

The Complete Crockett

The Galloway Raiders

digital edition

Scottish works



SANDY'S LOVE

S.R. CROCKETT

Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

First Published by Hutchinson in 1913.

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

We first come across the young Sandy Pryde chewing sorrel in the Galloway hills. He has graduated and aged twenty-two is ready to set out for London to make his fortune as a writer. He is of origins humble enough not to imagine that rail travel should be undertaken with anything other than a third class ticket (even when he is accompanying 'young ladies' on the journey). He is naïve, but eager and willing to learn. Crockett treats him with an irony, but also with a sense of indulgence, allowing us to like this gauche young man and through him, we encounter a familiar world from a more simple and innocent perspective. Sandy has learned that even when the journey is some 300 miles south, he must say 'going up' to London. He also notes that *'in Scotland, literature begins on the principle that hungry dogs hunt the best.'* He does not consider journalism to be a second rate profession, but rather a way into his final goal – being a best selling author.

In London as we see Sandy attempt to make his way (reminiscent of Barrie's *When A Man's Single* we cannot help but think that many of the incidents are drawn from real life. The novel is filled with vignettes that seem entirely real. For example, when trying to make his way, at one point he is so hard up that he earns money cleaning a publisher's yard after they reject his story. Sandy is nothing if not resourceful. And as such, is bound to 'get on.' In due course he starts to get some work accepted and syndicated

across publications, but he has already set up in business for himself, aware of the fickleness of publishing for a man who needs to earn a living.

Sandy is so nice, so innocent, so artless, that we cannot help but like him. He is truly an innocent abroad and we want him to succeed. And it is through the innocent mouthpiece of Sandy that Crockett explores social stigma in a variety of forms. Time and again Crockett illustrates the stupidity of the way people judge others. Both Sandy and VV are decent people who just want to live a good life. But they face a raft of stigma associated with their class and their creativity.

In *Sandy's Love*, Crockett looks in more depth at the theatre (previously explored in in *The Playactress* and *Kit Kennedy*) and the way it reveals the hypocrisy of social status. While VV's 'career' can get her into the houses of the aristocracy as an entertainer, it costs Sandy his preaching 'gig' at the Presbyterian Church. Sandy himself cannot see that VV's career choice is anything other than her version of his parcel carrying – it's what she has to do to keep herself alive.

Publishing and fame are central concerns of the novel. Through the mouthpiece of the narrator, Crockett makes many interesting and often provocative comments on contemporary publishing – specifically mentioning English misperceptions of what it is to be Scots. What we might call 'tartan and shortbread,' he describes as a kilt and haggis 'kailyard' notion of Scots. In the course of the novel, there is much talk of writers such as Lamb, Burns, Hogg and Scott; offering a perspective on Scottish fiction that is not always in tune with contemporary mainstream opinion. There are also observations on

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self publishing.

The creative Sandy and VV dream of a time when they can marry; where he can write and she can replace singing for proof reading and copy editing. This is perhaps more of an idyllic prospect for Sandy than for VV. The reality is that Sandy has to work his way into the industry by writing serials. This was also a reality for Crockett, not always a pleasurable one. He wrote to a friend *'Serial publication is rather wearisome, I always think, but it is what makes the siller come in to the author, so it is not to be despised.'*

The comparison between writing for publishers and running a parcel delivery business is clear to see on more than one occasion.

Over time Sandy becomes famous – or at least ironically described as: *'famous for those few who read books or make them, - and for the many more who listen to the talk of critics or read the sixpenny weeklies.'* His real popularity came later... and has to fend off unwelcome comments from the elite – for example that his writing is too sympathetic to Catholics. The narrator notes ironically *'he had not become accustomed to the astonishing things people will say to authors.'*

Late in his career, we sense that Crockett feels confident enough, or weary enough, to have his say. But he still manages to do it with humour and reasonable grace. As such it is interesting both to modern readers, but also to modern writers.

When Sandy is really famous but also ill, having been worked to exhaustion, a ghost writer is brought into the story. Ghost writing was more prevalent than we might think in those days; Dumas used them at times and here we learn that Quiller-Couch

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was asked to 'finish' a Stevenson novel. The narrator wryly observes that Sandy's proposed 'ghost writer' was actually more 'famous' than him. This is just one example of the interesting social information there is to be found in a Crockett novel beyond the bare romance story.

In *Sandy's Love*, social class is still seen as an even greater barrier than religion. The love relationship between Sandy and VV is always in jeopardy from social mores. And the changing role of women in society is also explored. While Sandy and VV strive for equality, we see society closing rank against the couple – both the strict religious community and the aristocracy. And the aristocratic relations between Balmaghie and Glendonwyn brings the ancient families we've seen in many of Crockett's earlier works together in a new context.

When the aristocratic Armytge McGhie is given a job by Sandy as a mechanic, we see that society is on the move and social class barriers are being broken down. We should remember the novel was published just one year in advance of the First World War.

Change is afoot but there is still time and place for the old ways. Sandy's father expresses the opinion regarding nature that *'those who were born to admire did not need to be shown, while those who were of the profane could not see, though the beauties were pointed out to them three times a day.'* Crockett leaves us in no doubt that the fashionable aristocratic set have scant interest in or regard for nature.

Sandy still has enough appreciation of the old ways to respect his parents and help out his family

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in times of crisis. He gives employment to his brothers and feels a sense of responsibility towards them. He writes to his mother to tell her about VV, countering the rumours she has already heard. But respect does not mean always bowing to the will of others. Sandy is not to be put off. VV and he go on a chaperoned honeymoon in Ireland before their actual wedding, which is an adventure all of its own. Crockett even manages to allow Sandy and McCombie to play a bit of golf (one of his own passions) while in Ireland.

The novel explores the iniquity of the antiquated tenancy laws. Sandy's father and mother face being cast out of the family home they have inhabited for generations on the whim of a landowner, simply due to the to the 19 year renewing tenancy laws.

Above all we get a sense of a world that is changing. In Ireland VV is even forgiven for singing Irish rebel songs in the company of Orangemen. Crockett is not simply writing a nostalgic piece, his writing looks both ways and gives us some interesting food for thought.

While hardly a hero in any conventional sense, Sandy is, despite his humble origins, a success twice over. Not only does he become a well known author but he also succeeds in his business endeavour which grows from one bicycle to a fleet of Daimler vans. By contrast the aristocratic Armytge has much more to prove.

As so often in Crockett's later novels, rail travel features. There are lots of interesting observations and 'facts' about the railways in Galloway throughout, for those interested in railway history. Crockett had relatives who worked in the ticket office, which is perhaps how the narrator is able to

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give Sandy the ‘trick’ of reserving a third class carriage so that you effectively have a first class journey. Crockett, like Sandy, had insider knowledge.

The final compromise of the union between Sandy and VV is that they get married in an Episcopal Church. Crockett suggests we have come to a time when love really does, if not triumph over, then at least find a way round the restrictions formerly imposed on lovers who come from different backgrounds and different walks of life. Finally, compromise is possible without society crumbling into dust.

Published in 1913 by Hutchinson, this was one of Crockett’s last novels. His health was poor and it is easy to resort to speculation given the subject matter and perspective of this novel. In the central character of Sandy Pryde it is all too easy to see a version of Crockett himself, drawn with the hindsight of some twenty years. The narrator looks back at the life of a young rural lad who moves to London and is both created and changed by his experiences there. Crockett certainly doesn’t hold back on venting his spleen on a number of issues, especially publishing, but of course one must remember that this *is* fiction.

Of course anyone who has read Dickens will be aware that the central character’s surname ‘Pryde’ is not an accident but a clear message from the author. Importantly, in *Sandy’s Love*, we do see the range of Crockett’s unique skills as a writer, all still very well oiled and running. His humour, his facility for natural description, his ability to play with narrative form, all the while presenting a seemingly effortless and engaging romance, are as great a

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tribute to his many skills as one could wish for. Crockett was a born 'romancer' and storyteller and for those who value this in their reading he never disappoints from start to finish.

Cally Phillips

April 2022

PART I

CHAPTER ONE

THE PIT FROM WHICH SANDY DIGGED
HIMSELF

Sandy lay on the short grass at the back of a dike strenuously chewing a sorrel stem. The slight flavour of oxalic acid in some leaves of shamrock plucked at the same time, pleased him. There is plenty of shamrock and a great deal of Irish blood in Galloway, facts which explain many things perplexing to the outlander.

Over his diminishing sorrel Sandy Pryde thought how great he was. Yonder were his elder brothers toiling away at the hay, but here was he permitted—nay as a matter of right, encouraged to stroll forth with a book, over which to laze systematically, and think how wonderful he was.

The reason of which was that his cards (he had had them printed immediately after the graduation ceremony) read:

Mr. A. A. Pryde, M.A., B.Sc., Edin.

He had thought of adding: 'Late President of the Logomachic Society, for the Culture of the Individual Logos.' But he had finally decided against it, for, though a born proselytizer and militant to the marrow, he felt somehow that when he set out to the Conquest of London, such a challenge might involve too much explanation and even controversy.

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And, as London was to be conquered in a very short space of time indeed, Sandy did not want to waste time.

