither young rakish gentlemen that rade in to Drumfern to see the marvel o' beauty and drink wi' the auld play-actin' fule, her faither, was my Lord Darroch, then a fine, handsome young man that had been a sojer a while. But, then as noo, as ill-hearted a spendthrift and rakish run-the-country as ye could find gin ye searched the kindgoms three.

'Weel, it fell oot that he saw Hester, and immediately began to be verra pack wi' her faither. For that was the mainner o' the man. He was never awa' frae Drumfern. He took private lessons, if ye

please, and in that guise he laid siege to the heart o' Hester Greyson. And with Simeon Greyson it was 'My lord' this and 'My lord' that. They drank in the publicks together. They dined in a private room at the 'George,' where my lord put up his fine horses. And so it gaed on frae bad to worse, till, having come hame yae nicht early frae the Assembly Rooms to greet hersel' to sleep, Hester heard the twa men come in. And there sitting at the table, birlin' at their wine and crackin' their ill-conditioned jokes, Hester heard how that her faither had actually agreed to sell her, body and soul, to my Lord Darroch — for a price. She heard it arranged how she was to be taken to a village out of Drumfern on pretext of a visit. There my lord was to repair with a servant or two, and a carriage and pair. Hester was to be entrapped within, and the twa were to start for England as hard as the horses could gallop.

The next day Hester Greyson fled to Davvid Stirling's arms, and before the gloaming fell they were man and wife. But Davvid did not dare to face his father, for he kenned he was a hard man. He got a cot for his lassie-wife down by the Saut Water, to which he could resort upon occasion. And for a while the young things were fair daft with that fey happiness that canna last mony months.

'But there came a word frae Drumfern to Arioland, maybe through the angry lord, or aiblins, some suspicious word frae the drucken disappointed faither. And sae Davvid was ordered hame. He would not come and did not. Sae his faither cut aff a' supplies. Only at odd times his mither wad get a pound note to him, and whiles — but there's nae need to speak about that. Noo, as the months gaed

by and nae relief, there cam' a time when the need o' Davvid and Hester grew great, the time being at hand when she behoved to dree the weird o' a' lovin' women. And sae Davvid, putting his pride in his pooch, brocht her up there on his arm to the great door o' Arioland. I mind it weel, as if it were yestreen. It was a winter's gloaming, the wind icy and shrill, flakes o' snaw pingin' in the faces o' the pair o' young folk as they stood close thegither on the doorstep.

'I can see your grandfather come oot to them. He had a grand presence, a head o' white hair lang and thick, his features as if cuttit in granite stane, and his stature was like to a cedar on Lebanon.

'Father,' says Davvid, 'I have come to ask your forgiveness. This is my young wife. Perhaps I ought to have told you first, but I married her in haste to deliver her from a terrible evil. And I love her.'

'I am thinkin' (Megsy broke off a moment) that the laddie had made it up what he was to say to his faither. Doubtless it had been a great thocht to him. For his faither was, as I tell ye, a hard man, and ever kept baith wife and bairns at a distance, as if he had been a god. But when he came to the last words a kind o' cry brak' frae him, and he sabbit oot the last words, 'I love her, father!'

'I have nothing to say to you, sir,' said his faither in a lofty voice. 'You have chosen your path, and you can walk in it. I do not know this woman, but I am acquainted with her kindred and circumstances. Had you asked my opinion of such a marriage before, I should have given it to you. I have nothing to say when it is too late — nothing now, nor yet ever!'

'Do you mean that you will turn her from your door?' I could hear the Stirling anger rising in Davvid's voice. 'I tell you, once for all, father, this, my young wife, is weak and ill, she cannot go far on such a night. I ask you to be merciful, sir, for her sake and not for mine.'

Then, before the auld man could answer, the laddie's mither cam' rinnin oot. 'I beseech you, let him bring her in — as ye hope for mercy,' she cried, and truth as I am tellin' you, I saw what I am sure nae mortal e'er saw o' Isobel Stirling. She kneeled doon at her husband's feet and fleeched on him to let them bide.

'But like to King Pharaoh of old, he hardened his heart, and would not.

'I tell you, Isobel,' he said, 'that one who can behave as this young man has done, is no son of the house of Arioland. From the hour of his marrying this daughter of the Philistines he was as a stranger to me.'

Then the puir young thing that had been standin' wi' dooncast face on the doorstep, drew away from your faither's airm that had been about her.

'David,' she said, in her pleasant English voice, maist like the far-away croon o' doves in the woods in springtime. 'David,' she says, makin' o' him wi' baith her hands claspit about his airm, 'do not quarrel with your father for my sake. Take me back home again. I am not afraid. I can wait till they are not angry with us for loving one another.'

'But a wild cry broke frae Davvid Stirling, for even as she spake these words she lay back in his arms with the bonny hopefu' smile yet on her face, and swooned away. His mither cam' past her husband

and would have succoured her, but Davvid was far beyond taking help even from the mither that bore him.

'Stand aside, mother,' he cried, haudin' his wife like ane daft wi' jealousy, in the hollow of his airm. 'None belonging to the house of Arioland shall touch her. She is mine, mine alone. I am no son of that man's. I count him as mine enemy. May this dear soul, whom I love, reproach me through all eternity if ever I cross that man's doorstep, touch a penny that is his, break bread or drink drop with him! May my soul be for ever accursed, if either in heaven or hell, meeting him whether on earth or in the abodes of the dead, I recognise him by so much as a look, because of the loving young heart he has broken this day at his own doorstep. Aye, if I were in the Place of Torment, it would be heaven to see him tormented beside me!'

'And without anither word, but this terrible oath, Davvid Stirling turned and gaed down the avenue, carrying his wife in his arms as if she had been a bairn.

'And he kept his oath. He took his wife to a mean common lodging in the village near by. He worked as a labourer, to earn the bite and the crust. He sent back the siller his heart-broken mither saved for him. He passed his ain faither in the street, he in his workin' moleskins, he in broadclaith as became a laird. But nane could hae telled by the quiver o' an eyelid that yin kenned wha the ither was.

'Then, when in the fulness of days, their bairn cam' — that was you, my wee lamb — the first Hester never rallied, but sank slowly — aye smilin', and smilin', so they said. But Davvid wad let nane

near her but the doctor, till yae wild March dawnin' the mistress o' Arioland gaed fair distractit and fled to her only son, leavin' the front door open ahint her. And even sae I fand it in the mornin'.

'She gaed, and wadna be said nay to, and they tell it (though she never did) that even then, if his Hester hadna fleeced wi' him, Davvid Stirling wad hae denied his ain mither at his door.

'The young thing died that day at the gloamin' in Davvid's airms. And the verra folk in the street stood still wi' fear to hear the greetin' o' the strong man.

'Then he lockit the door and convoyed his mither hame to the end o' the avenue o' Arioland, carryin' you in her airms. Farther nor that he wadna gang, but turned him aboot and up the street to the joiner's. There he waled boards to suit him, for he was aye a great laddie for tools, and back hame he gangs wi' the wood on his shooder.

'They heard the noise o' hammerin' a' that nicht. But in the morning a' was still, so that they listened to see whether he was awake. For they thocht that his distraction o' mind had driven him to something they daredna name.

'But there he bode twa days and twa nichts. Neither was blind drawn up, lamp lichtit, nor yet did a pew o' heartsome reek gang up frae that lum tap. Never a bite o' meat did he tak', and they began to speak o' breakin' in the door. But when it cam' to the point there wasna a man in the village that dared face him.

'But on the morn o' the third day as the men gaed oot to their wark they saw Davvid Stirling leadin' a farm cairt. There was a board laid lengthways across it, and ower it, a' covered wi' a white sheet, a coffin

— or something the shape o' a coffin. Davvid was dressed in his best, that he had worn when he was learnin' the surveyin' in Drumfern. And as he gaed through the village street women ran to their windows to see the uncanny sicht and men stood wi' their hats in their hands as Davvid Stirling, the son and heir o' a' Arioland, gaed by to bury his dead.

'But they nicht never hae been there for a' the notice he took o' them. They daredna gang ower near, but, like the folk in the Bible, they followed afar off.

'And when they cam' to the kirk-yaird, they looked aboot for a grave, but saw nane, neither was the grass so muckle as broken. But Davvid Stirling never looked to the richt hand nor to the left, but took his way to the great muckle burial vault o' the Stirlings o' Arioland. Then the nearest folk saw that the iron yett had been opened, for the padlock lay wi' its broken hasp at the side. And the door, too, had been forced.

Then when some o' them gaed near to gie him a hand he never let on he saw them; but he took the coffin ben, aye wrappit in the white sheet. And there he laid the young lass. And there she rests to this day. 'Nay, more, after he had ta'en hame the beast, Davvid gaed back to the tomb, closed the door, took a chisel oot o' his pocket, and in the next place on the monument of the Stirlings he carved as clearly as ony stonemason, the words — mony is the time I hae seen them —

Hester Stirling,

Wife of David Stirling younger of Arioland died
March 30th 18—, aged 17 years.

'Then he gaed awa'. Nae man saw him gang. He

left his hoose as it stood. The rent was paid to the last day he had occupied. But sic furniture as he had wasna touched. The landlord, MacDowall o' the Post-office, got the gear for his pains after a year and a day. Nocht was touched, but or ben, except that a' the young lass's claes and puir trifles o' ornaments had been burnt to ash on the hearth. They fand the buttons o' some bairn-claes and wee bits o' frocks she had been makin' against the time o' her visitation — but nocht else belangin' to the young thing.

'And every yin said that the next Sabbath when auld Maister Stirling gaed to the kirk, there wad be a terrible scene when he read the inscription. For dootless he wad hear tell o't. And some there were that threepit that murder wad be dune ower the head o't yet. For they said that auld Arioland (that's what they caaed your grandfaither) wad hae her lifted and buried in the pauper's portion. And ithers said that if he did, Davvid wad surely come back and shoot his faither. Some out there were that swore that they had seen him at nicht slippin' aboot the kirk-yaird, or lying in the wet snaw on his wife's grave. But I do not ken whether that was true or no.

'So the next Sabbath mornin' there was a great congregation at the kirk, or raither in the kirk-yaird, for nane gaed in that could help it. And they waited for auld Arioland. For he was an elder and never kenned to be absent. Syne he cam' down the street, riding like a great gentleman on his fine horse. He lichtit doon at the kirk yett and, as was his custom, gied the beast to a servant. Then he gaed in and, withoot stopping or noticin' the folk, walked slow and deliberate to the family vault. The door had

been fastened again and the padlock was on. But Davvid's inscription was tresh and clean. He stood facing the monument and read it several times ower without speakin'. And though there were mony that watched his face, they couldna see onything there.

'At last he spoke, slow and deliberate, as if to himsel': 'Yes;' he said, 'it is her right! I deny it not. It is her right!'

'And with that he turned away and went up to his seat in the kirk. For though a hard man and with a heart of stane, your grandfather was just according to his lights.'

'And was my father never seen again till he came home to see granny and me?' asked Hester, whose white face and quivering lip told the tension of the strain. Yet, as is mostly the case, her first question was quite commonplace.

'He was never either seen or heard tell o', my bairn. And when he cam' back he never gaed near the kirk or the grave where, beside the woman of his love, lay the man he had renounced as a faither.'

'I know,' said Hester, positively, 'why he did not go.'

'Why?' said Megsy.

'Because he loved her!'

'Say rather because he hated him!' corrected Megsy; 'ye are a dour queer stock, you Stirlings o' Arioland. Ye keep your grudges far ayont the grave.'

'Then I am sure I am no true Stirling, Megsy,' said Hester, smiling a little; 'I think I could forgive even Ethel Torphichan.'

But she added in her heart, 'Only I do not want her to marry Carus!'

'An' what about your uncle, lassie, that got ye

pitten into the jail?' asked Megsy.

'Oh, I have forgiven him long ago,' answered Hester, lightly.

'And why is it harder for you to forgive Ethel Torphichan than her faither?' But that is the one thing Hester would not tell Megsy.

CHAPTER FORTY TWO

THE GRUMPY ONE TAKES A BATH

Carus Darroch had risen early. He was nominally on a visit to his grandmother at the Lodge of Knockdon, a shooting-box which lies high up among the hills which separate the uplands of Galloway from the rich holms of the valley of the Nid.

Or rather, to be more explicit, that imperious lady had put the trim little house, with its wide moors and scanty fringing firwoods, at the sole disposal of the young man. She herself would sooner have been laid decently to rest in the burial-place of all the Niddisdales than leave London in May to be buried alive at Knockdon.

So in this solitary place Carus dwelt, with only grave James Lammie and his buxom wife to attend upon him.

Carus was supposed to be reading law, and so he was, but a good deal of his time was taken up with another matter, which, however, was not without its bearing upon the first. It was a matter which had occupied him much during the last six months. He was rearguing and investigating the case of Hester Stirling and her uncle. He was pursuing it, as he told himself, solely as an interesting sidelight upon his future profession. It really was Jim Chetwynd's business, so he argued, but then Chetwynd was a very busy man. And so, all without fee or reward, Carus took the matter off his friend's hands — only keeping him posted as to results, and profiting by his carelessly-given advice.

So he threshed it all out a thousand times and in a thousand different ways — why Sir Sylvanus had taken so sudden and violent a prejudice against one so beautiful and innocent, so loveable and winsome. (This part of the argument took some time.) How it was that the necklace with the ruby clasp was apparently of the same set and pattern as those in the possession of Sir Sylvanus, what David Stirling had to do with the matter, why Hester had gone off, nobody knew where — and (this took longer than all the rest put together) where it was that she had gone.

Carus had never spoken to his father since the day of the trial, nor had my Lord Darroch on his side made any communication whatever — certainly not one covering a cheque. If it had not been for his grandmother, Carus would have been in difficulties, though he had left Dover Street and the fleshpots of the West-end immediately, and gone to reside in Lincoln's Inn in a couple of rooms which at Niddisdale Castle they would have considered inferior accommodation for a lady setter of warrantable ancestry. But there was something Bohemian in the nature of the young Master of Darroch, and so, despite the injury to his feelings, which separation from Hester made, Carus was surprised to find how much happier he was in the society of men who devilled for the great leaders of the Bar, and wrote for any paper they could screw a couple of guineas out of, than he had been in Dover Street as the only son of my Lord Darroch of Darroch.

He had written several times to Mr. Borrowman upon business connected with his task and had

received answers in which no mention was made of Hester or of any subject near to his heart. So he could not rest till he had travelled north to Galloway, and early one winter's eve he knocked at the manse door. Anders MacQuaker it was who opened it. The minister was in, Anders was sure of that. More he did not know. He could not tell where Miss Hester was. He could not tell whether Megsy was in the flesh or out of it; but he surmised the former, 'for,' he said, 'I wad hae been sure to hear o't, gin Margaret Tipperlin had been deid!'

Mr. Borrowman smiled a quiet smile as he rose to welcome the young man.

'This comes of answering letters judiciously,' he said to himself.