Even as he lolled on the grass there was something indefinitely powerful about him. Shaggy leonine hair and eye-brows of the colour of his name tossed carelessly back, and eyes that had looked at professors and examiners unafraid, deep blue eyes of the aforesaid Lish strain not uncommon in Galloway, lighting up features somewhat carelessly chiselled as if blocked out of Craignair granite.

He had enjoyed himself since his return home, but his constant secret warning to himself had been: 'Mr. Alexander Andrew Pryde, Master of Arts, Bachelor of Science, mind out! Think of your career! Think also of keeping up a good debating society accent.' (Even as he spoke he said 'awkcint.) 'Fernielands must not be your Capua, Sandy lad. Not though ye could have your pick of the lasses for the asking—or even without. Think of your future, Sandy— your prospects, Sandy. Above all, Sandy (and let this be sacred) your Career!'

So we begin to grasp the man Sandy Pryde as he was at twenty-two. There he lay thinking himself to be as Caesar before he found out that all Gaul was divided into three parts, as good a man as Alexander brooding over his forthcoming Eastern Trip, as sure of his chances as young Buonaparte, when he sniffed the whiff of grapeshot grimly about the Church of Saint Roch and saw Europe already his own.

Our Sandy was not conceited. He was only sure of himself, equal-minded, resolute against fate. But if anyone had hinted that he would not succeed, he would only have laughed pityingly, but without

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anger. The man, poor creature, knew no better.

On the score of his academic successes, old Miss Glendinning at The Lodge, of the noble family of Glendonwyn, asked him to afternoon tea and thought him 'very genteel.' She even allowed him to walk with her two nieces from England, and Sandy Pryde, Master of Arts, Bachelor of Science, jumped at the chance. That the two nieces were pretty girls was of no consequence to Sandy just then—any more than their nobility. But Sandy, with London in full view, used them to improve his accent, and they used him as merry young women use young men whom they remember as shock-headed boys delivering milk and eggs at their aunt's back door.

But if the sisters condescended to Sandy, be certain that Sandy never noticed it. He was far too busy indexing words habitually mishandled in Galloway, with the same rigour and method as if he had an examination to pass in the pronunciation on the morrow. Eleanor and Lily thought that they were amusing themselves with this raw young man's heart as he towered up beside them. They were misled by the extraordinary concentration of his deep blue eyes as he looked at one and the other. But it was the long 'a' in the word 'command' he was thinking of.

Their aunt warned them to beware. She had often read of poor young men of a certain education falling dreadfully in love with high-born, inaccessible maidens— and then committing suicide. Once when she herself was young—but there, she did not want to have the guilt of Sandy Pryde's blood on her hands. She had a great respect for the family, specially Mistress Pryde. For, though they whiles differed about the price of eggs the quality was

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always sure. Indeed, they had a fine strain of poultry up at Fernielands. Mary Pryde brought the 'clocking' with her from Shillinghill when she married David. And so on and so forth—after the fashion of old Galloway dames, while her nieces (who knew better than to interrupt) listened with bored martyrdom to inextricable pedigrees of old farming strains in which McCullochs and Maxwells, Herons and Gordons were mixed with Mrs. Pryde's breed of Shillinghill Dorkings.

'I am thinking of settling in London,' Sandy remarked suddenly one rich evening in late June as he walked back with Eleanor and Lily in the long-drawn twilight, carrying then: sketching traps. He was fishing for information as to that metropolis of men, for that there were also women there had hardly yet struck him.

The girls turned their heads and looked at him curiously. Would he be coming to call? Certainly they did not want this raw-boned youngster at their afternoon teas in the house, a little beyond the Marble Arch, where their father was eating the bread of ease after long practice at the bar.

They need not have troubled.

'Oh,' they answered somewhat hastily, speaking one after the other in alternate phrases— 'we are supposed to live there, in London, you know— but you see we don't much—so often away— yes, exactly, on visits, and always in Scotland in the autumn—so many friends—besides, we winter on the Riviera, regularly—so we are a little lost in London.'

'Yes, there is a child's book about that,' said Sandy, calmly confident, 'but, you see, I don't mean to be lost. I mean that London shall find me.'

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The girls repressed a natural tendency to giggle, but with a mutual touch of elbows, they at least postponed it. Whoever was heard of in London except people of the right sort, certainly not little farm-boys who had carried milk and butter to their aunt's cook not so many years ago.

They would have been surprised had they known that Sandy had a real difficulty in talking down to them, or that he purposely avoided all subjects really interesting and serious subjects out of consideration for them, when in their company. They, on their part, thought that what he most wanted in London was a well-made suit of new clothes, and Truefitt's address—so that he might get his hair cut.

But after Sandy had lifted his straw-hat and made off, taking dikes and plantations in his stride, they watched the bee-line that he made towards the farm of Fernielands, built like a low-lying modern fort on the top of Femiehill.

The girls laughed freely now, but suddenly the elder, Eleanor—generally referred to as “Nore”—stopped.

‘At any rate he has lovely eyes—I don't know if you have noticed, Lil—and a way of looking at one!’ (She sighed.) ‘Honly.’

‘He had not brought the milk,’ chimed in the ironic Lily; ‘even you can't fall in love with someone whom you will connect to the end of your life with the rattle of milk-cans at the kitchen door.’

‘I suppose not,’ said Nore with her eyes on the distant straight back and the huge stride which devoured the hillside. ‘Did you see him vault that gate?’

‘Showing off,’ suggested Lily.

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'No,' said 'Nore, 'he thought we were in the house—as indeed we ought to be. Aunt will be as nervous as a brood-hen about us.'

'No she won't,' said Lily, 'she has your confidence in Sandy—because of the good strain of his mother's chickens. Dorkings, aren't they?'

'Lil,' said Eleanor, a trifle sharply, 'I only wish some of the young men we know were like him.'

Lily shuddered dramatically.

'Heaven forbid,' she said 'did you see the knees of his trousers?'

'There is no doubt that Heaven will answer your prayer,' said Eleanor a little dryly— 'but for other reasons than the knees of our friend's trousers.'

'Eleanor Glendonwyn Sykes,' cried her younger sister, 'you are in love, and with a milk-boy!'

And she began to improvise tauntingly:

'Where are you goings my bonniee milk-boy?' 'I'm going to London, Miss' he said, 'My eyes are my fortune, Miss,' he said, 'Miss,'he said. 'My shoulders broad and my towsy head,' 'Oh, come and marry me quick,' she said.'

'Lily, you are a fool!' said her sister, and went into the house very gravely. She remained thoughtful, too, all the evening, for she remembered that her father had once been quite a poor boy, long before he had thought of wedding the younger Miss Glendinning of Glendonwyn. She wondered if he had ever delivered milk. If it were not for Lil's mockery, she would ask him.

Eleanor sighed.

And as she sighed, Sandy, with a notebook on his knee, sat on the stile overlooking the orchard, carefully drilling himself to say— 'succeed,' 'advertisement' and oftenest and most frequently his

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favourite and most difficult word— ‘Command.’

CHAPTER TWO

PERSONALLY CONDUCTED

Sandy found himself alone at the Cairn Edward railway station. He looked at his watch. It was half-past nine in the morning. By half-past six he would be nearing the field of battle. London was doubtless humming with people. Sandy visualised a sort of enlarged Princes Street with the Tower instead of the Castle. Most curious it was to think that everyone there was unconscious of his coming, when in a few years at most his comings and goings would be reported like those of royalty. The 'personals' rose vivid and unbidden in Sandy's brain. (Too many things, indeed, rose unbidden there. Sandy had constantly to check its activity.)

'Mr. Alexander Andrew Pryde, the distinguished author of the highly-appreciated books, 'The June Glory', 'At Fever Heat,' and that wonderfully humorous work, 'The Minister's Dam,' left Cairn Edward yesterday morning for London. It is understood that the management of the National Theatre are in treaty with Mr. Pryde for a new and brilliant play. It is time that the young genius tried his wings in that direction.'

Sandy blushed as he read the words off the little luminous spot in his brain, just as easily as if he had the fourth page of a future 'Thistle Crown' curled up within his skull.

His elder brother, John, quiet, sturdy, slow of tongue, but affectionate and faithful, had driven him over. They had said nothing to one another, for John

knew that Sandy had been round the barn-end for half-an-hour, saying good-bye to his mother. So it was no time for brotherly speech. He did not even stop after depositing Sandy at the station. The pony was none too satisfied with the sudden hissings and puffs of steam and the whistling engines. Besides John had nothing particular to say. His heart indeed was loaded with affection, tender as that of a woman, but dumb and discreet— feelings which took the following form:

He broke silence.

‘Sandy, lad, don't smoke. But if ye do, here's a pipe that will do ye credit!’ And shoving a leather case into his hand— it represented two months' spending money for a son of the house of Fernielands — he drove steadily away without once looking back.

With half an hour to wait, Sandy patrolled. His wooden box was correctly labelled, and Sandy looked at it each time he passed to see that the ‘LONDON’ had not been changed since his last turn. But it always remained the same. He had a third-class ticket for which he felt regularly in his side pocket.

The clerk behind the wicket had asked him in business-like tones, ‘Single or Return?’ To which Sandy had answered proudly, with a ring of reproach in his voice, ‘Single, of course, I live there!’