And when Carus came in, the minister began to talk at once about the openness of the winter, and how far the farmers of the glen were on with their ploughing.

'You are staying at the Castle, I suppose?' he said, though indeed he supposed nothing of the kind, for all the country knew the terms on which Lord Darroch was with his son.

'No,' said Carus, 'I am at the Cross Keys tonight — tomorrow I go over to my grandmother at Niddisdale!'

'Ah,' said the minister, 'I pray you commend me to her Grace, and thank her on my behalf for all her kindness to — one so dear to this house!'

Here was Carus's opportunity, and he leaped upon it.

'Is Miss Hester not at home?' he asked, trying his best to conceal his anxiety.

'She is absent from us at present!' said the

minister, succinctly.

‘May I ask when she will return?’

‘Certainly,’ answered the minister, staring straight into the fire; ‘I am only sorry that I cannot tell you — I do not know.’

‘She — she is well, I hope? You hear from her, do you not?’

‘She was well when last I heard. She does not usually write to me directly,’ said the minister, guardedly.

Carus would dearly have liked to ask for Hester's address, but, being a gentleman, he felt the constraint in the minister's tone, and the implied hint that it was none of his business. So he remained silent, and presently rose to take his leave.

‘When Miss Stirling returns home, you might let Mr. Chetwynd know, or what is the same thing, write me a line to Lincoln's Inn. You know I am a lawyer, now, too, or at least, one in the making.’

‘When Miss Stirling returns I shall undertake that Mr. Chetwynd hears of it,’ said the minister, with some point.

Without another word Carus bade him good night, and as Anthony Borrowman lighted his lamp and bade Anders bring in the frugal supper of porridge and milk, he smiled quietly. ‘I am not at all sure that I have done a good night's work for myself!’ he murmured. ‘The rougher the road is made for young feet, the keener are they to run post-haste along it. But it shall never be said that a Stirling of Arioland threw herself at the head of a Darroch. Though Carus is a good lad, and if he be in earnest — well, these present troubles will make for his good!’

It is not easy to put on record the feelings of Carus Darroch after his courteous repulse at the Manse. He tried Mistress Curlywee, over at the Cross Keys, but that lady, divided between her respect for the future Lord Darroch and her fear of the present one, judiciously said much and told nothing. The young lady had certainly been in the village, but she had not been seeing her for some weeks—or it might be more. And she could not 'chaarge her memory' with ever hearing where she had gone. She thought back to some of her mother's people — play-actors, she thought they were. This last little feminine tag of spite Mistress Curlywee could not deny herself. Lords would be lords, no doubt. And as the auld cock craws, the young one learns. Moreover, it was an indubitable fact that cat will after kind, but — it was not a seemly thing that the matter should be brought into her decent law-abiding house. She was a woman with daughters, and bound to be careful.

So, still none the wiser, Carus went forth, as it were, seeking whom he might devour. It says something for the equitable balancing of earthly affairs that Grumphy Guddlestane was abroad that night. His was not a subtle intellect and when he got a subject to talk about he made the most of it. At a certain stage of his liquor each night it was Grumphy's wont to relate his adventure at the old castle to a band of sycophants. This occurred regularly between the eighth and ninth tumblers, if Grumphy got so far. This night, however, Grumphy had been turned out of the Cross Keys by Mistress Curlywee for creating a disturbance, and he was reduced to standing at the Cross and re-telling the

story to the loafers congregated there. He was in the full swing of oaths and revilings when Carus strolled by, his hands in his pockets. He thought at first that it was some one making a political harangue. But a name he heard caused him to stop dead. There is no need to reproduce Grumphy's language. Besides, it is impossible. Only those who know Grumphy can imagine it. It is sufficient to say that every evil word in Grumphy's limited vocabulary, every foul insinuation that would occur to a mind so grovelling was reproduced, reiterated, and enlarged upon with a kind of drunken triumph which roused Carus to wild rage.

'An' says I to her, 'Oot o' this wi' ye, ye besom — an' if ever I see your face on this side o' my mairch dyke — I'll...'

At this point Carus elbowed his way through the little laughing throng and stood before Grumphy Guddlestane. Grumphy did not know his master's son, for Carus had quarrelled with his father before Grumphy's time.

'Wha are ye?' said Grumphy. 'Anither o' thae play-actors' boys, that's comed lookin' for the bonny lass that stole the necklace!'

Carus did not stop to argue.

'This is the way with lying blackguards!' he cried, and the next moment he had Grumphy by the collar of his coat behind, and the tale-teller was being punted down the street of the Clachan of St. John by that very practical stern-propeller, a double-soled hobnailed shooting boot. At first Grumphy tried to turn round so as to come to grips, but the athletic leg which was attached to the boot kicked all the harder, and Grumphy could only go forward with

increased speed.

Now at the foot of the village street there is a sharp turn of the road and a low dry stone dyke. Immediately on the other side of this lie the byres and stables of the farm of Braehead. Just over the wall (the sanitary authorities have shifted it now) was the 'midden' of the farm-yard, at this season a black island of fertiliser in the midst of a shallow sea of liquid top-dressing.

Grumphy was travelling fast, the propeller in full action behind. Neither took much heed to their going, and the consequence was that Grumphy tripped over the low wall at the moment when Carus, losing hold of his collar, put all his energy into a final effort. The wall crumbled, Grumphy pitched forward bodily. There was a bat-like figure spread for an instant dark against the moonlight—a splash—and as a dripping scarecrow emerged amid the endless laughter of his late audience, Hester Stirling was avenged upon her adversary.

'I'll hae the law on him,' said Grumphy, spluttering, 'I'll find oot his name and kill him'

'Faith, an' I can tell ye that,' said a sharp boy who had seen with delight the whole affray, 'do ye no ken your ain young master—Carus, Lord Darroch's son and heir. Son and heir,' he repeated, tauntingly, 'hae the law on him, Grumphy, faith, I wad that. It is worth your while.'

'Lord hae mercy,' muttered Grumphy, 'what a mistak' I hae made. I'll get my leave as sure as fate. And a suit o' best claes spoilt, that cost me twa guid pound notes in Tobermory!'

So, amid cries of 'Keep weel to loo'ard, Grumphy! Faith, ye hae been seein' your auld mither this

nicht! Gang and bury yoursel', Grumphy, it's your only chance!' together with other efforts of rustic wit, Grumphy took his dripping and circuitous way homewards towards the cottage which had once been Dickson's, at the great gate of Darroch Castle.

In his room at the Cross Keys Carus inspected his right boot.

'I wish I had had on my Alpine ones,' he murmured regretfully, 'these have only tacketts on the sole— none along the edges.'

But, curiously enough, Grumphy, steeping his best two-pound Tobermory suit in a tub, and throwing his red silk tie out of the window, did not complain of the same thing. All he said was, 'What a mistak' I hae made — O Lord! what a mistak' I made!'

So may there always be tacketty boots at hand — Alpine, with plated toes, to enter into rearward judgment with the Grumphies of the land. It is the only argument they understand.

CHAPTER FORTY THREE

DIAN'S KISS

To the broad farce of the village street succeeds the idyll of Knockdon. It was May, and the 24th of the month. Sometimes in a bitter season the breezes blow from the Arctic even then with a vigour and incision truly Polar. But this had been a genial year. From the middle of March there had only been enough showers to water the earth and cause the grain to grow for the food of man and beast. Even these had fallen mostly in the night.

The hawthorn, which in Scotland is mostly June-bloom instead of May-bloom, was fully out by the middle of its own proper month. Even high up on Knockdon the little buds of the heather began to show, tiny tips of viridian green, of a colour keen as the leaves of turnips after the first frost. It was a fine morning, and Carus Darroch was almost happy. After all, it was not possible that in so small a world he could finally and altogether lose sight of Hester. The Providence which had brought them together would keep their love-tale from ravelling out like a knotless thread. So he kept repeating to himself. Providence has its work cut out for it in attending to the importunities of lovers.

'Never mind about others, give us the desire of our hearts!' is their modest prayer.

But Carus felt that even such high interest needed supplementing. He left no stone unturned to find Hester. He had attached Dickson to his faction upon his last visit to the Clachan — the one that

Grumphy Guddlestane had such cause to remember — by the simple process of kissing his wife. Good mistress Dickson, who had kissed Carus when she could ever since his babyhood, was enchanted that 'The Master' should not forget old times, and that after the salute he should ask for one of her bannocks, which, having received, he graciously sat and ate in her back-shop like any common person.

The Dicksons had set up a little place of business in the main street of the Clachan and were doing very well.

But even Mistress Dickson could discover nothing of the whereabouts of Hester. For a Scottish village is a strangely circumscribed place. Within a radius, varying according to the width of ploughed land about it, everything is known with photographic particularity. A man cannot get shaved without its being canvassed, and no words can express the minuteness with which the characters of women are studied. But once out of the radius of ploughmen who come to the smiddy to get their coulter sharpened, or their horses shod, out of the ken of the herds who descend whistling upon the village shops for flour and baking soda, off the main roads by which the farmers and their spouses drive to the market, you are in a region about which nothing whatever is known or cared. A river may divide two parishes as completely in interests and acquaintance, in bargain-striking and love-making, as if it constituted the boundary of two hostile countries. A mountain range or a stretch of wild heathery hills is a watershed of news not to be passed over. So it came to pass that, though she dwelt within a dozen miles of the Kirk Yett, St.

John's Clachan knew no more what had become of Hester than did the busy world of Hyde Park and Empress Gate.

So that one May morning — the 24th, as we have said — when Carus strode over a little hill all clad in the young green of the bracken, and saw Hester sitting on a stone twenty yards beneath him with a book in her hand, he stopped as if he had been shot.

The girl did not move. She was looking absent-mindedly over the open volume in her lap towards the distant hills behind which lay St. John's and Darroch. Her chin was sunk prettily in the hollow between her thumb and first finger. The teasing wind had played such havoc with her hair, that, feeling quite safe in that desert place, she had taken out the hairpins in the swift, mechanical way peculiar to women, and now, rejoicing in their liberty, the plenteous locks were straying loosely over her shoulders and falling almost to her waist.

For a long minute Carus stood still and drank in the gladness of the unexpected. The day seemed suddenly changed to something infinitely airier and sweeter. The breeze that stirred Hester's hair came to him like a draft of some rare vintage cooled with snow.

Carus took a step forward. The sun was still behind him, for it was early and the shadows long.

Something dark passed Hester vaguely, too large to be the sweeping wing of a moor-bird stooping in clamorous defence of its young, too dense for the shadow of a cloud floating in the upper air. She looked once over her shoulder and instantly sprang to her feet, letting her book drop unheeded on the heather. Like a startled fawn she stood a moment

half defiantly at bay, half poised for flight, while the red tide of a delicious shame flooded her cheek and neck. She had hidden herself well — but not too well. It had been for the best, as Megsy said, but oh, it was so sweet to be found again. She did not mind the danger, not a bit.

‘Hester!’

He came nearer, holding out both his hands, a look of boyish eagerness on his face, all his soul bent to one point.

She did not speak, but, as if mesmerised, slowly extended her right hand. Then, as if obeying a sudden impulse, she gave him the other swiftly.

‘Hester!’

He was nearer to her now and a sense of blessed danger, a delicious thrill of the quite unknown came over the girl, making her tremble from head to foot. Carus had had six months to think things over. He knew his own mind. He was not to be put off the moving speeches he had prepared. Many a time his eyes had failed from his law-book, so that the ‘brevier’ of the notes pined before his eyes, because he had seen that beautiful face looking at him even as it was doing now.

But for all that, now he knew not quite how to begin— nor where. For in six months on the moors, what with the hard, clear-ringing walks of winter, the trudges through the fresh spring rains, the quiet untroubled warmth of summer days, the country food and upland air, this was a new maiden who now stood before him— a beautiful girl with rippling hair falling to her shoulders, a woman crowned with the glory of her first youth. Hester's lips were red and tremulous. Carus remembered that they had

been rather palish pink when he used to look at them, and wish — well, what he wished ten-thousand-fold now. There was a brilliancy, a liquid sweetness in her eyes that fairly stupefied him. Where were his clever speeches now — the thoughts that burned, the words that fitly clothed the expression of his devotion? It was all to arise so naturally. He would not for the world take her by surprise. Hester Stirling was a fawn easily frightened. He would deal with her so delicately — so tactfully, that— And so forth even unto Amen!

‘Hester, I love you!’

He was gripping her wrists hard, having unconsciously shifted his hold. And Hester — what of her? For she also had had six months in which to make her resolves. And many admirable ones she had made. If ever he should seek her, find her, speak to her of love, as he had looked it the night of the ball, the morning at the station, she would remind him of his great position, of the anger of his father, of the disgrace she would inevitably bring upon him. She would tell him that she would be as bad as her enemies thought her if she permitted herself to listen to him for a moment.

‘Hester, I love you—I adore you — I cannot live without you!’

The words do not vary very much, because the thing does not vary very much either.

And Hester, the girl of the hundred brave resolutions, felt herself slipping away. These brave forbiddings would not come to call. These resolute determinations became momentarily less resolute.

She wondered what it would feel like, just for an instant. She saw it in his eyes. She felt his arm

about her a full half-dozen seconds before it went there, apparently of its own accord. She was just looking up at him with eyes of reproach for the purpose of telling him he must not, when a tremendous thing happened. Oh yes, she had been kissed before. Every girl who is worth anything has been. But this, that sent the world whirling and broke the firmament into a dozen pieces! Surely this could not be a kiss, only a kiss. Is there no other word for it? How poor and inefficient is this English language.

Yet that was all it was, and that kiss broke the crystal sphere of the old world of Hester Stirling and Carus Darroch, and, as through a smashed shop-front, they stepped out into a new world hand in hand,

‘Oh, Carus, we ought not, we must not! It is surely wrong!’

Like a fluttered bird, Hester protested, neither coquettish nor angry, but awed by the very wonder of it. The thing was so sweet that it must be wrong. She was so happy that it must be wicked. Hitherto, Hester had been either quietly happy or acutely miserable. But this that came altering in a moment the standards of a lifetime, changing the future, emptying and making futile the past. Surely all this could not spring from one kiss given and taken.

No, little Hester, no — but from a kiss returned. Not to give, not even to receive; to give back — that is what in the consecration of love is most blessed. That is what shatters an old world and creates a new. And those who are cool enough to reason about the matter may scoff, but they who know, know.

They walked on a little up the hill. Hester not

protesting any more, nor Carus answering. But their hands were clasped in each other's. At last beneath a 'gairy' of rock, with the green ivy pouring out of every crevice and crawling laboriously up the perpendicular face, they paused. Then, as with one mind, they sat down. There was something strong and triumphant in the carriage of the young man. Yet when he spoke it was pleadingly enough.

'Hester, tell me that you love me!'

She turned her eyes shyly up to him for the least fraction of a second. Then as swiftly they averted themselves.

'Oh, you do not need telling,' she said, pitifully, 'you know!'

'But I want to hear you say it,' said the young man, after his kind.

'I have done wrong. I have let you kiss me!'

Again the fallacy.

'But what is the wrong in that,' cried Carus, so impetuously that a black-faced ewe that had been standing near, shied and bolted up the screes with a rattle of loose stones, 'if we love one another? I have told you — now tell me!'

She looked up at him a moment, gathering courage. Then she spoke.

'I do love you!' she said.

But even so the young man was not content. There are some facts which are the better for being restated from several points of view. So it may be recorded among these remarkable and unprecedented occurrences, that before his curiosity was satisfied Hester had to assure Carus that she loved him better than all the world, better than Megsy, better than Revvie. For love is a retail trader

and needs to be minutely satisfied.

Then, being of an enthusiastic and yet most practical turn of mind, Carus talked of ways and means while Hester listened, her mind within her all the while urging her to disbelieve in the reality of the words she heard. It seemed that she must be dreaming, and that she would wake up presently in the dull garret at Empress Gate or in her own little bed at the Manse. But there was, after all, something solid and comforting in Carus's arm about her waist, and her head nestled in the place arranged by an all-wise Nature for similar contingencies occurring at intervals throughout the ages.

'We shall be very poor, Hester,' Carus was saying, 'but I know I can make enough by writing for us to live on. Trowbridge said the other day that it was a pity I was going to be a lord, when I was born to be a journalist. And I only need you to make me work really hard. Then there is grandmother Niddisdale. She told me she would disinherit me if I didn't marry you.'

'Did she say that?' said Hester, looking up for the first time and smiling; 'I am glad!'

Consequently Carus was glad too, and wasted some valuable time in proving it.

'Not that I mean to depend on her, dear old soul,' said Carus, tenderly; 'but if I am to have her money when she is dead, I don't think she is the sort to let us starve when she is living. Besides, she loves you, and I am sure she is very fond of me!'

'She has had Vic with her for six months — she will be fonder of her than of me now!' said Hester, somewhat mournfully.

'Vic, indeed!' flashed Carus in high fume; 'Vic is well and very well — but she never was — never could, never would — no, not if she lived to be as old as Methuselah. I had a letter from Kipford the other day,' Carus went on more slowly and thoughtfully, 'He seems to be seeing a lot of them just now out there! I wonder if his father knows!'

Hester instantly sat erect. There is no scent so keen as that of a girl, happy in the freshness of her own love happiness, on the trail of the love-story of a friend.

'You don't mean?'

'No, I don't,' said Carus, smiling at her eager face and the eyes suffused and brilliant. 'But all the same it is deuced odd! Kippie used so to hate what he called 'tagging round with a lot of women.'

'Ah, that is what you will say about me in a little!'

'You are not a lot of women — you are the woman — the Only One!'

So the great day passed on overhead, only the blue vault standing still — as it were, growing paler and hotter, till their shadows, when at last they came forth, were just little pools of indigo on the green-lichened rocks of the high Rig of Bennanbrack.

'Is it not wrong of you to stay so long with me — are they not expecting you at Knockdon where you are staying?'

'Yes,' he laughed, gladly and lightly (it was all over now, the bar crossed, the twin lights of the port shining peacefully on either hand), 'yes, James Lammie and Robina his wife will be expecting me. Also my breakfast will be expecting me. I rose early and came away without it.'

'What,' cried Hester, seizing him by the wrist and almost dragging him forward, 'you do not mean to tell me that you have had nothing to eat all this morning! And me keeping you here.'

'Don't pity me,' said Caius. 'I forgot all about it. I do not feel as if I would ever be hungry again!'

Which shows that Carus either spake in his haste or had had very little experience indeed.

'Oh, come away quick,' cried Hester, all the mother that lurks under the sweethearting of every woman up in arms within her. 'Come away, and Megsy will find you something to eat till she gets the dinner ready!'

So in this practical mood they walked towards the comfortable thatched roof of Buss-o'-Bield hand in hand.

Now it chanced that Megsy had gone to the door with an iron 'pingle' in her hand when she saw this strange spectacle — Hester and Carus walking over the heather, head bent, foot heedless, wrapped in each other.

Megsy let the 'pingle' fall with a clatter on the pebbles and went within with a sharp pain at her heart.

'Megsy, Megsy,' she said, 'ye hae lost your bairn for ever and a day. She is her mither's ain dochter. Frae this day forth she will never cast mair nor a kindly thocht ower her shooder to puir auld Margaret Tipperlin that happit the baby clouts about her, and wha's heart has yearned ower her ever since, nicht and day, dark or shine. Oh, Megsy, Megsy, verily ye are a weedow and a woman without bairns this day.'

And with her apron to her eyes she lamented

bitterly, because that for which she had besought the Lord with tears in the night watches had been given to her.

For the cup of the Lord's brewing is ever a mixed chalice when he comes to set it to our lips.

CHAPTER FORTY FOUR

LOVE'S GOLDEN WEATHER

And then what days were these that ensued! Never had such a glorious summer been seen in Galloway. Blue day succeeded blue day as the sun of May became the sun of June and the fresh clarity of the mid-year merged into the great white-flaming July heats.

Day by day Carus came over from Knockdon, Jamie Lammie and his wife, meantime, greatly marvelling.

'Whiles he wull tak' a fishin'-rod in his hand,' said the latter, 'but feint a troot does he ever fetch hame. And it's my belief that maistly it is never waggled ower a burn. I put up a bit piece for him, but as often as no he either forgets to lift it off the hall table, or if it gets the length o' his pooch, it is there when I brush his coat the neist morning!'

'Do you no mind, Robina,' said her husband, 'when I was coortin' you, hoo I used to forget to tak' my porridge.'

'Haud your tongue, man, and think shame to even yoursel' to her Grace's grandson, or me to the braw leddy that he'll mairry when his time comes, bless his bonny young face. Ye hae neither sense nor mense, Jamie Lammie, gang about your wark, ye sumph, or if sae be that ye are lookin' for a job, peel me the pitaties!'

It was well for their secret that James Lammie was naturally incurious as well as a little lazy and that he preferred wheeling his barrow of last year's

leaves along the narrow garden walks, or pottering about the boat-house down by the loch, to the observation of the facts of nature upon the mountain tops.

Yet the whaups knew, and in a week or two scarcely put themselves about to rise from their nests among the yellow bent, as Hester and Carus came by. These were no egg-lifters, they confided to each other, as some were who ought to have known better. If, indeed, in their curious linked manner of walking they came upon a nest with beautifully mottled brown and amber eggs, they might stand a little and look down at it. But good Mistress Curlew knew very well that they would pass on again and in a moment forget all about it.

Every morning by nine of the clock Carus was expected to appear on the sky-line to the east, eagerly watched for and instantly observed by Hester, Megsy feigning inattention, or even a certain boredom according to her mood.

'He'll surely never come the day — he'll hae some o' his graund freends wi' him to bear him company at the fishin' or maybe at the shootin'.' (It was June.) 'Surely we'll get a day to oorsel's the day!'

Then Hester would laugh and run to Megsy with a quick hug, crying, 'You silly old jealous Megsy, of course he will come. Why, he promised me!'

And of course that settled it.

Then from the door Hester would spy him black against the sky, and presently he would begin to play hide-and-seek among the scattered granite blocks on the High Rig — some with their noses in the air like Polar bears sniffing the breeze, others like natural menhirs raising warning fingers to the

skies. Hester's eyes never wholly lost track of Carus. She used instinctively to know where he would appear next, and many a time the traveller himself would pitch abruptly forward headlong over a stone as he watched for that flash of white kerchief when the slight summer-gowned figure in the doorway raised its arm.

By the time he had reached the scaur of the burnside Hester's breath began to come a little faster.

'I don't think I shall go and meet him this morning,' she thought, 'perhaps it is better that I should not.'

When she looked again, lo! he was crossing the meadow.

'But he will be so disappointed if I don't,' relented Hester, and with a hasty glance in the glass for that universal purpose of woman's — 'to see that I am all right,' she ran down the little path, clicked the tiny green gate behind her, and stood under the alders, where the shade is, to wait her lover.

And to Carus coming across the meadow, amid the delicate scents of cowslip and Mayflower, it seemed that life had never been worth living before. Day by day he found her more beautiful. And she was more beautiful too. For as genial sun and gracious rain cause a flower generous by nature, but starved of light and moisture, to bud and bourgeon and become a thing more glorious than itself, so in the sunshine of a great love and the inner glow of heart-happiness, Hester Stirling really did grow in beauty every day.

Carus advanced towards her, a look of eager happiness in his eyes. As he came he snatched his

cap from his head with a boyish gesture. He saw a tall maiden in a flowered summer dress stand waiting, bareheaded, a knot of pale blue ribbon at her throat. Then he joked at her, taking her in from the topmost curl of her dainty head to the little slipper that peeped out from beneath the sprigged amber gown.

And like that other lover his heart sang, 'There is none like her, none.'

But as he came nearer he saw only her face, as she turned her head a little back to gaze up at him. But that which he saw there is the thing best worth seeing on earth — the look of the perfect love which casteth out fear on the face of a woman. Then to the gracious smile of happiness succeeded the yet more gracious suffusion of tears, maidenly reserve, girlish pride, womanly surrender, and behind all the delicate beginnings of that wifely companionship, the solicitude semi-maternal which is the best ultimate and issue of the love of man and woman.

And to Carus her face shone like the face of an angel. He did not analyse these mysteries or even name them to himself. Instead he wanted to kiss her good morning — a much more sensible thing. He troubled himself about nought else. Only the tale-teller, sitting afar and alone, has time or care to separate trait from trait in a loving woman's face.

For a moment Carus held her a little off at arm's length, his hands upon her shoulders. And as he felt her throb beneath him in all the radiance of perfect youth and perfect love, he cried out, 'Oh, you are more beautiful than you were yesterday!'

And as the gladness sprang responsive from her eyes and her lips pouted to answer him, he stooped

and gathered her to him so close that speech had perforce to give place to little dovelike murmurs, and it seemed to Hester that she floated with shut eyes upon a great upholding ocean — a mother-sea in whose arms she and her love were for ever alone and for ever safe.

When Hester came to herself she would find herself walking up the narrow path with Carus a little in front of her, hastening to greet Megsy with a kiss, half fond and half propitiatory. She followed blushful and deliciously shamed that Megsy should know why she had gone to meet him. Yet she told Megsy every night how she loved him, and Megsy sighed as she thought how entirely this heart-eager, love-hungry Hester was venturing her all upon the faith of a man.

'She is her mother's daughter — praise the Lord!' said the old woman, 'a lass like that gies awa' her heart a' in yae payment, and if she loses, God help her, she is for ever bankrupt and dyvour!'

Then, as she looked at Carus, Megsy would add, deep in her soul, 'But for a' that the lad is an honest lad — the Lord keep him sae, for in his hands alone are the hearts o' men!'

After this Carus sat him down on the oaken chair at the corner of the bakeboard and talked joyously, stealing scraps of Megsy's cakes, till, as in former days at Arioland, she threatened to chastise him with the rolling pin if he nipped any more pieces out, spoiling the symmetry of her shapely farles.

And ever as Hester went about the clean-scoured kitchen, a white apron girding her — the most adorably dainty piece of housewifery coquetry Carus had ever seen — behind Megsy's unconscious back

eye continually encountered eye, spoke, and was answered. And upon Hester's cheek the rose flushed and paled responsive. It was all very wonderful to the young man, who had never before known love and who had had strength of mind enough not to waste himself on love's counterfeit, to find himself suddenly first, and presently everything in a sweet and girlish heart. Then the very plain-song intimacies of the house, the lifting of common burdens thanked by quickly averted glance, half accidental touches of hand on hand as they carried the brimming can of water from the well beneath the garden hedge, the light in his love's eyes shining and dimming, in golden sparklings even as the sun glimmered on the swaying crystal floor of the pail—these, and many things else, impressed themselves on his memory with the matchless clearness of a first experience.

How gladly they sat down to the midday meal, Megsy bustling about to serve them. Hester indeed regularly laid a place for her, but as regularly Megsy would lift her plate and carry it to the window sill, saying, 'It is no for a puir auld wife like me to be sittin' doon wi' a son o' my Lord Darroch, and the last o' the true stock o' the auld Stirlin's o' Arioland — fegs, set me up, I may no ken muckle, but I ken better nor that.'

But between the three, thus divided by the old Galloway woman's innate sense of 'gentrice,' the talk and jest passed free and joyous. They laughed at anything, or when there was nothing to laugh at, they laughed at that. Anders came twice a week and brought them provisions — often a fishing of trout, or sometimes a boiled ham. Revvie came when he

could — though as yet Carus and he had never met. And whenever he came he would have a dozen of eggs in a handkerchief, or six pots of jam set in a basket a-swing over his arm from Megsy's private cupboard.

In the afternoon Hester and Carus went out again to the moor, having first helped Megsy to wash up the dishes, for which purpose Carus was (quite insufficiently) girt about with an apron of Hester's which somehow seemed to carry with it a subtle fragrance of girlhood and youth. With laughter and scolding the work was done. Pretty wet fingers were lifted against threatened encroachments. Arched eyebrows frowned at stupidity, or red lips smiled all too alluringly upon honest application to business. With a new delight Carus found himself carrying piles of plates, conscientiously rubbed clean, to wall presses which, being opened, sent forth a pleasant smell of oatcakes and last year's honey. He hardly believed he could be the same man who a week ago had lounged about with a law book, listless and sad, under the spindling fir-trees of the Knockdon plantations.

After that they set out with glad anticipation in their eyes. The sky was brighter above, the heather greener (not yet red) underfoot, the birds most heartsofely clamorous as they swooped in comet-like courses about their heads — on every side of them love, and mating, and glad weather.

Megsy watched them go a little wistfully. Sometimes she accompanied them as far as the gate, one step through which brought them from Anders' carefully cultivated garden out upon the beleaguering heather. They bade her farewell as if

they had been about to cross the seven seas (nor by their protestations would they greatly have cared if they had, so be that they were together. So sublimely selfish is young love!).

And Megsy, smiling gravely upon them, would wave a hand and call her last warning, 'See that ye fall not out by the way!'

I love to dwell a little among these high and golden days. They speed so fast when we have them. The story may not progress very swiftly at such points, but it is always allowable to skip. And for Hester and Carus there had been much of pain and darkness in both their lives, and long seasons when the heavens seemed as brass and the earth iron. Let them wander, then, awhile, hand in warm hand, thoughts and emotions passing and repassing in sympathetic currents, alternating between their hearts without the need of the wires of spoken word.

They did not wander far from the cot of Buss-o'-Bield — wherein, perhaps, was their safety from questing herds and Jamie Lammie. They generally went directly to 'their place' as they both called it, a nook beneath the cliff where a chance granite boulder afforded them shelter and a dry seat, where the ivied cliff made a cushioned back to their hard sofa, and where a little streamlet, leaping into a miniature pool, shed abroad a pleasant noise of falling waters and drowned their whispered love-talk — unless, which after all was possible, speaking lips and hearing ear were very close together indeed.