‘One, twelve, six,’ said the clerk imperturbably and ticked a paper check hung up beside him.

Sandy thought how such a mechanical business as that of ticket-selling narrows a man's ideas. The fellow had not even looked up. And he, Alexander Andrew Pryde, with two degrees (and all the necessary certificates for the divinity classes

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snatched between times) was going away to have a bout with the world.

Unconsciously he squared his shoulders and walked more proudly. Two girls came upon the platform, and at the white gate a smart groom was delivering boxes to a bronze-green porter who rumbled a barrow.

'Gracious,' thought Sandy, 'I am going up with the young ladies from The Lodge.'

He said 'up' to London quite correctly, but he did not yet know enough of good manners to say—'those girls from The Lodge.' Sandy had much to learn.

But he did know enough to take off his hat to them, possess himself of sundry wraps and hand luggage and say—'Can I get your tickets—she's signalled!'

She was the Dumfries train. Miss Eleanor Sykes handed him a purse, and in three jumps Sandy was at the desk. The clerk, new to the district and its familiar ways, an interim from the head-office—was already shutting down the grille. But Sandy's huge forearm blocked the descending guillotine.

The clerk mumbled 'Too late—book at Dumfries!'

'None of your lip,' said Sandy, speaking the local language for the last time, 'two singles and look slippy! A shilling more change, if you please! That's it—thank ye!'

Sandy knew the price of 'singles' now, and he had had it out with the foolish clerk who had not been interested in the fact that he lived in London.

He put the coins carefully back in the dainty little golden purse—a feeble, and, from a moral point of view, even a wicked contrivance, but—(oh, foolish and un-Logomachic word) pretty. Hers it was—the

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tall one's— Miss Eleanor, he remembered.

'Why,' cried Lily in utter amaze, catching sight of the colour, 'they are third-class!'

'Why of course they are— and what for no?' said Sandy coolly.

'But we never travelled third-class in our lives! You must change them—quick.'

'If you will take my advice, you will just come along with me,' said Sandy stoutly, for he saw that Eleanor was smiling half-wistfully, half-dubiously. 'What's the use of wasting money like that!'

'What would father say?' said Lily, turning to her sister for support.

'He would say that you were very sensible young ladies! Haste ye fast,' said Sandy, as he shepherded the girls in the direction of the incoming train— 'forward, please—the best compartments are always near the engine.'

He had them into an empty 'third' with all their packages arranged, and was back with the news as to the van in which their labelled possessions had been bestowed before Lily Sykes had time to be angry, or Eleanor to analyse the curious feeling of safety and satisfaction that came over her. Lily was frankly disgusted.

'Nore,' she snapped, 'for goodness' sake don't look like a pussy cat with a saucer of cream.'

And then she laughed. 'Yes, of course, it is because of the milk-boy—he used to fetch cream for the strawberries. Anyway, we can change the tickets at Dumfries and get rid of him. Fancy all the way to London!'

'Hush!' said Eleanor quickly, as Sandy appeared from the telegraph-office whither business had called him, 'don't hurt his feelings, Lil!'

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'His feelings!' scorned the younger, 'that sort of man, brought up on a farm, has the hide of a rhinoceros!'

'Not at all,' disapproved Eleanor Sykes, 'only he has not been much with girls. He has no sisters, and I daresay we are as strange to him as he is to us. Come on Lil! It will be good fun.'

She was obliged to put it thus to her sister, though in reality she went on the adventure with a sort of hope green in her heart, as young and crude as the patriot button-holes of St. Patrick's day.

There was no incident on the hour's journey to Dumfries except the fact that Sandy compelled Eleanor to count the change.

'Always keep note of other folks' money,' he said sententiously; 'as to your own, please yourself.'

He also instructed the girls as to the meanings of the strange names of the stations they passed, Killywhan, Kirkgunzeon, Dalbeattie, Lochanhead. He had had a chum who had taken the Gaelic classes. So Sandy, ever questing after knowledge, had attended some of the lectures, and pumped his friend as to the rest— all in the interval of following up three or four professions at a time. He always possessed bursaries—generally the best to be had. But he spent the proceeds to the last penny on class and laboratory fees. Then, communing with himself, he said, 'There, Sandy, you must make some money or starve. But at any rate, the learning is paid for.'

Thus in Scotland literature begins on the principle that hungry dogs hunt the best.

At Dumfries a new Sandy revealed himself to the Sykes girls—quick, thoughtful, foreseeing. At the restaurant a neat little lunch, daintily prepared, awaited them.

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'It's rather early,' said Sandy, 'but you see, there's a good while to wait, and though there's a dining car, I cannot vouch for it. I can for this.'

And surely enough, the girls enjoyed the cold lamb, salad, and cheese. Sandy was not so sure about what drinks might be suitable for young ladies, and when wine was refused, he was secretly relieved. Sandy was in no difficulty about the paying. He made neither fuss nor mystery.

'It's a shilling each,' he said as he returned with the bill. 'Thank you. Miss Eleanor.'

Lily turned away, fearful of giggling, but Eleanor, genuinely grateful, said, 'Thank you, Mr. Pryde, that is the best breeding in the world. My aunt would like that. You have no idea in what difficult positions men put girls sometimes by not having more of your straight-forwardness about such things.'

Sandy said, 'Oh, of course.'

But all the same he had not the least idea what she meant. In the little idle time that was left him in his two universities he had known some very nice girls— artists, lady doctors, nurses and cookery teachers, mostly from Shandwick Place way and up by Gilmour Hill. These had always paid for themselves as a matter of course. Where everybody was working hard, and all were as poor one as the other, it was the only way. Also it saved a deal of trouble—so at least some of the girls had told him.

Sandy meant to do just the same in London, since it was evident that the metropolis of letters was not exclusively inhabited by males.

This being settled (and a severe lecture administered to Lily under her sister's breath), they found themselves presently in a third-class compartment of a corridor carriage. It was marked

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'Private' and Sandy, who was well known at Dumfries Station ('Change here for all universities'), threw a quick 'Thank you, Robert,' to a smart young man with his banded cap on the back of his head and in his hand a sheaf of papers to send south by the stately 'through' guard. Robert Gilston had been at school with Sandy and had borne off from Sandy the arithmetic prize that famous year when Sandy cleared the board of all else.

'Why, this is a first-class, surely,' cried Eleanor, astonished at the unexpected comfort and the likeness to the 'firsts' on which it had hitherto been her destiny to travel.

'No,' said Lily chilly. 'It is marked Third' inside the door. But who reserved it?'

'I wired a friend,' said Sandy simply, and then, knowing no reason why he should be ashamed of Rob Gilston who was better than himself at arithmetic, he added— 'He is the despatching clerk on the passenger side. I was at school with him. Good-bye, Rob!'

At which the nostrils of Lily twitched ominously, but Sandy, quite unabashed, waved his hand from the carriage window as they slid smoothly out of the station.

'All sorts and conditions of men!' whispered Lily scornfully to her sister. 'I suppose he will smoke all the way to London.'

'I will ask him,' said Eleanor gravely, and she added aloud: 'Do you smoke, Mr. Pryde?'

'Oh, not that often—cigarettes mostly,' said Sandy— 'it was the artists that learned me, but not' (he was going to say) 'when travelling with ladies.' But finding the phrase pretentious, he turned it off somewhat lamely, 'I have quite dropped it of late.'

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'I imagined,' said Lily Sykes demicourly, 'that I saw a pipe in your pocket when you were searching for change.'

'Aye,' said Sandy, with sudden reverence, 'here it is,' and he opened the brown leather case, and there on a bed of green velvet, curling graciously, appeared— magnificently coloured, all meerschaum, amber and silver—the pipe of John Pryde.

A quick saltiness jetted and smarted in Sandy's eyes.

'Ah, I was sure you smoked— it must have cost you something in tobacco to colour that. I know because of Cousin Kit Sykes— Eleanor's friend. He says it's about as dear as a pony.'

'This was dearer,' said Sandy softly, 'far, far dearer. That meant a strong man's work for two months, early and late scything the meadows in the sweat of his brow. And he sat up at night colouring it to give it to me.'

The scorn died out of Lily Sykes' face. She did not understand, but there was something in the rich tremulousness of Sandy's voice which touched her.

Why should there be all this latent emotion about a pipe? But a glance at Eleanor's face startled her. Her sister was breathing a little quickly. Her eyes were curiously veiled. Was she—could it be that she was going to cry?

'Nore!' she said sharply. And there was warning in her tone. She knew Nore.

Then the mists rose and Nore's face was only grave and tender as was its habit.

'Well, Lily, what is it?' she asked, without however raising her eyes.

'Oh, I was only going to ask you if you had forgotten that coat-of-arms you were doing in

tapestry work for Cousin Kit's rooms in the Temple?’

‘You know I have sent it to be made into a banner screen,’ said Eleanor quietly; ‘they say they are coming in again.’

‘That is because it will do nicely for your drawing-room after!’ said Lily, laughing a little viciously. She meant that there should be no doubt at all upon the mind of the ‘milk-boy’ that her sister, who seemed inclined to be foolish, was ‘as good as engaged’ to her cousin Kit Sykes, at present a soldier but also the future head of the great Leadenhall firm of financiers.

But Sandy was thinking of something entirely different.

‘Gretna,’ he was murmuring, half to himself, ‘and now the bridge.’

‘Woof,’ said the train as it dashed across. Sandy leaned back satisfied. The quest of fortune, as understood in Scotland, had begun.

‘Now we are in England!’ he said, with a long sigh, blinking of all that might lie before him there, but not guessing at the least of the least things which should really befall him.

The girls looked at his glorified face, and Eleanor's heart went out to him with pity. Oh, she knew it was impossible. But of course she knew that he would feel strongly just to be in England because they were English and because she lived there.

Eleanor began to wonder about being a sister to Sandy— a sister—or, considering the different spheres in which they would move, perhaps, more exactly a guardian angel.

Yes, a guardian angel would do.

CHAPTER THREE

SANDY BURNISHES HIS ARMS

As the train sped Londonwards the two girls, Eleanor and Lily Sykes— maids with some claim, on the side of material, to high degree—saw their chance and proceeded to instruct themselves as to how things passed in worlds other than their own.

Even Lily, at first inclined to scoff, remained to tolerate, and after a little incident at Carlisle, even in some measure to admire.

A powerfully-built young man carrying a bag and a rolled umbrella jostled away along the corridor looking for a place. He entered the girls' compartment smoking a pipe and was just sitting down when Sandy called his attention to the 'Engaged' label on the window.

'I've as good a right,' the man was beginning with sudden truculence.

'Ma friend, ye are in want of a 'smoker,' Sandy interrupted, possessing himself of the man's bag and umbrella and making off with them; 'I'll find you one!'

'Hey, you stop!' cried the intruder, and ran after Sandy along the platform, but Sandy was already in converse with the majestic guard.

'Certainly, sir! This way, sir, and look sharp!' said the official, clicking a key.

'And don't stop to thank me!' said Sandy, as the door shut. Then he strolled back to his own compartment and apropos of Carlisle Castle, began to tell the girls about Kimnont Willie and the legend

of the 'Fause Salkeld.'

Lily guided him to discourse upon his own past, in the hope that something might be said which would diminish Sandy in the too appreciative eyes of her elder sister.

'Yes,' Sandy admitted in answer to an insidious question, 'I have made a little money now and then. You see I always worked during the summer—till this last year, that is.'

'What did you work at?' asked Lily, still more insidiously.

'Oh, anything—timekeeping at a factory, purser on a Clyde boat, writing for the papers.'

'Oh,' cried Eleanor, interested at once, 'I knew that was your real vocation. Please tell me what you wrote—poetry?'

'I tried my hand,' said Sandy modestly, 'but I soon gave that up.'

'I understand,' said Eleanor, 'you were not satisfied. You could not express yourself. The greatness of your idea was at variance with the poverty of the result.'

Eleanor had read something like this recently in a book of high-class essays.

'Aye,' Sandy admitted, 'that was it. The result was poor. Poetry was a drug, they said. They never paid more than ten-and-sixpence—and five shillings for a sonnet!'

Lily looked triumphantly at Eleanor, but 'Nore was still enthusiastic—more so, it seemed, than ever.

'It must be beautiful to be poor—earning one's living by the force of genius!'

'I did what I could,' said Sandy modestly. 'I asked them double the money for the poetry— but never

got it!’

‘It must be like what my cousin Christopher says is the greatest pleasure in life—playing beyond one’s means!’

‘I don’t play cards,’ said Sandy. ‘I’m not saying it’s wrong. But it’s stupid. And I think your cousin was a fool to say any such thing.’

‘Not a fool, but foolish ... to talk like that, said Eleanor, flushing a little.

‘Tell us about the time you were doorkeeper in the works—ship-building or whatever it was,’ demanded Lily Sykes, who saw her sister’s annoyance, and thought she saw a way of putting a still greater drag on Sandy’s wheel.

‘It was a rough place,’ he answered, ‘we had to fight sometimes. Once they took the timekeeper’s office by storm. I got that there!’ And he indicated a white scar that ran transversely from the corner of his left eye downwards to his ear.

‘Oh!’ cried Eleanor with a quick gasp which she thought nobody noticed, ‘did they hurt you—much?’

‘Well,’ said Sandy, ‘there was a good deal of hurting going on till the police came and they fetched the troops up from the barracks at the double, but I had to leave.’

‘And you so brave!’ cried Eleanor. ‘How cruel to send you away when you had done so much for them—the ship-builder people, I mean.’

‘Oh,’ said Sandy, ‘it was really out of kindness to myself. Little bits of iron used to fall from great heights when I was in the yard. Lumps of lead would whack against the walls as I went home—all by themselves. Telford’s Yard was not good for my health. So I took a little voyage in a fishing-smack as a common hand. I was three months away.’

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'Just as in Captains Courageous!' And Eleanor clapped her hands.

'No it was in the Good Intent of Leith,' said Sandy. 'We ran herrings to St. Andrews and North Berwick for the golfers.'

'You were also at a paper factory, I think?' said Lily, who was acting as cross-examining counsel for the accusation, 'There were girls there?'

'Oh, heaps!' said Sandy, 'That's what paper mills are for—employment for honest and hardworking young women guaranteed.'

'I suppose you let in the pretty ones after time and said nothing about it?'— and Lily Sykes laughed with guile in her heart.

Sandy turned upon her a look of reproach for her ignorance.

'The pretty ones were always there in time,' he explained, 'so as to stand and talk a while with the lads. It was the slatterns who were the laggards.'

This time it was Eleanor who laughed.

The train sped smoothly southwards. They were not again molested. Under Sandy's leadership they lunched, preferring (having regard to the earlier Dumfries feast) the second service. Sandy, who was never troubled by any false shyness, abounded in instance, anecdote, and humour—the latter of two sorts, when he laughed with his companions, and when he wondered what they were laughing at.

This, however, did not annoy Sandy. He did not in the least mind being laughed at, and girls, especially, were unfathomable in their merriments. He sometimes laughed just for company, which made them laugh the more.

Never had a journey passed so quickly. Both the girls agreed as to that.

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'I would like to send you a copy of my book when it comes out,' Sandy ventured as they drew near the whisking roar of tunnels which leads out upon the continuous plain of houses.

'Our address is always in the directory,' said Eleanor quickly, disregarding a frown from her younger sister; 'I am sure papa...'

'We are going abroad soon,' Lily interrupted breathlessly.

'I am sorry that I cannot as yet give you my address,' said Sandy with genuine feeling, 'I have not found' (he disdained the words 'chambers' and said manfully) 'lodgings— a bedroom you know. That will do till I get to work and my book is printed, but the address of the publisher on the book which I shall send you will find me. Also the registrar of the University of Edinburgh sends on my letters, as does my mother at Fernielands.'

They said good-bye at the station, rather awkwardly on the girls' part—Sandy offering, as all roads were the same to him, to drive them home in his cab first, and then start and look out for lodgings.

'The car will be waiting,' said Lily quickly, as she adjusted her veil after making a slight but careful toilet by the aid of a 'vanity box.'

'Thank you!' said Eleanor bravely, as she reached out her hand to Sandy in the first freedom of cool open space on the station platform, 'I shall tell my father how kind you have been, and how quickly you have made the journey pass.'

'Thank you,' said Sandy, lifting his hat. 'Yes, it has been a short journey, but there is a longer in front of me. God bless you!'

Eleanor would have liked to say— 'And you!' But

she could not, for the footman was taking the wraps, and her last sight as she stood on the windswept unsympathetic platform was the energy of Sandy's shoulders, as he dragged forth his little brass-cornered box from the crowd about the van, shouldered it with one easy heave, and with his bag in the other hand, marched off, disdainingly porters, to the nearest cab rank.

Lily made a very witty tale of the awkwardness of their escort, his rough heather-bred fashions, his self-confidence, and what she was pleased to call the thick skinnedness of his moral fibre. Sandy, she said, was perfectly impervious to hints.

'I think,' said Eleanor, 'That no one could have behaved with more delicacy.'

'In a third-class carriage, you mean,' said Lily, 'Well, at any rate it was an adventure.'

'Such an adventure,' said their mother, 'as I never will allow you to risk again. For the future I shall ask your aunt to send a maid—or Jennings shall go and fetch you!'

'Nonsense, my dear,' said Mr. Sykes, who had been listening behind his paper, 'the young fellow seems to have behaved like a gentleman, even from Lil's telling. There is no actual crime in travelling third-class, and for the rest I don't see how they could have been better looked after if I had gone myself.'

Eleanor looked at her father gratefully, but again he seemed to be entirely submerged in his evening paper.

So letting her mind wander she wondered what Sandy was doing at that moment, and when she went to bed she thought of him yet again, when she said the simple prayer she used after blowing out

the light.

Meanwhile Sandy, licentiate in Divinity though he was, had need of such simple remembrances in the darkness—as those of 'Nore Sykes, and a certain shrewd warm-hearted old woman who was lying awake, listening to the sough of the Fernielands beeches on a hill top above the woods of Glendonwyn.

Once she got up and looked out, and there on the dike outside sat John Pryde. His dogs crouched at his feet, and under the stars he smoked a new pipe.