Here they talked of all things, talked and talked with lapses and occasions, hourlong whisperings of utmost content and rapturous discoveries of new similarities in liking, and undreamed-of unities of

taste. Once a rabbit ran almost to their feet, and then because they sat so still, began to nibble at the short grass by the waterfall, watching them all the while out of one mild and furtive eye.

'Carus,' the voice of Hester was speaking very low and excellent, 'I think you ought to go and tell Lady Niddisdale. She was very kind to me.'

'Dearest, so I shall — so I must. All in good time — but not yet. Why, I have just found you. I have had you such a short time. I cannot give you up yet!'

'But it is not giving me up, Carus.' Hester's voice was a little stronger now. 'Listen, dear — you will come back. You will have to come back very soon, for I cannot do without you — now!'

'It will never be quite the same again,' said Carus, prescient beyond his years.

'It will be sweeter!' said Hester, also prophetic.

'Yes, but not the same! It can never be the first time again. Why, it seems only a day since I saw you sitting by the side of the burn with your hair blowing in the wind.'

'That was very bad of me — I don't know how I could ever look you in the face!'

'Well, I can imagine worse things — and better!' said Carus, 'but tell me, dear, what you were thinking about as you sat there!'

And so, of course, Hester told him, and they told it each other again and yet again. Then Carus retailed stories of travel and of college which always came to an untimely end when Hester said, with a little sigh, 'Now tell me about the very first time that you knew you loved me— tell me all about it, from the beginning, and don't skip.'

And after awhile Hester would sigh again, and

Carus stay his narration long enough to say, 'Why do you sigh, little woman?'

And to this as regularly Hester would answer, 'Because it is getting so nearly done!'

But when at last the westering unresting sun, jealous that, all companionless, he must traverse the blue arch, hunted them out of their shady nook, Hester would rise and say, 'We must go home—Megsy will be waiting for us!'

'Just a moment—just one!' Carus would plead, detaining her.

'For shame, cormorant!' Hester would answer, reproachfully, 'you ought to be ashamed.'

Yet, nevertheless she would relent, treachery being within the gates, and yet awhile they would tarry as the sun whirled horizonwards, more red and angry than before.

Then, at last, very soberly and with a wondrous stillness of happiness in their hearts, Carus and Hester would walk homeward in the deep hush of late afternoon, the sheep bleating on the far slopes and the nesting cries of the moor-birds sounding wistful and far off, like plaintive music heard in dreams. At this time they would not speak much. They would not even look at each other, till, with a waft of peat smoke or sharper tang of burning birch, they came suddenly upon Megsy and the house of Anders in the lee of Bennanbrack.

'Miss Megsy,' Hester would say, an unconscious tell-tale. 'Have you been very lonely? Do you know, Megsy, I think he is nicer than ever. And, oh, he thinks I am prettier, and I love him far better than I did yesterday!'

'God keep it ever thus atween ye, bairns!' Megsy

would answer as she turned within to fill the tea out of the little brown caddy into the earthenware pot. And a tear glistened in her eye unseen for that other Hester, who also had staked her all on love, and had gotten so little happiness out of it.

'The Lord gie to this my bairn the better part!' murmured Megsy.

CHAPTER FORTY FIVE

WAYS AND MEANS

As slowly as the long ages of Asunder lag toward the brief day of Together, even so swiftly posted the day of Together toward the bitter night of Parting.

Meanwhile the summer was high on the earth, and after the nesting gladness the birds suddenly fell silent, as is their custom. Only the lambs' bleating was heard on the hills, or, more rarely, the deeper mother cry of the ewe as she called her own to her. And Hester clapped hands to see the young white thing run skipping to her dam and bunch itself lustily against her full udder.

Carus made many plans sitting at the feet of his love. She let her hand stray among his curls as he gazed out over those crimsoning leagues of heatherlands. She liked to watch him thus. He looked so masterful, as if he could assuredly bring to pass that thing which was in his heart. And indeed it is the men whose faces unconsciously firm themselves in the front of overfrowning opposition, who reckon difficulties only as things to be overcome, that in the end go far. And Carus, with this love in his heart, was one of these.

Some day, no doubt (so he meditated half to Hester, half to clear his own thoughts), he would succeed his father and be a lord. But he had no intention of shutting out certain honest ways of earning a livelihood on that account. He would be a lawyer if he had the brains — he was already making a good deal one way and another by his

writing. The editor of *The Trafalgar Square*, that most discriminating magazine, had accepted his last short story and written him a request for more.

But in a week (in spite of her brave advice Hester sighed involuntarily); yes, so soon my Lady Niddisdale would be at the Castle, and thither he must go and lay the whole case before her. He did not think of communicating with his father. He had resolved to accept nothing further from him. If he could — if there were enough of manhood in him — he would make Hester's way and his own. If his grandmother proved kind, so much the better. Who were they that they should decline the gifts of the gods? Besides which, if they did not take the money, Kipford would soon make ducks and drakes of it—and more ducks than drakes, added Carus, somewhat ungenerously.

But for all that he did not intend to be a useless man, or dependent upon any one. And Hester would be his little helper. They could be happy, even if they had but two rooms and a kitchen, as at the Buss-o'-Bield.

'Oh, that would be lovely!' cried Hester, with a little gasp at the thought. The sense of being left alone with Carus for always had not come home to her so strongly before. The thought made her heart quake within her with most delicious fear.

'Two rooms and a kitchen!' she murmured over and over to herself— 'Oh!'

The signification of the closing ejaculation is obscure. The tale-teller can only report the facts.

Carus felt that the time had come to strike the glowing iron. But Hester's fingers gripped his curls quite recklessly, and Carus was made to understand

things that are often hid from the wise and prudent.

'And, Hester dear.' He tried to twist about, but the hand in his locks held him him. 'I want to speak to you.'

'I hear.'

'But let me speak to you.'

'Speak on.'

'It isn't fair, Hester. I can't say what I've got to say sitting this way. But (hypocritically), after all, it doesn't matter, if you don't care to hear. What a lot of lambs there are on the Rig today — the herds must have been 'gathering ' somewhere!'

'Bother the herds,' cried Hester, 'don't tease me, Carus. Tell me what you were going to say — quick!'

'But you don't want to hear!'

'Yes, I do — there!'

Carus, freed from restraint, turned about without rising from the short bull's fell heather. He was kneeling before Hester now.

'Dear,' he said, softly, 'if you are willing to risk it, why should we wait? I can work, and it will be good for me as well to have to do it. Marry me this autumn, and we will fight it out together in London during the winter. Are you afraid, little Hester?'

'Oh no, I am not afraid!'

'Must I go away till you learn to love me better?'

(Cruel Carus, well he knew.)

Hester gave vent to a little gasping sob, and clutched him instinctively about the neck.

'Oh, I cannot live without you now, Carus! You have made me love you so! I will do as you say.'

'When I say?'

'Oh, Carus, let me ask Revvie first — I could not, unless Revvie wished it. He has done so much for

me, and he is so lonely!’

‘And will you do it when I say, if Revvie is willing?’

‘I will!’ said Hester, with a little gasp of determination like a timid bather at the cold plunge.

‘Signed, sealed — and delivered!’ cried Carus, kissing her triumphantly.

CHAPTER FORTY SIX

A MASTERFUL YOUNG MAN

The Reverend Anthony Borrowman sat in his study with the window open, though it was after nine o'clock in the evening. It had been a splendid summer's day, and the last red of the sunset still lingered along the rims of the hills of Kells. A soft mist lay faintly purple along the river, darkening rapidly into indigo where it trespassed on the gloomy fringes of the Darroch woods. To him enter an impetuous young man who had ridden fast and far.

'Why, Carus Darroch,' cried the minister, dropping his book, 'what do you here? I thought you were in London, getting ready to be my Lord Chancellor!'

'I am on my way to London — I have come over from Knockdon on purpose to see you!' cried this impetuous young man.

'To see me,' repeated the minister, and then as if the place had struck him, 'from Knockdon?'

'Yes,' said Carus, 'I walked into Moniaive and got a horse of sorts. Then I rode over to see you. I am going to marry Hester, and I have come to ask you if I may!'

'Carus,' said Mr. Borrowman, holding up his hands in deprecation, 'how often am I to tell you not to include two irreconcilable propositions in one sentence. If you are going to marry Hester (as without any deduction of any kind you declare it your intention to do), then it is not the least use coming over to me to ask my permission, even if I

had a right to withhold it or to give such permission.'

'Oh yes,' cried Carus, upon whom this finesse was thrown away, 'it does matter — to Hester. She says she will not marry me unless you give your consent.'

'Your propositions are more irreconcilable than ever,' said Mr. Borrowman, gravely. 'Sit down, Carus, and I will prove it to you. In the first place.'

'But may I?' said this straightforward young man, who had not ridden all the way from Moniaive, after having said 'Goodnight' to Hester on the Rig of Bennanbrack, merely to receive a lesson in logic.

'May you what?'

'May I marry Hester?'

'I presume you have already asked your father's permission and obtained it?'

'No,' said Carus, unabashed. 'You see, sir, it is not the least use doing that. He ordered me out of his sight the last time I spoke to him. He will not give me anything to live on.'

'So you bethought yourself of taking to you another fool, a pretty one, to help you to live on nothing!' cried the minister, clapping his hands, 'and you said to yourself, 'No use asking my father's consent — must ask somebody's — let's ask old Anthony Borrowman's!''

'Oh, no, sir,' said Carus, eagerly, manfully abjuring dialectic and sticking to his point, 'I did not want to ask you — it was Hester.'

The minister's eyes softened and the humour died out.

'It was like her,' he said, quietly, 'the bird that came into the old manse in the bitter winter weather must surely fly away with a mate in the spring!'

'Then I may —?' said Carus. He knew what he wanted, this young man, which in life is the next thing to getting it.

'I have seen it coming,' said the minister, getting up, 'I saw it when I came to London, when I knew that she had first thought of you, when that ...'

'Never mind about him now, sir,' said Carus, 'just tell me that you are pleased — and will marry us — soon!

But it was not Mr. Borrowman's way to do anything without qualification.

'I would rather trust her to you than to anybody else,' said the minister, 'if it must be, it must be. I am not a man to lift up ineffectual hands. But why not be content as you are? — look at me!'

'When you were as young as Hester and I, I have heard tell that you...'

This was carrying the war into the enemy's camp.

'Tut — tut — tut,' said the minister, hastily, getting up and walking about, 'mere country-side clatter — idle clashes — I wonder you pay any attention to it. If that gossiping old hussy, Megsy... But I can see that you have been using your time, sirrah. How long have you been going every day to the Rig of Bennanbrack?'

'About six weeks, sir!'

'Alas, poor human nature — my last idol is shattered!' cried Mr. Borrowman, 'and I have been there every several Monday, and not a soul has ever said a word to me about it.'

'I hope you will not think it was Hester's fault, sir?' said Carus, smiling.

'Hester—Hester,' cried Mr. Borrowman, demonstrating in the air with his hands, 'everything

is Hester! As if the whole world must come to an end because an ungrateful young hussy has made up her mind to desert the only tried friends she has in the world, in order to go off with a young man of whom she knows nothing at all!

'You can acquire a good deal of knowledge in six weeks,' said Carus, smiling, and realising that the battle was won. 'Then you will marry us, sir? I may tell Hester that? When shall it be?'

'You can settle that with the young woman,' growled Mr. Anthony Borrowman, 'I am minister of this parish, and cannot refuse to marry any pair against whom no legal disabilities can be alleged. You are quite sure, Carus, that you have no other wives living?'

'Oh, no, sir!' smiled Carus, 'unless I married them in my sleep.'

'And that Hester is either a spinster or a widow?'

'One of the two, sir!'

'Then that is all I have a right to ask. I am at your service — for a consideration. You are both of legal age, as a glance at the baptismal records will show. The usual fee is a white silk handkerchief and a piece of the wedding cake, warranted deadly at any distance under fifty paces. Sometimes, but rarely, it runs to an umbrella.'

'Good night, sir,' said Carus, holding out his hand.

'Why, what is your hurry — you are not going back to the Rig of Bennanbrack tonight?'

'No, sir,' said Carus, 'I am going to ride over to Niddisdale Castle, to see my grandmother. Lady Niddisdale!'

'Tonight—nonsense, nonsense!' cried the

minister. 'Why it's twenty-four miles if it is an inch! Wait till tomorrow! I can put you up. You shall have Hester's room. I will correct your syllogisms for you!'

'I am sorry I cannot, sir; I made arrangements with the hostler at Moniaive to have another horse ready for me!

'Then you took my sanction for granted?'

'I am afraid I did, sir! But you see Hester insisted.'

The minister flung up his hands in a gesture of despair.

'Well, of all the impenitent young jackanapes!' But the rest of the sentence was drowned in a clatter of horse's hoofs, through which rang, clear as a bugle-call, the cheery 'Goodnight' of that masterful young man, Carus, Master of Darroch.

CHAPTER FORTY SEVEN

A FOOLISH CHAPTER, AND THE WISDOM OF IT

It was a very tired beast bestridden by a young man, a little white about the nostrils, that turned up the long avenue to Niddisdale Castle, very early next morning. So tired was the horse indeed that Carus dismounted and, at the first forking of the road, led the animal towards the stables. In order to reach the main courtyard, where the clock was, he had to pass an angle of the garden wall. A door stood open here, and Carus heard himself greeted through it by name. He turned about, and there, quite without attendant, her red flannel dressing-gown girl with a purple sash, rotund and comfortable, a shawl upon her head, wooden clogs of the country on her feet, with the straw peeping out all about the instep, he beheld her Grace the Duchess of Niddisdale.

'Will your beast stand, Carus?' she called out to him, without any apparent surprise.

'Yes, granny — that is, if he does not fall down. Hold on a moment, and I will lean him up against the wall!'

And letting go the bridle, Carus rushed to give his relative a filial hug, instantly letting go again with a little groan and a shake of his fingers.

'Yes, I know,' said her Grace, smiling, 'it is rather like embracing a joiner's tool-bag! But the truth is, these beasts of gardeners are so dreadfully scientific, that if I did not go about mending things, boring holes, putting in nails, and looping up tags, the

whole place would go to rack and ruin. Was that a gimlet you felt, Carus, or a pruning knife. I usually carry one open for convenience!’

‘I don't know, grandmother,’ said Carus, rubbing his wrist, ‘I am really quite indifferent which it was.’

‘That will teach you not to put your arm promiscuously about young women,’ said the Duchess, thrusting long tin-tacks freely into her mouth and picking them out one by one as she needed them, to nail a strip of matting to a wall, ‘it is a pity (tap-tap-tap) that a lady cannot get up to earn an honest livelihood betimes in the morning (tap-tap) without being assaulted by wild Mohocks returning home from some scene of midnight dissipation — Carus Darroch, I have just remembered. You are not staying at the Castle. Where have you been? Answer me this moment, sir!’

‘Grandmother, dear, I have come to tell you that I am going to be married!’

‘And looking like a death's head about it! — Is it anything disgraceful, sir?’