CHAPTER FOUR

SHIFTS FOR A LIVING

'At first,' said Sandy to the Girl Who Lived on the First Floor, and had a sitting-room, 'I hardly ever got farther than the 'Inquiries,' with a hand which pointed to a very undesirable young man. Then I saw that it was no good. So I walked straight upstairs, and when they called after me, I just said 'Bank' and tried different doors till I found the right one.'

The Girl Who Lived on the First Floor laughed. It was pleasant to walk along the street and listen to Sandy with his best clothes on. He donned them when he was going to make another frontal attack on the publishers. He had manuscript concealed about his person, but so carefully it did not show in his figure.

In so doing he had no thought of impressing the Girl on the First Floor. He wanted simply to get past the publishing and editorial bull-dogs who were his bane.

'Are you going to clean out back-yards today?' Miss Jones asked, looking up at him with amusement mingled with a certain quite real appreciation. Miss Jones lived in the distant suburb of Kentham for the sake, in the first place, of economy. Lodgings were cheap there. Sandy, too, had blundered upon 151, Kandahar Road, and had settled there for identical reasons. Miss Jones was a young lady of rather striking appearance, a little pale to country eyes, with black hair that curled

closely and naturally about her head, giving her a boyish look. She signed herself V. V. Jones, and was understood to sing at concerts. She practised singing for some hours in the forenoons during which Sandy wished her and her grand piano at Jericho. Miss Jones's concerts were always in the evening and generally she came home tired.

Sandy and she had struck up an acquaintance upon the strength of her fox terrier 'Adney,' which had got itself hurt in the street. Sandy recognized the little thing by a dainty woven wire collar. He carried Adney home to No. 151. He had him cleansed and bandaged, but spare bandages and hot water still cumbered the table, when Miss Jones, an impulsive young lady, came bursting into Sandy's garret. Happily his couch was protected from view by a screen bought at Mr. Dunn's sale across the way. . . She saw Sandy standing underneath a flaring gas-jet rolling a bandage in a workmanlike manner, and whistling like a linnet. 'My Nanny's Awa' was his ditty. He had learned a little of surgery also, and so when Miss Jones came dashing in all a flurry of silks and fair, fine linen, calling out 'Adney—Adney —oh, my little darling'—Sandy turned upon her and spoke without any introduction.

'He's doing first-rate,' he said. 'He had better bide with me tonight, though!'

'Oh,' cried Miss V. V. Jones, who spoke in italics when excited, 'he could not bear the separation, the darling. I couldn't sleep. How did you get him? Where was it? How did it happen?'

'I don't know,' said Sandy, pinning the bandage and starting to make a little bag for Adney's worst foot. 'I noticed a crowd of boys about a dog. I sent

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them flying and brought the dog home. I knew he lived here.'

'Then you didn't know Adney belonged to me?' said the girl, who had the very same fear in her heart which (to begin with) agitated the Sykes girls, that Sandy might be a presuming young man—and in the way of her business she was exposed to more than enough of these.

'I thought he was the landlady's,' said Sandy, sucking a finger he had pricked.

'Oh,' said Miss Jones, scandalized, 'a dog like Adney!'

But that night and very frequently thereafter, Adney bore the separation from his mistress with remarkable fortitude. He would trot up to where Sandy was working when he had had enough of exercises, scales and ballad music in the same room as the grand piano, Sandy would hear a scratchy scra-a-tch at the lower panels of his garret door, and lo, in a moment Adney would be on his knee, trembling with delight. His wounds healed quickly—'by the first intention'—as Sandy said. 'He is a clean-blooded, well-bred little beast' was his certificate to Adney's mistress of her favourite.

'I believe he loves you more than he does me,' Miss Jones complained. 'Oh, Adney, Adney—you have broken my heart! And I who nourished you from the time when you were a little snuffling, wriggling puppy and . . . through the distemper and all. Oh, Adney!'

But Adney tore joyously at the flounce of her skirt and tried to explain to her how nice it was up in Sandy's room, where nobody ever rushed at him to hug him when he would rather have gone on sleeping, where there was no singing that made him

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want to whine, and no clitter-bangle-jangle on the grand piano which made his fox-terrier nerves all meningitish. Just the occasional shuffling of paper and the jab of a pen in the ink, which by comparison was nothing.

But of course Miss V. V. Jones could not understand. And if she had it is little likely that she would have climbed aloft to Sandy's garret, curled up on a chair, and listened to the scratch-scratch of Sandy's pen as Adney loved to do.

Nevertheless a real friendship grew up between Sandy and Miss V. V. Jones, He liked her better than anybody in London. He had almost forgotten about Eleanor Sykes even. Miss Jones was not ashamed, for instance, to be seen talking with him when he had his working suit on. And Sandy, when he came in, was glad to talk a little about his day, taking the matter with much gaiety and making light of his worst shifts for a living.

The tale of the publisher who first gave him a hearing was a delight to Miss V. V.

Said Sandy: 'The bald-headed old ruffian had asked to see my story—'Flower of the Hemp'— the story of a moral burglar, because he liked the other, 'A Silken Noose'— both just the same common rot, of course, or he would not have cared a tinker's curse about them. But I could not get an answer out of him as to whether he wanted the thing or not. But I wanted the money— badly. So up I went with half-a-dozen little clerks perspiring after me. My long legs got me there first, and I opened the door as soon as I had knocked. Indeed I'm not sure about the knocking.

'I was sitting down before he knew I was there. Then he said it was no way to come into a business

man's room, and I said that if I could not get an answer from him whether he wanted to print my stuff, I would come in through the window or down the chimney!

'Then he told me to take my rubbish and go—somewhere—anywhere—nowhere—he had no use for me—should—could— would never have any! He never wanted to see my face again.

'Well,' said I, 'at any rate you have the dirtiest back-yard I ever saw. It is a disgrace to be seen by anybody waiting in the hog-pen you call your salon. It's worth five shillings to have it made decent, and I'm the man to do it.'

'So he glared a while, but the humour of the offer struck him. He agreed.

'Perhaps you clean back courts better than you write!' he said, to get square.

'Cash down,' I said, 'you can keep it off the pay for the last story in your Rag if it is not to your satisfaction. I shall want that five shillings now to hire a barrow. I knew I should have to leave a deposit.

'Five shillings? Right it was! I had the rubbish cleared away in two hours and I sold the boxes and cardboard, besides a mountain of wrapping paper, in the Commercial Road for another shilling. I came home by tram for threepence. Of course I ought to have walked, but then I should have been too late to see you and tell you all about it.'

'Do you like telling me things?' said Miss Jones simply.

'Of course I do,' said Sandy with emphasis. 'I must talk to somebody! A Scot has, you know—I don't mean the Bang-went-Saxpence sort most English people pretend to believe in. They are as

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scarce as the kilt, scarcer than haggis, scarcer, indeed, than anything except a kailyard, which no Scots writer living has ever seen.'

Nevertheless the siege of London proceeded slowly. Sandy fired romances, tragedies, comedies, and other eighty-ton projectiles into the most strongly intrenched fortresses of the Row and its ever-extending westerly tail. But the effects were as yet hardly noticeable. Sandy must bide his time they told him. Certainly Sandy could bide time with any man, but how was he to live in the meantime? He asked himself that. Also he asked Miss V. V. Jones. He might also have asked Eleanor Sykes, but he had called twice and found all the family from home. Sandy noticed that the correctly attired male domestic almost grinned in his face the second time, as he watched his search for a card, and his knuckles hardened with Galloway anger.

'The damned flunkey!' he muttered, using the word with which Scotland expresses its utmost contempt, 'he knows they don't want me.'

'Well,' he added, 'I will make the day come when they shall be seeking Sandy's company and that, maybe, before long.'

But this was mostly parade. Deep in his heart Sandy felt himself impenetrable to flouts and jeers, proof against the crosses and rebuffs. All that was part of it. Shakespeare held horses. He cleaned backyards ... Shakespeare began a little younger, it is true, but then he had not had a university education, and besides, he was married.

All the same the instinct of his country— to tell the truth but by no means the whole truth, kept him from saying anything about his visit to the Marble Arch when he saw Miss V. V. in the evening.

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Sandy had had a few half-column sketches accepted (and promptly paid for) by The Morning Dawn. Encouraged by success he shot paragraphs, news notes, character sketches, light verse and quaint inventions presented with an appalling air of reality, so as sometimes to deceive the very elect—members of the staff of The Morning Dawn itself.

These, if printed at all, mostly found their way into one or other of the syndicated papers, vaguely affiliated to the Dawn—the Evening Glow, The Weekly Bud, Sweet Dreams (a soppy monthly), and occasionally in the quasi-religious production. Sabbath Bells, designed (but in vain) for Scotland and the Northern shires of Ireland.

But, from all these, even when he got something accepted, pay was less certain, and depended chiefly on whether the editor 'wanted any more.' If not, the cash was difficult to collect. Sandy could not deny that he needed a new occupation—something steady and paying, it did not much matter what.