‘Oh, no, gran,’ said Carus, eagerly, ‘of course not. And I want you to help me out with it, like a good dear old sweetheart as you are!’

‘I was waiting for that. How much?’ said the Duchess, brutally.

‘It isn't money, gran,’ said Carus; at least, not chiefly. I want you to back me up, you know — come to the wedding.’

‘I see — wanted, respectable, middle-aged lady of rank — her very presence a certificate of character anywhere. You have come to the wrong shop, lad. Better ask your uncle Niddisdale. That is more in his line — beauty in distress, and family lawyer all

complete. Characters repaired while you wait.'

Her Grace had not forgiven the fact that she had been entirely left out of the proceedings in the case of the ruby necklace.

'You will, then, gran dear?' This pleadingly, in what his relative used to call his 'sugar-plum' voice.

'Hands off; that's where I keep my screwnails. Before I make any rash promises tell me two things, young Master! Is it Ethel Torphichan?'

'God forbid!' cried Carus, heartily.

'Does your father approve?'

'I never asked him,' said Carus, promptly; 'and what's more, I'll see him far enough before I do!'

Her Grace dropped everything on the ground, hammer, nails and all.

'Then count on me, dear boy,' she cried. 'Wait till I get this tack out before you kiss me, though. There! There! There! It's my little Hester of course! Oh, you foolish improvident boy. I shall read you such a lecture presently!'

'Of course; who else could it be?' said the youth, scornfully.

'That loses Jim Chetwynd about fifty pounds,' she said. 'Not so heavy on my left side — that's where the big tenpenny nails are, for the wall-fruit—pocket on the inside of the dressing-gown. Be good enough to curb your emotion and bear in mind that I have no corsets on. You need not blush, Carus, some things will come to you in time, with the general spread of education. In the mean time, pray go easy. Stay me with gimlets, comfort me with bradawls, for I am sick of love and lovers! Carus, I shall have to caution you against irreverence. It is specially out of place in the presence of the aged. And now, sir,

where have you been making love to little Hester all this while? If you are not already married and trying to break it to me, I am mistaken, also disappointed! Is the little fraudulent minx round the corner there, waiting behind a tree till Demogorgon is appeased?’

‘On my honour, no, gran!’

‘At lovers’ perjuries, you know, Carus, but I’ll forgive you this time. It’s not so bad as I expected, and—ah — hoped. You are partly your mother’s son, Carus, after all. Poor Sophia! Well, where have you hidden your little Hester?’

It was seven of the clock when Carus the Rapid departed from Niddisdale Castle, carrying with him his grandmother’s very unconventional blessing, and in his breast-pocket a cheque of exceedingly comfortable potentiality.

He had also annexed a fine hunter of Kipford’s, and he had left behind him a note to his ex-fag, beginning,

‘Dear Waffles. — I’ve taken Sybil. Don’t get in a wax. It’s no use. I’ll send her back all right. I’m going to marry Hester Stirling, and be hanged to them all. Give me your blessing and come to the wedding. You are to be best man — second week in September, I hope — third I fear — last if no better may be.

‘Yours, Carus.’

On the Rig of Bennanbrack Hester had passed a most unhappy morning. By eight o’clock she was looking out for him. Though both Megsy and her own good sense told her that he could not possibly arrive till nine, she walked up and down the beech hedge at least over one hundred times each way. At that hour there was still no sign of him, and they sat down to a joyless breakfast. Hester could eat

nothing, and moped with a face 'as long as a fiddle,' as Megsy told her more than once.

At ten there were premonitions of rainy weather on Hester's countenance, and she could not be brought in from the door on any pretext. She had seen him at least a dozen times on the skyline, and as often she had found that it was only an erect boulder or a browsing sheep topping the rise.

At eleven precisely, Hester came in and flung herself hopelessly down on her bed. She was sobbing freely now, and when Megsy came to her with doctrine and reproof she burst out, 'Oh, you do not know him as I do; he would have been here long ago if all had been well. Something terrible has happened. I know it has! Don't say it hasn't, Megsy. It is very cruel of you, when you know in your heart — (sobs). Oh, he never did this before!'

'He must have fallen into a sheep-drain,' said Megsy, trying to arouse Hester, by a fine irony, to a sense of the folly of her conduct; 'there are some of them on the moor quite three feet deep!'

'Oh, Megsy,' Hester had caught this Job's comforter by the arm, 'do you really think so? I know he has caught his foot in one, and fallen and hurt himself. Perhaps his head! I will go and look for him. Don't try to keep me, Megsy — I will, I must!'

For that was the way love had come to our heart-hungry impulsive Hester — as indeed all who had known her from a child knew that it was bound to come.

So for two hours and a half Hester, pathetically watched over by Megsy, wandered over Bennanbrack, looking vainly for any trace of Carus, till the blue vault above wavered and dissolved into

whirling mists, and she stumbled blindly back, to sit down and stare at the blank wall of her room, dumb, dry-eyed, desolate — not even that Rachel, who in Ramah refused to be comforted, more tragically afflicted.

There was no pretence of mid-day dinner that noontide. Megsy had taken refuge in her old woman's belief that time, the ancient heal-all, would cure this also. She went about polishing brasses, black-leading iron, and sweeping up the floor, while Hester, in the pauses of her pictured tragedies, thought her hardhearted. After all, Megsy did not know. She did not understand. Unhappy Megsy, never to know what it was to be really, really miserable!

Then when at two o'clock quick feet were heard without, and through the open door Carus came striding in, bright of face, if somewhat purple-ringed of eye, and held out his arms, Hester turned upon him with a chill and vacant gaze.

'Oh, you don't love me, or you would never have treated me like this!'

'My dear, my dear, what is it?'

'Not to come, never to send any word, not to tell me last night!'

'Hester, dear, how could I? Whom had I to send?'

But he threw himself on his knees before her chair, and clasped her slender rounded form in his arms, heedless of Megsy, 'listen, Hester; I have never slept or lain down since I saw you. We are to be married in the second week of September. Revvie is to marry us, my grandmother is coming to the wedding, and, look at this [he flashed a blue slip of paper from his pocket], here is a cheque for a

thousand pounds!’

Then Hester disgraced herself. She said afterwards that it was the cheque that did it. During the last moments Megsy had discreetly slipped out, but when she heard Hester laughing strangely she almost ran back.

‘Stop, bairn,’ she cried, ‘dinna! Do ye hear me biddin’ ye?’

But Hester only laughed the more, looking up helplessly at Megsy, and indicating the alarmed Carus with her finger.

‘I can’t stop, indeed I can’t!’ she gasped between the ringing peals, still pointing her finger at Carus, ‘he made me. Oh, Carus, stop me! It was so funny! Ha-ha-ha!’

Then with a rush came the tears, heart-breaking and desperate, and through them her eyes still laughed, and her body shook. Carus was infinitely pained. He had much to learn, and was in the way of learning it, too. The way of a man with a maid such as Hester is a long, long way. It has many turnings, and they who think they know it best know least.

‘Oh, he does not love me,’ she sobbed; ‘he keeps me waiting till I think he must be dead, and then he comes and shows me a cheque for a thousand pounds!’

And again she laughed helplessly, signalling feebly for them to stop her. But that was far beyond their powers. Till Carus, who had been on horseback all night and gone through many things, being sick with disappointment and the lack of the welcome he had anticipated every mile of the long backward way, suddenly put his head on his hand, and a great

dry sob shook his frame. After a long moment there came another, and yet another. Megsy, the wise woman, went out. Hester instantly stopped her own crying and sat up. This was utterly unprecedented. She recognised in the sound something that, if allowed to gather way, would be as wine to her water.

'Don't, darling, don't!' she cried, laying her hand on his shoulder.

But again it came, as it seemed, rending his very bodily frame. 'Oh, don't, if you love me, Carus, don't do that!'

Again!

'I'll be good — yes, yes, I will, I am horribly ashamed of myself. I was so frightened about you. It was so silly, but I could not help it.'

She kneeled to him, and put her lips up to his.

'Kiss me, Carus,' she whispered; 'it shall be the first week in September, if you will only stop!'

And Carus stopped.

CHAPTER FORTY EIGHT

THE MAN WHO HAD BEEN IN HELL

'Yes, it was about one chance in a million, but I managed to get word out of the prison to Yule, Two-Rupee Yule, you know, the secretary of the Burmese British Mission, and he compelled the King to let me go — upon threats that he could not have carried out!'

It was a curious yellowish-grey man with oriental eyes, bushy white eyebrows, and a face drawn and lined horizontally as if it had been bound about the temples with whip-cord, who was telling his tale in the dingy den in Lincoln's Inn, where the best criminal lawyer's business in London was done.

'Why 'Two-Rupee' Yule?' asked Jim Chetwynd, who was toying with a paper-knife.

The wizened man laughed a little, as at a reminiscence which pleased him.

'It was the first thing I laughed at after I came out of hell!' he said with the grim succinctness that characterised all his utterances. 'It happened this way. Harry Yule was a bright young fellow in the Engineers, and he was sent down to Budaon, to build an embankment. He had Budaon coolies, that is, Budmashes — arrant scoundrels. And he swore, swore as if he had never had a godly Scottish mother and learned the catechism, the same as myself. But one day he had a smart attack of fever, and the devil a monk would be. *Imprimis*, Harry Yule would stop swearing. And to make sure of it he covenanted with himself that he should pay two

rupees to some charity for every uncovenanted word he uttered, Budaon coolie or no Budaon coolie. And strange to say, when he got well he kept his oath. Not that it stopped his swearing, but that it docked his pay! Then, by-and-by the rupees began to accumulate and it was necessary, thought this honest Harry Yule, to find an investment for them.

'As he watched the press of struggling thirst about a foul shallow horsepond, he thought, 'Why not a drinking fountain?' The water was at hand. The work would be excellent practice in his profession. The Budaon coolie should drink if he would not wash, the Budaon maiden draw water at will, the Budaon horse and the Budaon pariah dog should all be provided for.

'It was done, and to this day a stately fountain makes a centre of life to the great square in front of the mosque, and all the poor folk of Budaon worship the shade of Two-Rupee Yule.'

'Is that true?' asked Jim Chetwynd, who, while listening, was sizing up his man. He wanted to know to what extent he could depend upon him.

'I asked him,' said the oriental, 'and he said, 'No, it is a (qualified) lie, sir. It was not two rupees I fined myself, it was one rupee!''

'Ah,' said Jim Chetwynd, 'that is a good story. But now as I have just one short half hour to spare, let us talk business. I have a letter here which I wish you to read before I send it off!'

At this moment a clerk came in with a card in his fingers. Mr. Chetwynd glanced at it,

'Show him in!' he said, briefly, and rising, he stood a little in the shadow of the plum-coloured window-curtain. He wished to watch the face of his

visitor. It was Carus Darroch who entered, eager-hearted as a boy, and all his face lit up with happiness.

The yellow-skinned stranger seemed almost to crouch back upon himself, like a cat at the spring. His hand moved to his pocket with the habitual action of the man who has always been armed. But ere he could reach any concealed weapon Jim Chetwynd's strong fingers fell on his shoulder.

'Let me introduce you,' he said. 'Carus, this is my friend, Mr. David Stirling!'

'And you are the Master of Darroch — you tried to take my Hester from me!' The oriental traveller was evidently labouring under the pressure of strong emotion.

'I would, indeed,' said Carus, promptly; 'that is, if you are my Hester's father.'

'Her father?' said the stranger, putting his hand to his brow, as if his brain was not clear.

'Certainly,' broke in Jim Chetwynd, with the strong, clear, incisive tones which seemed to restore David Stirling's sanity at once, 'you forget this is Lord Darroch's only son, Carus. And I should not wonder if he has a certain permission to ask of you. He is the best fellow in the world, and it was to his prompt action that your daughter owed everything in the shameful matter which I have already set before you.'

David Stirling held out his hand, goodwill slowly putting to flight the disgust with which he had looked at Carus.

'Come, Stirling,' said Chetwynd, 'this will never do. You must not forget that all these things you have been thinking about happened more than

twenty years ago. Carus is no more responsible for his father's intentions or misdeeds than I am. And, indeed, he has had, as I understand, no communication whatever for a long time with Lord Darroch!

'You are the young man who wishes to marry my daughter Hester?' said David.

'I am,' answered Carus, 'though how you guessed that at first sight is more than I can make out.'

'I did not guess it. I was not thinking of you or of my little girl either, but of—how does it go —?'

'Of old, unhappy far-off things, And battles long ago!'

'You are putting off Mr. Stirling's time, Carus, and what is worse, you are wasting mine,' interjected Jim Chetwynd; 'ask your permission, and be done with it.'

'I do ask it, sir,' said Carus, earnestly; 'I am very glad you have — ah — come alive again. But I did not know Hester had so many people whose leave must be asked. You make the fourth.'

'And the others?'

'Have all said 'yes,' as I hope you will, sir,' returned Carus, with joyous and engaging frankness.

'I wish you well; may the little one be happy — infinitely happier than...'

Chetwynd interrupted again.

'I want you to hear this letter I have written to the address of Sir Sylvanus Torphichan-Stirling, M. P. I have tried to make it as brief and compact as possible. Carus, you need not go, being, as it were, already of the family.'

Then Jim Chetwynd read aloud the following

epistle with a certain gusto of appreciation:

‘Sir, — As legal adviser for Miss Hester Stirling, beneficiary under the will of the late Mrs. Isobel Stirling of Arioland, I beg to inform you that on the sixth day of September next, being the twenty-first birthday of the said Hester Stirling, my client and I will wait upon you, either at your own house or at your lawyer's office, as you shall determine, in order that due account and reckoning be made as to all the properties in your hands belonging to Hester Stirling. — I have the honour to be, Sir, your obedient servant,

‘James Chetwynd.’

‘Shall I not send him a letter, informing him that if he does not instantly surrender the stolen jewels I will have him branded as a thief?’ David Stirling spoke fiercely, a world of agony long repressed in his tone.

‘Not for anything, my dear sir,’ cried Chetwynd; ‘we have a wily fish to play in your good brother-in-law. We must not jerk him. I see I must not let you out of my sight, my friend.’

‘I am quite willing to stay with you. The world hums too loud and runs too fast, after fourteen years in prison,’ said David Stirling, smiling; ‘but I shall get used to it again.’

‘And in the mean time, Carus, say nothing of this to Hester. By the way, where have you hidden that child?’

‘She is at Niddisdale, with my grandmother, and they move in a mist of millinery. I had some things to see to, so they sent me up here, as much to be out of the way as anything. By the bye, I must see you as to settlements.’

'Her Grace has already written to me about them. Tomlinson, in the office, will give you any information. Good morning! Don't have too many farewell bachelor suppers. They are a mistake. Nothing, believe me, will cause you more regret afterwards. They are disastrous!'

David Stirling had sunk back into his gloomy isolation, but when Carus took his leave he held out his hand kindly enough.

'You will make my girl happy?' he said.

'I will try! I only want the chance!' said Carus, eagerly.