Now Sandy the Perfervid was not the man to sit and wait till a job came along looking for somebody to do it. Accordingly he thought the matter over for a couple of days and then decided that the sooner he got to work the better. His idea was good. Already he had spied out the land. The working-class suburb where he lodged was in need of transport. Of course there were the big agencies—'C. and P.'—that sort of thing, and for which you stick a card in the window. The big emporia delivered in their own motorcars. The butcher, baker, milkman had their particular messenger-boys. But Sandy could see a gap and he thought he could fill it. The small shopkeepers had a difficulty in delivering their more distant parcels. Besides, running out themselves

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was not the thing—the average small boy deceitful. They had nobody to send to the city wholesale houses if they needed samples (still more an assortment) to show to a customer who was to 'look in' in the afternoon.

Sandy sounded some of the nearer shops where he had dealt or into which he had seen his landlady go. He pointed out the advantages of his scheme. He proved his responsible position by means of the landlady, the minister of his native parish, and one complaisant editor. Sandy was not sure if the editor would remember him, so he wrote, and received the lapidary reply: 'Anything you like if it will keep you from pestering me!'

Sandy smiled cheerfully and thought of the day when that editor would pester him. When that day should come, he would be good to him. Sandy bore no malice. There is no time for that in Kandahar Road. Besides, he had to go to the cycle-shop, in the yard of which he had seen the old delivering tricycle with boxes fitted fore and aft. It was rather heavy, but then Sandy was the most of six foot and brawny about the shoulders. It was dirty, but—Sandy could clean it. It needed painting, but Sandy knew the price of paint per pound and where to get the loan of a couple of paint brushes, one for blocking in, and the other for lining. The colour he selected was to approximate as near as he dared to the red of the Post Office pillar-boxes, the lining was to be done in yellow.

Fortunately the tyres were good, of solid rubber and furnished with a hardish criss-crossing to guard against side-slip. He would need a new chain, which was a nuisance. But, contrarywise, the brake was on the axle and he could stop dead on the steepest hill

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by the mere pressure of his hand. He must mind, though, or he would go over the handle-bars.

Sandy cast the usual doubts on the worth of the article. He said that he wondered it had not been scrapped long ago. The yardman said that the price was two pounds and ridiculous at the money.

Sandy agreed to the word 'ridiculous,' but added 'at any money.' Still he was in a hurry and if the man was reasonable, they might deal. Would he throw in a chain and let him choose it himself? He would pay thirty shillings down on the nail. He displayed the coins. The shopman thought of an account he had to meet that afternoon, but decided that he would meet a certain Kitty instead, and take her to Brighton next Sunday. The bill could wait—would have to, indeed.

'Thirty-five!' he said, 'and I'll give you the best chain in my place and a box to fasten on in front—a box with handle-bar clips—just proper clips.'

Sandy demanded to see the chain and the properly clipped box for the handle-bars. Then, being satisfied, he paid the money, made his own adjustments, and went back with his trophy to 151 Kandahar Road. He got it in by a door in the wall, generally used in connection with the ashbin.

Miss V.V., who had just got up, watched him furtively from behind the green-sparred Venetians of her bedroom window. Sandy had girt himself with an old college belt and was in his shirt and trousers. The washing which that 'delivering tricycle' needed was, as he would have said, a caution. Sandy splashed himself satisfactorily from head to heel.

Then it must stand still till it was thoroughly dry, during which time Sandy sat in the shelter of a rickety summer-house, covered with one bold hop

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and several anaemic creepers. He smoked John's pipe and thought out his plans.

Presently Miss V. V. came out and picked her way towards him, a slim pamphlet carried in a roll and covered with brown paper in her hand. As she advanced towards Sandy, he hastily shook out his pipe and restored it to John's case.

CHAPTER FIVE

SANDY'S GAGE OF BATTLE

Sandy rose instinctively. Miss V. V. was descending the steps which led to the low-lying oblong of grass-plot, miscalled the garden, of 151 Kandahar Road. She wore some light-blonde Indian silk of a colour like honey, which at once clung and floated about her. She had a Charlotte summer hat on her head, as if tossed there by accident. But what Sandy saw gave him his first revelation of woman and her possibilities. She set her foot on the last step, paused a moment, looked at him, and smiled. A bright thing, winsomely attractive, with something that made her different from all other girls he had ever seen. What this was he could not tell—a touch of languor, perhaps, or smiling indifference, which attuned itself to, and yet strangely disturbed, his own self-confidence.

Then she moved forward, and stopping in front of him with a slight stamp of her foot that flung the scent of all manner of heady possibilities in his face, she demanded: 'Why have you been taking up all my good morning time watching you, so that I cannot learn my part? Besides, what is all this mess you are making at the side of my favourite seat?'

The words were, in themselves, not remarkable. But the voice, the turn of the lips, the drawing tremulousness which Italian cellists call the 'cavata'—Sandy fairly quivered where he stood. The world was new. The brick houses became redder, the dusty grass greener, the fields of Paradise which

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compass Havilah, the land of Eden Gold. A new world had come to him—that at which Sandy had so long mocked. Blue sky and white clouds swung over the Kentham valley. The very dust in the air became an aureole for V. V.'s hair, and the dry warmth of the miles of sun-heated brick houses brought a pale rose to her cheeks, and sent sparks of heady fire to her eyes.

'I beg your pardon,' said Sandy, recovering himself enough to speak in a halting awkward fashion. 'I have bought this machine. You see I am going to deliver parcels about here. Literature does not always nourish its man, except when a fellow gets on the mountain tops.'

'Deliver parcels?' queried the girl, knitting her brows doubtfully.

While Sandy unfolded his scheme, just as proudly confident of success as he had been of immediate literary conquest a month ago. Miss V. V. nodded approval.

'Take what you can get and you will get there,' she said with a friendly smile. And strangely enough the smile reminded Sandy of his mother at Fernielands above the Black Water. She used to look at him like that when he was going off to 'sit' for another 'bursary.' It meant more than mere kindness. It was confidence in him.

'You will bring it hame in your pouch, Sandy!' she would say and Sandy remembered the smile of happiness in her eyes, as if the money were already there. He surprised it again in those of Miss V. V.

He was not old enough even to marvel. As yet he did not know his good fortune nor yet how to profit by it.

Sandy was one to whom fortune arrived as daily

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bread, and if bad luck came by chance, he knew how to convert it into good—or at any rate to make the best of it till the shadows flew away.

Moreover his temporary back-set in literature had made him more humble—not less confident, nothing on this side of Styx could do that—but more adaptive and in a way more tolerant. But the base of him was still the Westminster Catechism and Roos's version of the Psalms as sung in all Scottish churches, and drilled into Sandy during years of studious ennui,

Sandy went on with his painting. Miss V. V. seated herself in the summer-house after Sandy had fetched a cushion for her from the sitting-room. She opened the slim roll of typewriting covered in brown paper, and her eyes followed a few lines before fixing themselves on Sandy's bent head and busy fingers.

'Have you been copying out Shakespeare?' said Sandy, looking up. 'I once did that for Omar Khayyam, when he cost half a guinea—and I hadn't got the half-guinea. Dickson lent me the book.'

The girl stirred indolently, a slight flush slowly colouring the pallor of her cheeks.

'It is a part,' she answered crisply. 'I act.'

Sandy rose suddenly, his paint-brush dripping red in his hand.

'Act!' he said, 'Act! I thought you sang at concerts.'

'I used to,' said Miss Jones, 'that's what the landlady tells people. But I act when I get the chance—mostly sketches at music-halls. I like it better.'

'Music-halls,' Sandy repeated slowly; 'but they are bad places—music-halls' (the old Edinburgh accent came back to him) 'I have always been taught.'

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‘They are places where a girl has to work very hard for an honest living. But you can get your money there as honestly as carrying parcels and cleaning out publishers' back premises.’

‘Impossible,’ said Sandy. ‘Why Mrs. Kendal herself,’ And he served up an incorrect version of the famous Manchester speech.

Miss V. V. looked him straight in the eyes. She saw that he meant no harm by his contradiction, and so she took no offence.

‘You go to church on Sundays?’ she demanded with astonishing unexpectedness. She was leaning back with her small shapely head in her netted hands and the thin, honey-coloured silk of her dress coming and going with her slow, untroubled breathing.

‘I go to the kirk,’ said Sandy, taken aback.

‘What 'kirk'?’ demanded Miss V. V.

Sandy had pity on her ignorance.

‘There is but one' kirk' hereabouts,’ he said; ‘the Presbyterian at the corner of Kentham Road, and even that's half and half. There are no denominations here and no stated minister at Kentham Road— just supply.’

He was talking Greek to Miss V. V., but the girl went on with her idea.

‘There are men in top-hats standing at the door, I think,’ she said.

‘Yes, elders and deacons,’ said Sandy. ‘They are watching the plate.’

Miss V. V. supposed him to refer to the sacramental vessels, but she did not stop to enquire. She was hot upon her plan for the broadening of Sandy's mind.

‘Well,’ she said, ‘I have passed there once or twice

on my way to the park to read, and one of the older men I saw at the door, a man with long side-whiskers like a stage lawyer, owns a full half of the 'Victoria' where I am working.'

'That will be Mr. Hugh Scoville,' Sandy reflected. He is a great one for getting big interest for his money. They say music-halls pay!'

'Exactly, Mr. Scoville. He is an elder, isn't he? Yes, an elder of the kirk, and he takes his thirty-three per cent, in the odour of sanctity.'