It was four days before an answer came from Sir Sylvanus Torphichan-Stirling. It ran as follows:

'Sir, — In reply to yours of the 11th current, I beg to say that my responsibility as to the bequest to Hester Stirling under the will of my mother-in-law begins and ends with the payment of £2,000, less such expenses as I have incurred in my capacity of guardian to this young woman, and for the mutual adjustment of these — as I have not been well of late — it will be convenient if you or your representative will call upon me at Arioland House, Galloway, on the 6th day of September,

'I am, Sir, Sec, &c.'

'Hester can't go with you that day,' said Carus, jealously, 'we are to be married on the 6th, It is her birthday; and so you must fix it for an earlier date, because after the 6th we shall be out of reach for some time.'

'No, Master Carus, no,' said Jim Chetwynd. 'Go and order your trousseau in St, James's Street, sir. Let me manage this business, there is no twelve o'clock rule and no hurrying to church when you are

married in Scotland. You will be tied up in the Manse, without any fuss, civil or ecclesiastic, at three in the afternoon, and your grandmother will be there to see. So will I, James Chetwynd, aforesaid. So will the father of the bride — with a wedding present; who knows? In the mean time, continue to say nothing, even to Hester. Ta-ta!

And Carus, stunned and uncertain, took a cab and drove to his tailor's in St. James's Street, even as he had been told — for a man is only masterful till he meets his master.

'Why did he mistake me for my father, and why did he look as if he would have killed me, I wonder?' he mused, thinking of David Stirling, as he was being measured for a tweed travelling suit.

CHAPTER FORTY NINE

AT BAY

The new house of Arioland sat considerably higher up the hill than the old. It had been built under the direction of an architect of taste in the best style of Scottish baronial. The first house was more sequestered, set in deep stringently clipped garden closes, bosomed in tall trees, cawed over by perennial rooks. The new house was also built among trees, but out on an open braeface, where only a few 'auld scrunts o' birk' and 'scurry thorns,' gnarled and twisted by the wind, broke the smooth green sweep of the turf. Crow-stepped, many-gabled, far-regardant, the new Arioland only wanted time and softening creepers to become one of the 'most desirable places of residence' which could possibly be advertised in any country gentleman's newspaper.

Mr. James Chetwynd and his friend David Stirling walked up the unfinished avenue at ten o'clock precisely on the morning of the sixth of September, the lawyer looking about him with the air of a proprietor who has been absent for some time and has a keen eye to detect shortcomings. David Stirling kept his eyes fixed on the ground and took little notice of anything. Only as he passed the little side avenue which led from the broad drive down in the direction of the old house Chetwynd noticed that he started violently, as at the sudden appearance of some one or some thing unseen, and, changing about, walkcil on the other side with his companion

interposed between him and the weed-grown gravel in front of the ancient doorstep.

'Steady, Stirling,' said Chetwynd, gravely, laying his hand upon his client's arm, 'as I said before, we have a cunning fox to run to earth this morning. Don't let him persuade you to throw away any points!'

'You can count on me,' said David. 'I will be calm.'

'Leave everything to me, remember — do not interrupt, whatever the provocation. If you are asked a question, answer it — no more, no less — and keep your powder dry!'

These were Jim Chetwynd's final instructions as the two went up the steps to the front door of the new house of Arioland.

Timson it was who opened the door — a rural gentleman-farming Timson, not now gorgeously arrayed so much as of a chastened dignity, in keeping with the status of the ancient family of Torphichan-Stirling.

'Sir Sylvanus at home?'

'I am not aware whether Sir Sylvanus can receive you, sir. He has been far from well,' said Timson, with dignity.

'We have come from London on business,' said Chetwynd, sharply; 'we have an appointment with your master. Show us in.'

Timson opened the door with an air of resignation like one who would say, 'I have done my best for the honour of the house, and if evil comes of it I am not to be blamed. I decline responsibility.'

Sir Sylvanus sat in his writing-chair at a great desk with a roller top. He was banked in with an array of serried pigeon-holes that rose above his

head and extended on either side of him, as if the distinguished philanthropist were about to soar to tracts unknown on French-polished mahogany pinions, carrying all his correspondence with him, as documents of importance even to the recording angel.

Each nest of six or eight holes was labelled with the name of its own society, from that of the Believing Medical Students' Tract Union, to the more importunate propaganda set on foot by the 'Am-I-my-Brother's-Keeper-Responsibility Society.'

Sir Sylvanus rose with astonishment at sight of the stranger with the lawyer. But before he could speak from the farther end of the room came a shriek, thin and piercing.

'It is David — David, my brother — risen from the dead!'

And there stood Lady Torphichan-Stirling, holding her hands in front of her with palms outstretched, as if to ward off something. A look of startled horror was on her face. But the horror on his wife's countenance was nothing to the blank and ghastly fear that seemed to illuminate that of Sir Sylvanus, shining through it as a light might shine through a turnip-lantern.

'Sarah — Sarah,' he said, at last, in a shaking voice. 'What madness is this? Pray do not forget yourself.'

He threw a little whitish powder into a glass with a shaking hand before he emerged from behind his rampart of pigeon-holes, poured water upon it, and drank it off. Then he came out and bowed to the two gentlemen with outward calmness, though the grey flush could still be seen on his cheeks, and his brow

was clammy and glistened like satin.

'I expected, according to your letter, that you would be accompanied by the young woman, Hester Stirling. To what do I owe the honour of a visit from this gentleman?'

'As Lady Torphichan-Stirling has already informed you, this is her brother and my good client, Mr. David Stirling, late of Upper Burmah. He will act for his daughter on this occasion.'

Sir Sylvanus steadied himself with a mighty effort. The drug which he had taken as soon as he realised the nature of the crisis that had come so suddenly upon him had begun to take effect. His stature seemed to increase. He stood more erect. His lips, hitherto grey as the rest of his face, assumed their natural colour. The philanthropist was at bay.

Jim Chetwynd went on.

'We will first settle the matter of Miss Stirling's legacy. I have here certificates of birth and other necessary documents if you care to inspect them; and if it is perfectly agreeable to you I shall be glad to accept your cheque for £2,000, for which I have a receipt ready in my hand. No, Lady Stirling, I beg you will not go. I should very much have preferred to meet with your husband in the presence of his lawyer, but since he did not wish it to be so, your presence as a witness is of the utmost importance.'

Sir Sylvanus was sitting down at his desk to write a cheque.

'Yes, stay, Sarah,' he said. And, obedient to his word Lady Torphichan-Stirling sat down again on the sofa, restlessly plaiting and unplaiting her fingers, and gazing first at her husband and then at the two men who stood so still and silent by the

window. They had not been asked to sit down, and indeed had no wish to do so.

The baronet rose with the cheque in his fingers.

'Thank you,' he said, steadily, as he looked at the receipt. 'Now, the business is finished, I shall have the honour of wishing you good morning. I am, as you have already been informed, still far from well.'

And he laid his hand on the bell-pull which projected from the wall adjacent to his hand.

But Jim Chetwynd was before him.

'Before you do that,' he said, in his fighting voice — a clear hardish falsetto, with a metallic timbre to it which suggested a trumpet — 'would it not be better for all parties that you should hear what we have to say? It may save us having to repeat our words in various other places—in open court, for instance, and before a jury.'

CHAPTER FIFTY

THE BOLT FALLS

Sir Sylvanus lifted his hand from the bell and stood undecided. 'Do you insist on your impossible proposition that this — ah, gentleman is my wife's late brother, Mr. David Stirling, who was killed in Burmah nearly twenty years ago?'

'Not killed. Sir Sylvanus,' said Chetwynd; imprisoned and tortured, but still alive to reclaim his own and to see that the fullest justice is done to his child.'

The slightest twitch of the eminent physician's face betokened that the thrust had gone home.

'I presume, sir,' said he, turning to David, 'that you are aware of the serious consequences of prosecuting so preposterous a claim?'

'I am fully aware of it, Sylvanus,' said David Stirling, gravely. 'Fourteen years in prison is a long time. I have been fourteen years in prison. I do not wish for a second dose.'

At the slight emphasis on the personal pronoun Sir Sylvanus winced again, but more markedly.

Chetwynd shot a warning glance at his client.

'I am not now going to insist upon the fact of the identity, or for that matter to found anything upon it. For even if this is not Mr. David Stirling, that does not affect the claim of Mr. David Stirling's daughter to the property of her father in your hands. The question of identity will doubtless be settled in the proper court.'

'Oh, Sylvanus,' cried his wife from where she sat

opening and shutting her mouth like a fish on grass, and gripping the arms of the chair, 'do not anger them. It is David — truly, it is the dead come to life again.'

'Silence, woman!' cried the baronet, bending a look upon his wife, so fierce and ugly that the man's whole nature seemed to be laid bare. It was as if some black depth of the primal sea had been drained of water, and all the hideous writhing mass of polyp tentacles, the glutinous mass of foul things that breed and brood in the Under Dark had suddenly been laid bare.

Lady Torphichan-Stirling lay back as if smitten by a paralytic shock, and after a moment's pause, the baronet lifted his regard from her face.

'Gad, it was enough to make a man believe in the evil eye, to look at the beggar,' said Jim Chetwynd afterward.

Presently, however, the lawyer continued his statement, in the same impassive voice.

'I have, therefore, to claim restitution of a collection of valuable rubies and other precious stones, committed to the care of Mrs. Isobel Stirling by my client, Mr. David Stirling, her eldest son. These stones were contained in a black bag specially constructed for the purpose, with an inner lining of steel, which had a couple of red stripes going vertically across it. The approximate value of the jewels at the time of their coming into your hands was £290,000.'

'I have never seen so much as one of these,' said the baronet, firmly. 'There was some such bag in a provision cupboard in the old house, I believe, but it was entirely empty when I found it. What became of

its contents I have no means of knowing.'

Jim Chetwynd bowed gravely.

'Sir Sylvanus,' he said, 'I fear the number and importance of your philanthropic occupations cause you to forget. I will take the liberty of recalling certain facts to your remembrance. On October 16th, 18-, Mrs. Stirling died. You spent the 18th, 19th, and 20th in going carefully over the house. You found the will, and amongst other things you came upon the striped bag in the cupboard of the ordinary sitting-room, as you very correctly say. But on the 16th, the day of Mrs. Stirling's demise, that bag was noticed to be full and heavy. On the 19th you were seen with all the jewels on the table before you.'

Sir Sylvanus sneered.

'Who saw me?' he said, scornfully. 'Do you think any judge or jury will accept an ex parte statement like that?'

'They will weigh it carefully against other ex parte statements — yours in particular,' said Chetwynd, parrying neatly.

'I presume you will attach some importance to what Lady Torphichan-Stirling may say?' continued that lady's husband. 'I will have the bag brought down from the box-room. I believe that it was removed from the old house along with other rubbish. She will tell you that she has never either seen or heard of any jewels contained in it — though there is no doubt that it came out of my mother-in-law's house somewhere. If, therefore, there were stones or other articles of value in it when Mr. David Stirling committed it to her charge, there was certainly none in it when it was found and removed.'

The baronet rang the bell, and Timson appeared.

'Bring down the old hand-bag with the red stripes I saw you carrying over from the old house at the time of the removal. It is, I think, in the upper box-room.'

Timson returned in a few minutes with the bag in his hand, bearing it gingerly, as if it would ruin his breeches if brought into too immediate contact with them.

As he passed the two visitors to the house of Arioland, the smallish oriental-looking man, with the grizzled hair, glanced keenly at the bag in his hand, and seemed to derive a certain satisfaction from what he saw.

Sir Sylvanus opened the catch, which indeed was only held close by the pressure of the hinge-springs. The lock had been burst without skill, by the application of force on either side.

'It is empty,' he said, glancing within. 'Lady Torphichan-Stirling will tell you that it was in this exact condition when found.'

'What my husband says is true,' said the poor lady, 'only the bag was found, not in the parlour store-cupboard, which I went over carefully about ten days after, but in a recess behind the sideboard. It was empty and open, as you see it now.'

'I do not doubt it, my lady,' said Chetwynd, bowing ceremoniously and respectfully. 'The question is who opened it between the 16th, when it was on the shelf, locked securely and very heavy, and, say, the 26th, when it was found behind the sideboard in a recess, forced and rifled?'

'May I look at the bag a moment?' said David Stirling.

'If Mr. Chetwynd will be personally responsible that you will do it no injury,' said the baronet, handing it to the lawyer.

David Stirling took it into his hand with evident pleasure. He tapped the steel walls with his knuckles, listening as he did so. Then swiftly tilting it on end he touched a concealed spring at one of the lower angles. The apparently solid bottom fell away with a rasping click, and several papers tumbled out. Sylvanus gave a hoarse cry and sprang forward.

'Give them to me; they are my property!' he cried.

The lawyer interposed a strong arm, while, with a quick stealthy motion, David Stirling gathered them up. Then he threw the bag aside as of no more consequence.

'On the contrary, they belong to my client. I know what they are without looking at them. They consist of a will and duplicate attested lists of the jewels formerly contained in the bag. The will is Mr. Stirling's holograph, and bequeaths them all to my other client. Miss Hester Stirling.'

'Deliver these papers, or I will summon assistance!' cried the baronet, white and furious.

'You can do that afterwards,' said Mr. Chetwynd, calmly turning the key in the library door and putting his back to it. David Stirling stood with the newly-found papers in his hand, without a trace of emotion showing on his face.

James Chetwynd went on.

'As I told you — and you may take my word for it — one of the papers in my client's hand is the list of the jewels found in the secret compartment before your eyes. Well, that of itself proves nothing. But a

most curious coincidence arises, which might have some effect if put to a jury. I hold another list in my hand, the details of which have taken some years of labour to collect. You, sir, have for many years been largely interested in precious stones, and this is a fairly complete record of your transactions to date. Mrs. Stirling died on the 16th, on which day the jewel-bag was intact. Ten days after, on or about the 26th, the empty bag was found in a recess. On December 1st of the same year, at the counting-house of Messrs. Vanderspuye and Co. of Grootpoort Street, Amsterdam, you made the first of your numerous sales of pigeon-blood rubies, being the identical stones indicated on this list by the numbers 234 and 235, a pair of very fine colour indeed, for which you received a draft on London for over £6,000.

Then I have also here the dates — exact for the most part, a few, however, being only approximate — at which you put the rest of the rubies and some few diamonds on the market. As usual most of the stones came to this country, or passed over to America, and nearly all (I may inform you) can be traced.'

Sylvanus had grown paler and paler during this speech. He passed his hand across his brow and wrung the chill drops off it which otherwise would have run down into his eyes. But with a mighty effort he rallied.

'The proof is insufficient, sir,' he said; 'there can be no pedigree of an uncut stone!'

'Most of the stones — nine out of ten at least — were cut! Besides, I am of opinion that your lawyer, when you put the evidence before him, will be of

opinion that it is sufficient — for about fourteen years' imprisonment, that is!' said Jim Chetwynd, grimly. He had no mercy, for he remembered how callously this man had accused a wronged and innocent girl.

'By gad!' he said, as the memory took hold of him. 'I will grind his bones for that!'