'Well,' said Sandy, 'and what have I to do with that?'

'You—nothing,' said Miss V. V.; 'but maybe you will think a little when I tell you where the thirty-three per cent, comes from—not from the price of the seats, but from the bar, Mr. Pryde—the bar. And Mr. Scoville is a great temperance reformer.'

Momentarily Sandy was staggered, but he recovered himself. 'The 'kirk' is a place where the right gospel is preached,' he said. 'It has nothing to do with who stands in the porch.'

'Nor have we who work for our living honestly on the stage, anything to do with those who make their living from the bar.'

'Well, yes,' said Sandy, first Hamilton Medallist in Logic, 'I'll allow that.'

'Allow it,' said Miss V. V. 'Of course you will allow the truth.'

'See here,' said Sandy quickly, 'you want to do your work, I must not interrupt. I want to paint my delivering boxes and enamel my machine. We won't agree because neither of us knows what the other is talking about. Now, if you will come with me to the Kentham Road Kirk next Sunday morning, I'll go to your music hall to see you act. That's a fair offer.'

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Miss V. V. paled at his words, and Sandy put an interpretation on her hesitation.

'Nobody will know you,' he said, 'they are all just Scots folk, and even if they did, would never cast it up to you—not even old Sidewhiskers, the pumphandling old heathen!'

He ventured so to describe Mr. Hugh Scoville's manner of receiving visitors to the kirk he had been the chief means of building.

Sandy was not sticking up for whited sepulchres in the porch, but for religion as properly preached in the pulpit.

'Kirk and music-hall,' he said, 'turn about. That's fair-play. Then we will talk the matter over. At present we don't know each other's premises!'

'Very well,' said Miss V. V. 'I will, if you will.'

'I will!' said Sandy emphatically. Then he too flushed a little. For he remembered that it needed little more than these words, in his own country, spoken in the presence of witnesses, to constitute a perfectly legal marriage. And Sandy was obliged to confess that more disagreeable ideas had passed through his mind.

CHAPTER SIX

PERFERVID TO THE RESCUE

On Sunday the first of July, as ever was, Sandy, dressed in his best and with his tall hat in his hand, at twenty minutes past ten of one of the finest mornings that ever flattered the chimney-pots of the Kandahar Road into the likeness of shafts of rosy flame, stood waiting to fulfil his contract.

Sandy was in his full 'blacks,' yet untempered by the grey trousers he had resolved to acquire as soon as the parcel-carrying trade settled itself on a paying basis. He had carefully pressed his clothes, and had spent a silver shilling on the ironing of his hat. All he wanted was gloves, but these as yet he despised.

Presently Miss V. V. appeared, dressing the part in faultless black, a black hat with a sombre plume and a prayer-book in her gloved hands. At the bedroom door she made Sandy a little curtsy. As she shook hands—for at his knock she had called him into the sitting-room to wait there (she would soon be ready)—he caught sight of a Prayer Book with a silver cross on the side.

'No use for that where we are going,' he said intolerantly, 'no read prayers, no read sermons. Let the heart speak.'

Miss V. V. did not even smile.

'Very well,' she said, and took up a black lace parasol with an ebony handle.

'You approve of me?' she asked meekly, as Sandy took her in from head to dainty shoe in one long, comprehensive stare—the stare masculine which

regards effects only.

'You would do for the parish kirk of Gwendonwyn on Sacrament Sabbath!'

V. V. thanked him. She knew it was the highest compliment he could pay her, and she liked it better than some thousands of others she had received in her day.

At sight of the couple the landlady was so astonished that she ran upstairs to open the door for them. She would rather have missed a coronation procession.

'We are going to church,' Miss V. V. informed her simply. Then, after she had watched them out of sight, she returned, still bewildered, to the kitchen, where she confided to the commercial traveller (who took his meals there) that she was never more surprised in her life. Also that, in her humble opinion, it was a case.

The commercial traveller (Bludso Brothers, pharmaceutical products) laughed contemptuously (and a little enviously) over his belated eggs and bacon.

'Church!' he exclaimed, with his mouth full, 'no fear, Mrs. Larkins, they are off to catch the train up the river. You won't see either of them again this day!'

After a pleasant walk, they arrived at Kentham Road Presbyterian Church. Architecturally it was rather a barren edifice, in status it ranked on the border line between a 'charge' and the mere mission station from which it was emerging.

Here Sandy was well known, and several of the grave-faced young men who were standing about shook hands with him, at the same time showing what they had gained during their residence in

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London by raising their hats to his pretty companion in black. Mr. Hugh Scoville came out of the vestry rather suddenly, just in time to see Miss V. V. smiling because a young man had said to Sandy, 'I didna ken ye had a sister in London!'

'No more did I!' quoth Sandy and passed on down the aisle to the first vacant pew. He stood aside to let Miss V. V. pass, but was much amazed and ashamed when the young lady promptly dropped on her knees and bowed her face in her hands.

Sandy touched her cautiously with his elbow.

'Get up,' he commanded, 'the folk will be seein' ye. They will ken in a moment.'

Miss V. V. rose all shame-faced.

'I thought this was a church,' she murmured, excusing her blunder.

'No, no,' said Sandy, 'it's a kirk. There's a great difference. I'll explain later. Sit up straight. Don't budge. Watch a fly on the book-board!'

'But there's no fly,' said Miss V. V. meekly under her breath.

'Well,' whispered Sandy, his lips never moving in the least, though she heard him quite well, 'look at the place the fly would be, if there was one!'

The ghost of a smile flitted over the face of Miss Jones.

She became slowly conscious of a gaze upon her shoulder from somewhere behind. No, not Sandy's, for Sandy was dutifully watching his own particular fly. But presently a portly gentleman made an errand up the aisle, whispered a little with an official person, and on his return gazed all the way at the black slender figure with the downcast eyes.

A memory which he could not fix haunted him—really the ghost of a poster he had seen and passed,

a thing of spangles and frills, and a coquettish Spanish fan.

But he retired behind, and still the congregation of Kentham Road gathered slowly. They were soberly-clad, rather stern-featured folk with a sprinkling of professional men, doctors and schoolmasters mostly, and they sat, all of them, as it were, retired within themselves, each watching an imaginary fly, not an eyelid raised, not a sound, not an apparent whisper.

Miss V. V. was conscious through her lashes of a young man who sat down carelessly by an American organ. There was a choir of a couple of dozen, perhaps, very unequally divided as to sex, a short thickset man and an overgrown boy, looking vaguely uncomfortable and out of place, as who would say—‘What are we among so many?’

It seemed to V. V. that the solemn hush would never end. But a ripple of uneasiness sprang up among the people in the pews which grew into expectant curiosity as the minutes passed and the hour thundered out from the parish steeple of Saint Jude's.

The white-waistcoated man who had stared so at V. V. strode up the left aisle, clearing his throat. He had an announcement to make.

‘Elders and deacons of this congregation are requested to meet for a moment immediately in the vestry.’

Sandy frowned.

This was by no means a good beginning for a service which he had meant to impress and perhaps convert Miss V. V. He ought to have paid a cab, and taken her all the way to Regent Square, where she would have been sure of hearing something good.

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For, as in every Scottish bosom, it was not worship, but the 'sermon' that buiked most largely with Sandy.

From the vestry, near the open door, ripples of painful doubt came forth to disturb the already ruffled congregation. There was real whispering now, a low willow-by-the-watercourses sough of it. Two or three, even, let us hope not real true-blue Presbyterians, actually turned round in their seats.

'No minister, again!' was the gathering slogan passed from seat to seat, and the three hundred people in the little building with its shining varnished oaken pews and churn-barrel roof tossed to and fro like the sea. They could not depend on the Session, that was clear. Ah well, they would see—the Congregational meeting was near.

The white-waistcoated bald gentleman made another journey.

'Friends,' he said, standing by the side of the organist, a young man who seemed to take the matter with a great deal of calm, 'friends, it grieves me to inform so many of the faithful—who on this day of heat have come so far—to gather themselves together—according to the Word—that we are without a preacher. The elders, therefore, will take turns to read aloud from the Scriptures, interspersing the service with prayer...'

'Unless,' said an old man, rising with some authority from a cross-bench where he had been sitting with his hand scooped behind his ear, 'unless there is some properly qualified person worshipping today with us!'

Now Sandy was determined that V. V. should not have to depart, as it were, empty-handed. He had chosen an unfortunate day, but the welfare of her

soul was at stake. He touched her with his elbow.

'Stay where you are,' he said, 'watch the others. This will never do. Sandy Pryde will not have it!'

Then he rose amid a murmur of wonder and made his way to the session house.

'I am a Licentiate of the College on the Mound,' said Sandy. 'Here are my papers.' And he drew a couple of blue slips from his pocketbook. 'I have no prepared sermon, being but a worshipper. But rather than all these should go empty away, I—will—take the service!'

Whereupon they fell upon his neck, for their elderships depended upon it, or at least very much of their power and influence. There had been difficulties before, but never on this scale. Sandy was their avatar.

'Mind,' he warned them, 'I am not ordained to baptize or to give the sacrament— but I can legally speak the word that is in me in accordance with Presbyterian laws and regulations.' So the beadle slipped his white tie, and they put it upon Sandy. After which the entire Session helped him into the gown.