But aloud he went on.

'You have,' he said, 'one chance. It is not a great one, but there is something to be said for it. It is conceivable, or may be made conceivable to a British jury, that you did find the jewels, did appropriate them, concealing the fact from your wife, did dispose of them from time to time, did purchase estates, become a philanthropist, go into Parliament, and so on, upon the proceeds. But, finding no directions regarding them, that you considered yourself as next of kin to the lady in whose house you found them, and therefore, in default of other, their true possessor.

'As against this, however, it will of course be argued that you made no discovery of the find, as you would have done if you had believed that you were honestly entitled to the stones. They were not included in probate, therefore you yourself did not consider them to come under the will. Further, you have represented to your customers in Holland that these rubies are the product of a mine in Burmah, worked privately by your brother — such a brother not being in existence. And lastly, and what will weigh with the jury more than anything else, your own evidence in the last case against Miss Hester Stirling, for stealing one of six ruby necklaces similar in pattern and identical in marking, will

dispose entirely of the contention that your action in appropriating the goods was because you conscientiously believed them to be your own property. You found five of these in the bag, you swore that you found six. No judge or jury will, in these circumstances, credit your oath as to the remainder.

‘To recapitulate, the evidence which we shall lead is, as you say, insufficient for some purposes, but I think you will agree that it will probably be sufficient to induce a jury to find against you on sufficient points to warrant the judge in sentencing you to fourteen years’ penal servitude at least.’

‘Oh, Sylvanus — dear Sylvanus,’ cried his wife, running to him and flinging her arms about his neck, ‘do not hold out against them. I do not care where we go. I do not care whether you did it or not. I do not care whether we are rich or poor. But oh, Sylvanus, it would kill me if they put you in prison. Agree with these gentlemen—do not quarrel. Mr. Chetwynd is a good Christian man, and will be sorry for my poor innocent children. David is my brother. Do not be hard with him, gentlemen, I beseech you. He has been a kind husband to me.’

‘And after this,’ as Jim Chetwynd afterwards said, ‘we could not quite do all we meant. The fellow must have had some good about him to make his wife stick up for him like that.’

Sylvanus did not shake off his wife this time — neither did he browbeat her with angry words. He only set her a little apart, but gently, like a troublesome child. Then he moved his lips to frame the low-spoken words ‘What do you propose?’

‘We have no desire to be oppressive,’ said James

Chetwynd, 'though we are prepared to use all means, and if it comes into the courts prepared also to prove the worst. Yet, for private purposes and with a view to the avoidance of family scandal (always a bad thing), we are willing to make a compromise, though it is running dangerously near to compounding a felony. However, these are the terms we are prepared to accept. My client will buy the estate of Arioland, including this house which you have built upon it, at a valuation. You will make count and reckoning with me for every precious stone you have sold, on which we will allow you ten per cent, for brokerage. We will accept settlement either in the lands you have bought, at the prices you have paid for them, in approven stocks, or in cash.'

'If you insist on this, I am a ruined man,' said the baronet.

'Most people would be very glad to be so ruined,' said Chetwynd, 'I calculate that you will still be worth, with the purchase price of Arioland and your brokerage on the jewels, somewhere in the neighbourhood of three thousand a year. Now that can only be called comparative poverty, and all this you will have in addition to any private fortune you may have amassed by your most praiseworthy and diligent efforts in your profession.'

'Oh, Sylvanus, give in to them,' cried his wife; 'do not make them angry. I do not care a bit about the money, but I cannot let you go to prison for all those years. At our age I should never see you again. We shall be very happy, I am sure!'

The voice of his wife seemed in some degree to move the fallen man. His pride ebbed away from

him.

‘I agree to your terms!’ he said, in a broken voice, and bowed his head on his hand.

‘We give you a full year to settle in — and, as I said, you will not find us oppressive. In the mean time, I leave you to the consolations of an affectionate wife. And may the consciousness of your many good works support you in this trial!’

‘And do you know, the curious thing is that I partly meant it!’ said Jim Chetwynd, as he relieved his companion of the steel bag on their way over to the Manse.

‘You let the rascal down too easy,’ said David Stirling, ‘if I had had my way he should have stood in the dock — for what he did to my girl.’

‘I think differently,’ said Jim Chetwynd; ‘I have seen as much as most men, but I have never seen any good come out of revenge yet. It is a boomerang which always returns to strike the thrower when he least expects it. The solid cash, and more solid land, will be so much more satisfactory — especially to your successors.’

But David Stirling only shook his head bitterly.

‘You have not had fourteen years in prison as I have had, Mr. Chetwynd,’ he said. ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, saith the Lord.’ But that is because he wants to keep all the pleasure of it to himself!’

CHAPTER FIFTY ONE

HER MOTHER'S WEDDING DRESS

'There's sic a cryin' o' the guidwives o' the village frae doorstep to doorstep that ye are fair deafened as ye gang doon the street,' said Anders, describing his progress mansewards through the Clachan of St. John on the morning of the sixth of September.

'Carlin calling to carlin, as Alp to Alp!' commented the minister, grimly.

'This will learn them,' said Megsy, grimly, thinking of the obloquy which, at the instance of local greatness, had so recently overwhelmed her treasure. Megsy's state of mind may best be described as a chastened triumph. She was losing her darling, indeed, but in what circumstances of pride and hope! Hester was to wed Carus, Master of Darroch, the only son of a Lord. A real Duchess was coming to look on. A proximate Duke was to be best man. The daughter of their hereditary enemy was to act as bridesmaid. These things were sweet to Megsy Tipperlin, and she could not hide her swelling sense of satisfaction. If she had known the scene at that moment being enacted in the library of the new house of Arioland, she would have been, in the language of the countryside, 'to hold nor to bind.'

Hester had awakened early, and her first thought, as she dimly saw the window-blind rosy at the edges, had been of Carus. She loved him — he loved her. This was enough — for several seconds.

Then suddenly, with a breaking of bonds of sleep, a springing forward of hot blood, a bounding of

frightened pulses, Hester remembered that this was the morning of her wedding day. Today it was all coming to an end — no, to a beginning. Today she was to give herself to Carus, who loved her, whom she...

And a tide of delicious shame and joyous apprehension overwhelmed her. Without, the blackbird fluted mellow on a thorn to the mild and equal autumn morning. Down in the woods across the water of Darroch, in his father's woods, she heard the strange half-human cry of the pheasant. It was there that she had first met him.

To give herself to Carus — ah, that was very sweet, and passing strange. She had come through dark waters to do it — yet she had not been all unhappy. It seemed as if she had always thought lovingly of Carus. And now — surely it could not be that today — before the sun, which was reddening the eastward edges of the world, should redden those to the west, she would be—Hester could hardly put it in words — Carus's wife. From head to foot she burned hotly at the thought. But smiled, too; smiled so bewitchingly that it was fortunate it was only the sun who was looking at her through the chinks of the old manse shutters.

It was like our little Hester that she never once thought of what Carus and she would one day be called — Lord Darroch, Lady Darroch; she never thought of it once, not that morning. It had, indeed, come to her while he was away in London. But it had seemed by so much the most terrible and impossible thing which lay before her that she had put it from her. Perhaps, after all, something would happen to prevent that part of it. Perhaps they did

not permit men who wrote and made their own money by telling other people what the law was, and were poor, and married girls who had been charged with stealing, to be peers of Scotland. Then she had thought of the ball and of how these people who were really great had seemed to like her, and the memory had been some satisfaction.

But now, this morning of her wedding day, after the first delicious thrilling of wonder and fear, the happiness that invaded and took possession of Hester's heart was all caused by one thought. She would never have to be alone again. Not really, that is — for even when Carus had to go away from her, she would know that he 'belonged,' and that he was getting ready to come back to her as soon as he could.

But there was much to be done. She must not lie there—just thinking of Carus. She wondered, in addition, how that marvellous wedding-dress in the next room would look in the daylight. So diaphanous, so softly-clinging, so white it had seemed the night before. She slipped out of bed and stole on bare feet across the floor, to the door of the chamber, where this gown among gowns had been laid when taken out of Madame Celine's box. She would just have one peep — only one. Carus would see her in it and it was so pretty. So, with her sweet face all flushed and eager with anticipation, her hair tumbled into heaped masses of soft curls by the sleep of the night, Hester stole through the quiet home a glimmering sun-flecked figure in maiden white. Her hand was on the hasp. She started back. She heard a sound of muffled sobbing. Who could it be? Had anything happened? Perhaps he was ill.

Perhaps they dared not tell her.

Scarcely did she dare to open the door and look within.

She saw Megsy on her knees by the little spare bed, on which the wonderful wedding-dress had been laid out. That creation of the supreme artist (we refer to Madame Celine, of Regent Street, not to the Architect of the universe) was carelessly tossed aside and Megsy was smoothing and patting a simple gown of plain muslin, with little bows of silk, which looked creamy in the light of the morning, as it streamed over the tree tops. Megsy was on her knees before this schoolgirl's frock, smoothing the folds and bending out the loops of the bows with her stiff old fingers. But it was the sound of her sobbing that touched Hester.

Quick as a flash she darted in, her little warm feet making no sound on the bare wooden floor.

'Megsy — Megsy — Megsy dear, what is the matter? Why are you crying like that? What is it?'

Megsy started violently, but instantly recovering herself, she turned indignantly upon Hester.

'Greetin' — ye are no wise, lassie. What for should auld Megsy be greetin' on a day like this?'

'But, Megsy, there on your face this very minute, you old pet — why there is one' — (she touched a wet spot on Megsy's cheek, where a furrow had acted as a channel). 'Dear Megsy, tell me why you are so sorry. And what is this — is it one of your old dresses?'

'It is your ain mither's wedding-dress, Hester,' said Megsy, glad to have found a subject. 'Your grand-mither brought it back with her. It was the only thing your faither didna burn. I'm thinking that

his heart gied way within him when he tried to put that in the fire.'

'My mother's wedding-dress,' said Hester. 'My own dear mother, whom I never saw.'

'Little she got oot o't but sorrow,' said Megsy. 'The Lord gie ye her happiness an' your ain too, my lassie!'

'She got the man she loved,' said Hester. 'I should be willing to die, I think, after I have had Carus — all to myself— for a year!'

'And I thoct,' Megsy went on, 'that ye micht like to see the puir bit thing. Sae, I did it up that ye micht see hoo muckle mair bonny an' graund an' stylish to look upon is this braw goon that her Grace has sent ye. I kenned ye wad lauch to see the difference!'

Cunning Megsy—jealous Megsy, too! She thought that these great ones of the earth were taking altogether too much upon them, thus to arrange for her bairn even before they got her away from the plain old manse, and from the care of Revvie and herself. They had not crooned hush-a-bye over her in the days when, a little forsaken motherless bundle, she had wailed and refused to be comforted, searching with blind lips for that which was as white as marble and as cold.

So Megsy had contrived this — and then, caught in her own devices, she had wept and prayed, and prayed and wept, that her darling might have a longer and happier life than the young bride and wife whose simple white frock she had laid out before her on the bed.

Meanwhile Hester had been thinking.

'Megsy,' she cried, a swift thought running

athwart her brain, 'I will wear it today — this dress of my own dear mother's.'

'Nonsense — nonsense, lassie, ye vwillna — ye maunna.'

'Megsy, I must — I will!'

'And what will her Grace say, gin ye cast frae ye lightly the graund goon she coft and sent a' the way frae London toon?'

'I will tell her, Megsy. She will understand!'

So, early that morning, Madame Celine's beauteous creation was folded up neatly in tissue paper and silver paper and gilded cardboard and wrapped about with string. While Hester and Megsy, with needle and thread and scissors, with box-iron and pleat-iron and goffering-iron, prepared a surprise for the little company of wedding guests already converging upon the old manse by the Darroch water.

At breakfast time Hester descended, flushed with the great thought, her white baking apron covering her old brown dress and making (to eyes male) still more adorable the lithe grace of her figure. Revvie, who in his ignorance had expected a toilet even thus early in the day, stared in amazement.

Then he nodded his head.

'You could not do better, little one,' he said, kissing her; 'you should be married just as you are, like that. Or, if that be canonically forbidden, as I suspect, at least be sure that you wear it often afterwards, for Master Carus's sake.'

'Oh, Revvie,' she cried, patting the grey scrubby locks, 'what a shame you never got married. You say such charming things. I think you would have made a very nice lover too.'

She looked at him critically, turning his head about this way and that with a finger and thumb applied beneath the chin.

‘And I suppose you expect to ravish us all in that wonderful dress of the Duchess's I saw last night!’

‘It looks so much more lovely today, Revvie, you should just see it!’

‘I can wait!’ said the minister.

Thus diplomatically spoke Happy Deceit.

CHAPTER FIFTY TWO

UNDER THE CANOPY

Her Grace the Duchess of Niddisdale was driving over from Knockdon in the ducal carriage and four, attended by Miss Victoria Torphichan-Stirling and — the Marquess of Kipford, her Grace's grandson. The horses were changed at the inn of Barnbogrie, to which they had been forwarded some days before.

The Duchess occupied the whole of the back seat, or at least she and what Vic irreverently called her 'props' did. These included an old-fashioned dressing-case full of bottles and powder-shells, a snuff-box with a portrait of Prince Charlie on the lid, a prayer-book, two packs of cards, Dr. Johnson's *Rasselas*, and a French novel fast resolving itself into its component 'signatures.'

'Do you know,' said Kipford, feelingly, 'I don't believe that this is any proper marriage at all. Just think, grandmother Niddisdale, it is to be at three o'clock in the afternoon, not in a church, no red carpet, no procession down the aisle, no wedding march, — is it binding really?'

He gave a little hitch to the thin Indian rug which (in their care for the Duchess's health) Vic and he had thrown across the inside of the carriage. He drew it a little higher on the side at which Vic sat.

The Duchess smiled indulgently as she watched the manoeuvre out of the corner of a pair of very experienced old eyes.

'I wonder if they actually think I don't see them!' she thought. For there were reasons why the merest

tyro in affairs of the heart might have discerned that Vic and Kipford were holding each other's hands underneath the Indian rug. But aloud she said, 'Oh, in Scotland the difficulty is to escape being married, you know. Everything holds good. If you and Vic were to stand up before a couple of witnesses and declare that you were man and wife, it would be as binding as if the Archbishop of Canterbury had married you with bell, book, and candle.'

Kipford pressed Vic's hand so hard that the Indian rug trembled. Well, that was worth knowing too, if (as he put it) the governor should cut up rough.

'I wonder how our little Hester is taking it?' said the Duchess. 'She will be in her bridal grandeur by this time, and sitting waiting.'

As they drove down the long street of the Clachan, the whole population turned out to see. The ducal coachman gathered up his ribbons more firmly, the postilions on the leaders sat more erect, and the Duchess's four splendid blacks, recognising what was expected of them, bent their necks, and threw out their feet with their best action. With due circumspection the carriage turned in at the white manse gate under the elms. This was held open by Anders in his Sunday best with a flower in his button-hole. Then, with clatter of unanimous hoof and tremendous spraying of pebbles, the equipage drew up on the little sweep of gravel before the door. Kipford gave Vic's hand a final squeeze, and leaped out before the stately footman could open the door. Her Grace slowly descended, and half-way up the steps held up her hands, letting fall a black satin bag in her astonishment.

‘Why, Hester, everybody will be coming in less than twenty minutes — and you in that old schoolroom dress, and a white apron. Where is Carus? I believe you have been wasting your time sweethearting — as if you would not both be sick and tired of it before a month is out. What! he has not arrived yet? He is still at the inn! You have not seen him today? Well, I would not have believed it of Carus!’

Hester took the Duchess up the stairs into her own bedroom.

‘Where is your dress, my dear? I hope that stupid Celine has sent it in time?’

‘Oh, yes,’ said Hester, ‘but do not be angry, dear Lady Niddisdale. This is what I am going to wear.’

‘Why — tell me why?’ said the Duchess, kind but mystified. ‘Does it not suit you?’

‘Oh, yes, yes; it is too beautiful; but this — this is my mother's wedding-dress. And — and — it is a secret, but I must tell you — my father has been found. Carus told me not to tell. He is to be here today. Mr. Chetwynd is bringing him. And I want to wear my mother's wedding-dress for his sake!’

‘Very well, so you shall, childie, so you shall. We will give a ball at Scotstarvit House when you and Carus come back, and you can have Madame's dress altered for that. And now we'll have Vic up, and make you look as lovely as we can!’

‘I declare, there is the auld Adam himsel!’ cried Lady Niddisdale, looking out of the window of Hester's little room, when the arraying was nearly finished. ‘I wonder if he is coming to forbid the banns. He should have done that in the kirk on Sunday, though. If he is going to play death's head

at the feast, I'll death's head him, the bewigged old scoundrel!

'But it will be all right,' she continued, after a pause; 'Jim Chetwynd has gone to meet him. Jim will take him in hand. I know that cold-water-down-your-spine look of his. See, my lord is uncomfortable already. He doesn't like Jim!'

It was indeed, with the idea of entering some protest against the marriage of his son that my Lord Darroch had come over. Grumphy Guddlestane had kept him informed of all he could hear at the few haunts left to him in the neighbourhood. He was burning to be revenged on Carus. The iron of the 'sparrables' upon his young master's boot had, by a somewhat unusual portal, entered into his soul.

But as the justly indignant parent approached the Manse, with a rapid step, Mr. James Chetwynd went forth to meet him, holding out his hand. Lord Darroch looked as if he would have liked to decline the honour, but Jim Chetwynd's hand was not easily set aside, and Jim Chetwynd's eye not one to be denied when it had that grey glint in it, like winter moonlight on polished steel, as steady and as cold.

'I think, my lord,' he said, after ascertaining the parental purposes, 'you would do well not to make any objections at this stage of the proceedings. You will only alienate your son more completely, and I am sure you have no wish to do that.'

'And why not?' swelled the peer, the remembrance of his wrongs surging high within his breast; 'I have done everything for the boy. I have never attempted to control him save in this one thing. And now he goes and marries a pauper to disgrace and spite me,

a nursery governess who left her employer's house under grave suspicion.'

'That will do, sir; you must not forget that the young lady was my client, and I have no doubt you remember, too, the judge's words at the close of the trial. But let me remind you that Miss Stirling is the sole descendant in the direct male line of the oldest branch of the Stirlings of Arioland, a family as old, to say the least of it, as your own.'

'But they will be penniless! I certainly will not give them a farthing, and I will see that every farthing I have any influence over goes elsewhere. I will not be defied; defied, sir, by a couple of foolish chits.'

'Poverty, sir, is, after all, a comparative term,' said Jim Chetwynd, gravely; 'I may inform you, in strict confidence, of course, and on my professional word of honour, that on her father's death Miss Stirling will be worth something like ten thousand pounds a year.'

The peer of the realm gasped, as well he might.

'On her father's death! Is not her father dead? Ten thousand a year! If that be true — well, I acknowledge it would make a difference. I have always loved my boy. He is all I have in the world. I should like to give him my blessing—and — and his dear young bride!'

'Ah, who is this?'

They had unconsciously approached the steps of the Manse. It was not far up the little avenue at the farthest.

'Mr. Stirling, you know my Lord Darroch?'

It was Chetwynd who spoke, with a curious tremor in his voice. 'If he stands this he is all right,' he was saying to himself.

My Lord Darroch slowly paled to a greyish-green as he looked at the man before him. David Stirling did not address a word to the peer to whom he was thus introduced, but without a moment's hesitation, in an uncanny silence, he launched himself at Lord Darroch's throat. And he would have borne him to the ground in the fierceness of his anger had Chetwynd not interposed an arm; 'Steady, David, for your daughter's sake. See, there she is.'

David Stirling raised his eyes, and dropped his hands. Above him, and quite near, stood a slender girlish bride, in spotless, old-fashioned white, simple and cheap in material, but fitting her young curves perfectly.

'My God — Hester — my wife!' he cried, and with a reeling brain fell back into Chetwynd's arms.

'How was I to know?' said my Lord Darroch, as Jim Chetwynd, having committed David to his daughter's care, escorted the peer down the gravel; 'I had forgotten about the girl ages ago. There never was anything in it any way, though her father was undoubtedly a rare old scoundrel. I thought she was only a little actress wench out of a player's booth. How was I to know that things would turn out as they have done?'

'How indeed?' said Jim Chetwynd, unsympathetically, and, without any farewell to the victim of circumstances, he turned on his heel and left my lord to pursue his ruffled way back to the towers of Darroch.

They stood up together 'in the greater church,' as the minister put it afterwards, to be married the one to the other, according to the ancient custom and order of the Kirk of Scotland. It was the Duchess's

idea that they should be married in the lovely manse garden, which descends in irregular terraces to the clear amber pools of the Darroch water. The parlour seemed close that glorious September day, and the great beeches at the end of the long walk made a spacious cathedral, through which the winds murmured a kind of solemn nuptial hymn all the while.

Very handsome they looked, Carus proud and straight, Hester thrown back into her teens again by the simplicity of her white dress. But her eyes were purple in their depths, and they seemed all depth together, so great and dark and lustrous they were. Before them stood the minister, and exhorted them to love and good works in the bond of peace, his grey hair making a kind of stormy glory about his head.

And when it came to the questionings, 'I will!' said Carus, in a hoarse whisper. And 'I will,' said Hester, a little pulse going tick-tick all of itself down at the bottom of her throat. They did not kneel at any altar. They were not gazed upon by crowded pews. But the birds of the garden sang their wedding-march as they went soberly down the gravel walk, when all was over, Carus with his wife's hand upon his arm.

'I've got you! You can't get away now,' he said, very low, as they came near the door.

'I don't want to!' she answered, and smiled up at him.

END PAPER

'Behold in me,' said Vic, as she took off her big Gainsborough hat and threw it victoriously on a chair, 'the Prodigal Daughter, just after the killing of the fatted calf—I don't mean you, Kipford. You need not look so anxious. But I'll tell you how it was, Hester. I know you are dying to hear—or what amounts to the same thing, I am dying to tell you.'

They were seated in the same old room of the ancient House of Arioland in which the story began. There was the store cupboard in which the black bag with the red stripes had been set. The marks of the bottoms of preserve jars and honey glasses were still brown-circled upon the pale paint of its shelves. Hester and Carus were living here till the alterations at the new house on the brae were finished. Then Revvie and Megsy were going into the old house to live, for they had at last persuaded the minister that he should take his well-earned leisure, and give up the Manse by the Darroch water to a colleague and successor soon to be appointed. Hester sat and sewed placidly as she listened. Restless Vic twisted her gloves into knots and threw them at Kipford, who indulgently gave them back to her again, as he listened with a smiling admiration to her prattle. They had ridden over from Knockdon together.

'I thought it would be rather fun to see how they were getting on at Russell Square you know; so when I was in town I made Kippie walk over with me.'

'And wait outside the door—no fun!' put in that

young man, plaintively.

‘Hush!—well, Timson let me in, with a doubtful look on his face, so I said to him, ‘You needn't be afraid, Timson, I'm not after the spoons. The workhouse provides those.’

Hester looked up in some astonishment. Kipford nodded, as much as to say, ‘Yes, she really said that! Isn't she magnificent?’ the young man was very much in love.

‘So he led me up to the great drawing-room, where the philanthropy mills still work — and my Sam, don't they grind slowly. And by great good luck, there they were, all except my father and Tom, who, you know, has chambers of his own now. They were waiting on some swells — the peer who has invented the new baby-trainer, for use in all nurseries, complete with automatic nursemaid and patent ‘mother’ attachment—tickles it it under ‘the chin, baby laughs. It cries without good reason — click smacking attachment comes into action!

‘Vic!’ said Hester reproachfully, as became an old and staid married woman. But Kipford only laughed the more delightedly.

‘Go on, Vic,’ he said, encouraging her — which the young woman did not need in the least.

‘Well, when I went in I stood — like this — ‘Return of the Penitent Outcast to the Family Hearth.’ Then, as nobody spoke, I said, ‘I have come to ask you to forgive me!’

‘Then it was mother who spoke.

‘Victoria,’ says she, ‘can you expect to be forgiven when you have turned against all your blood relations for the sake of a stranger?’

‘I know I don't deserve that you should.’

'Hold your tongue,' says the mater; 'I will not have you in my house — either now or ever again! I will make an end of this!'

'Eth and Claudia said nothing, but sat looking at patterns in a stray Lady's Home Journal.

'Mother,' I said, getting down on my knees (here Kipford nodded again), 'hear me — listen to one word from an unworthy daughter — only one before you drive me forth from your roof!'

'Whatever you have got to say — say it and go!'

'And with that she pointed her finger to the door — extraordinarily dignified the mater was.'

'It must have been as good as a play!' chuckled Kipford.

'It was a play!' snapped Vic, 'and do be good enough to shut up. Waffles! So I pretended to look demurely down, and they all waited for me to speak.

'So,' says I, 'it is really nothing, only I thought you might like to know that I am going to marry the Marquess of Kipford, the Duke of Niddisdale's eldest son.'

'What?' they cried all together. 'No, it is impossible!'

'So I said it was just possible, and showed them my ring. Didn't Kippie do himself proud when he bought that?' said Vic, exhibiting it.

'Got it on tick!' put in the fond lover.

Then, as soon as they found out that I wasn't telling lies, they all came round about me like flies to a honey-pot — all except the pater that is!

'My de—ear daughter, all is forgiven,' said the mater, 'I always said it would come to this — didn't I, girls? You know I did, though you won't answer.

And you will be a real Duchess, Victoria, and take

precedence of that little!' Of you, Hester, she meant.

Then Claudia came up and kissed me. 'I hope he will make you very, very happy,' she said in my ear. Oh, Clau knows her way about!

'Kippie had better,' I answered — for the moment forgetting my part — 'or I will make him singularly unhappy!'

Kipford nodded again, as much as to say, 'And she would, too!' He seemed unaccountably pleased at the prospect.

'So with that they all fell on my neck and kissed me — except only old Eth. And by Jove, but she was the best man of the lot. She stuck to her guns, and didn't cotton to the duchess business — not a little bit!

'You needn't think to come your grand marriages over me!' she said, as she lifted her skirts and swept out as fine as you please. If you were going to marry a reigning -prince, I would not speak to you — because of the way you have backed up that little Hester Stirling!

'Good for you, old No-Surrender,' I said; 'you're the girl to lead a forlorn hope — and it 's getting pretty forlorn now, isn't it, Eth?'

'For I wasn't going to let her walk off with all the honours.'

David Stirling died four months after his return from captivity and was laid beside that first young Hester whom (I doubt it not) he went forth to join, where spirit can commune with spirit and love answers love untrammelled to ail eternity.

Sir Sylvania was never the same after the great collapse of his 'speculations.' He remained a rich man still, but somehow to himself the savour had

gone out of his life. So one day he measured out carefully a triple quantity of the same white powder into a glass of water, tranquilly took it, and came in to where his wife was sitting.

'Have I been a good husband to you, Sarah?' he said, quietly sitting down beside her.

'Why, Sylvanus, dear, what is the matter?' she cried, startled; 'of course you have — never a better!'

'Ah, then there is one person on earth who will regret me. Give me your hand, Sarah!'

And he shut his eyes and slept — never to waken again on earth.

And now when Hester and Carus go to Russell Square, as for Vic's sake they sometimes do, Ethel, who is still unmarried, does not see them, but Claudia is perennially charming. And always before they go out. Lady Torphichan-Stirling solemnly draws back a purple curtain as from before a shrine. A full-length picture of Sir Sylvanus in academical gown is disclosed. The black frock-coat falls without a crease, immaculate, faultless, emblematic of the character of the departed.

'There,' she sighs, in the hushed tones of a devotee, 'there stands my blessed angel, once a saint among men, now a saint among immortal spirits. He is dead, but his works live after him. Verily the memory of the just is blessed!'

Then Hester and Carus say not a word, neither does James Chetwynd say a word when he, too, visits the faithfully-tended shrine of Sylvanus Torphichan-Stirling, Bart, M.D., Philanthropist and Malefactor.

There is a sound of young voices now in the great house of Arioland. Lady Niddisdale threatens

condign punishment and compromises for future good behaviour on the basis of present candy. My Lord Darroch comes over and kisses his daughter-in-law.

'This is indeed a privilege,' he says; 'did I not tell you, Carus, you dog, that you ought to get married early!'

My lord's memory is a useful one, even in what it forgets.

Then he takes his son aside, and says, 'By the way, dear boy, just lend me a hundred or two, if you are well fixed at your banker's just now. Jobson is becoming confoundedly impertinent! You'll get it all back with usury some day, you know!'

Carus takes out his cheque-book and writes without a murmur. His lordship has found out to a sovereign how much he may venture to ask.

Revvie and Megsy are happy at the old house. Revvie is buying books a score at a time, having for the first time in his life more money than he knows what to do with. Megsy is up at the Great House every day, and has the poorest opinion of the way the nursery is conducted. Anders does most of the work about the old house of Arioland, and every week bides to 'speer' Megsy, who has not yet consented to let him have his name on her stone in the kirk-yard. But Anders does not despair. 'Some day,' he says, 'I'll catch her aff the fang, and she'll promise afore she kens where she is. If I leeve lang enough I shall yet see on her tomb the words 'Margaret MacQuaker, wife of Anders!'

As for Hester and Carus they are lovely and pleasant in their lives, and their sole prayer is that in their deaths they be not divided.

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1912 Sweethearts at Home
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POSTHUMOUS PUBLICATIONS

- 1915 Hal o' the Ironsides
- 1917 The Azure Hand
- 1920 The White Pope
- 1926 Rogues' Island
- 2016 Peter the Renegade

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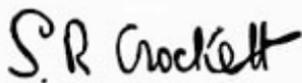
www.gallowayraiders.co.uk

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 signature is written in a cursive style with a large, prominent "S" and "R".