'It's rather unhandy and made for a small man,' said Sandy, 'but I can take it off when I begin to preach. Mind, this is no my strict business— which is to be a literary man, and in the meantime I am delivering parcels with expedition and at cheap rates. A. Pryde's Parcel Agency. I'm Pryde. I want no misunderstandings. But I'm College bred and I studied by-whiles to be a minister—as for the preaching part of it, I am fit for that, at any rate.'

'You are the very man for us,' said this session of practical men; they knew what it means to start making a living in London, after having been born

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and educated a Scot.

As for V. V. she sat quivering in her place, her eyes only showing her excitement. She felt exactly as she always did on first nights. V. V. always knew her fines so well as to be terrified lest she should forget them—so now a great anxiety for Sandy took possession of her. She watched intently the procession of elders pressing up the aisle and defiling into their square pew. Then yes—that grave gowned figure who came behind was Sandy—a new Sandy—one who did not even look her way.

The beadle held the pulpit door open for him, and bowed as he passed. There was a hush of relief among the people. The young man had satisfied the elders of his qualifications. Still more he had satisfied the beadle, Sandy McKay, from the Black Isle—a man not to be trifled with. The congregation of highly qualified Scots sermon-tasters exiled in London would now sit in judgment upon this young man's gifts as a preacher of the Word.

CHAPTER SEVEN

HIS MOTHER'S SERMON

No Scot, male or female, was in the least surprised to find a 'qualified man' quietly seated in the congregation. There are scores of such 'licensed to preach,' who somehow or other, have slipped into other occupations. More congenial professions have snapped them up, but they keep their credentials carefully, and they go about the world still able to give a reason for any hope that is in them.

Sandy gave out the opening psalm in a quiet, easy, well-accustomed voice. The American organ played the tune over, and the congregation rose to sing. A book was thrust over Miss V. V.'s shoulder by a kind neighbour who saw the girl was a stranger. After a glance at the music V. V. began to sing, and her voice, ringing through the little pitch-pine kirk, almost silenced the choir, and caused half the congregation to turn round.

At Kentham Road, only 'The Old Hundredth' and 'Oh, God of Bethel' really stirred them to take part. For the rest they made tentative throat noises and left the duty of praise to the choir—a notable example of the pernicious influence of environment even on the elect of Israel.

But V. V. sang on, and to Sandy the voices seemed to drop off one by one till she was singing alone. It was a Welsh tune and little Jenny Jones (who today was Miss V. V.) had gone back again to the Llanvaes Calvinistic Methodist Chapel, where she had sung with the best of them.

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Altogether it was a wonderful day for Kentham Road Kirk.

And then Sandy prayed. It seemed astonishing to V. V. that grown-up people should pray and in public. Sandy prayed so strangely too— not in set liturgical phrases, but for what he seemed to need or with curious directness for the people who sat with bowed heads under him. One or two of the elders sat up and watched his face. They were taking his measure.

‘For courage and strength in a strange land’ —(so in substance it went)— ‘not for great faith, but for a little day by day to keep us going— for health, but with ever a thought for the sickness of others—for strength and the knowledge that in a moment our strength may become weakness— for money, and the grace to use it— for the glad and hopeful heart that takes the sting out of poverty—for the sweet influence of a God Who has proven His love for man and interest in him.’ But among all the petitions that which Sandy kept to the end touched the exiles most. ‘For your mothers and any mother, and all whom we love and have left behind away up yonder in the North, we pray and I pray this day.’

Here Sandy's tones deepened and there came a thrill that quavered in V. V.'s heart. At first she had only hoped that Sandy would get through his part without discredit. But this was different. She felt that he was not acting. Dimly she remembered hearing great preachers long ago in Wales, but somehow— yes, Sandy was different.

And then, after a hymn and an anthem from the choir who stared at her as if daring her to come on, Sandy shut the Bible as he rose to give out his text.

And then Sandy twice repeated the words, with

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quiet deliberation, 'Now in the place where He was crucified, there was a Garden.'

Sermons tell but poorly in stories, so the tale confines itself to V. V. and her feelings as she listened.

She had no knowledge of Scottish sermons or of the strictness with which these are judged. It was with a wholly professional interest that she first listened to Sandy. Yes, his voice was good and to a certain extent trained. But presently he was saying strange things. He was speaking of the Eden 'poem' of Adam and Eve— how they had to be brought out of the garden and set to work in the sweat of their brow, in labour and sorrow, before even God could make anything of them.

Then he spoke of a great Sacrifice and a certain place that was a Hill of Suffering and the place of a skull— yet had a garden in its bounds. He told of the three crosses and of One who hung between two thieves and looked down on the ruddier roses and stained lilies of that strange garden. V. V. trembled, not knowing what was coming.

'But,' the voice continued, 'after that came the night dews—then the storm—and the trampled flowers lifted their heads and looked at Him who was the Rose of Sharon and the Lily of the Valley.

'And what has all this to do with us? This!' said Sandy. 'We, most of us—and I pity those who do not— lead lives of toil which often seem barren enough. We leave behind us youth, too quickly flown, wrecked hopes, disappointed ambitions— we climb or shall climb, some of us, the Hill the steps of which are sufferings—thorn-crowned and with bleeding feet we shall climb to the summit—the summit which for each mortal of us must be the

Place of a Skull.

'But— hark to this— there is a garden there— bowers, quiet shades, the dewy flowers about us and the stars above. If we do not see them it is because we are blind. Look about and think of others, and in seeking others to help we shall see the flowers and smell them. We shall hear the 'Today shalt thou be with Me in Paradise' for the Calvary of this world is to climb the mountain of success with no thought save for oneself, while the paradise Garden spreads unseen about us.

'Ye may think that all this is only poetry,' Sandy concluded, 'but I tell you it is the very truth of very God. Go home and think of it.'

Somehow, she knew not how, Miss V. V. found herself outside the little kirk at the corner of the Kentham Road. She waited a while for Sandy, so long, indeed, that the white-waistcoated old gentleman came out and asked if he could be of any service to her. V. V. shook her head without speaking and passed on her way.

'I hope to have the pleasure 'he was beginning, but V. V. was already well down the slope. She had reached the first dried turf-square of Old Kent Park when Sandy overtook her.

He had been running and panted a little.

'I hope you will not think it inconsistent,' he said, 'but the elders and deacons up there had asked me to continue to fill the vacancy in the meantime.'

'Inconsistent!' said Miss V. V. 'I did not know —I never thought that you . . . could speak . . . like that.'

'Oh, that!' said Sandy, who was thinking of something quite different. 'Why should anyone be feared with a tongue in their head and a Bible before

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them? My mother kened ten times more than ever I did about that Garden. It was her sermon I was preaching!’

‘Your mother!’ said V. V. with a sigh. ‘I should like to know her if she has thoughts like that—I have no mother.’

‘So you shall,’ said Sandy fervently, ‘if I have to bring her all the road in a wheelbarrow. But I telled yon elder and deacon folk that though a qualified man, I was a parcel-deliverer through the week, and that if they thought any shame of my earning an honest living, I was not the preacher they were looking for. But they said it made no difference—that most of them had done much the same. Aye, and I got two or three good orders through it—that is, I will get them the morn’s morning—for I telled them it was not fitting to be bargaining about prices on Sabbath, but that once for all, a shilling an hour (or part thereof) were Sandy’s terms.’

‘Of course, after this, you will not dare to come and see me act at the Victoria?’ said V. V. with a slight touch of wistfulness. Sandy stopped and looked at her steadily.

‘What do you take me for?’ he said severely. ‘A man of my word or not? Of course I will come.’

‘But I dance,’ said Miss V. V., quite softly.

‘So did King David before the Lord, and had he been content with that he would have saved himself and his folk a heap of trouble.’

‘I sing.’

‘I know that—this day I heard no one else singing but you. It was that which first made me think of Paradise and the choring angels.’

‘Oh, Sandy,’ cried V. V., aghast at the freedom of his speech—‘you must not say such things—they

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frighten me! Don't you know—don't you see.'

She summoned all her determination and stopped suddenly before a huge poster in a gilt frame.

There was an announcement beneath that 'The Great West-End Success MISS VIVIAN VIVID would appear in the famous musical comedy sketch, 'The Boy and the Butterfly.'

'I am the boy,' said V. V. faintly, 'and oh, Sandy, you will think it horrid. It isn't really, but you will think so,'

'That we shall see,' said Sandy judicially. And then with quick instinct divining that the downcast eyes were heavy with unshed tears, he added, 'This is only your parcel-carrying, V. V. We shall better this yet. You take my arm, V. V.'

'But suppose some of the people from Kentham Road?'

'Take my arm as I tell you!' said Sandy.

And V. V. took it gratefully, wondering if his mother had taught him also how women like to be dealt with.

CHAPTER EIGHT

SANDY, LYRICAL POET

'Yes,' resumed Miss V. V. mournfully, 'I am Vivian Vivid, and they mean that thing there for me. I wonder— after this morning—you would dare?'

'Dare!' said Sandy. 'And what for no? Wait till you see me in a sleeved waistcoat of my brother John's and a pair o' mole-skin breeks delivering parcels! Maybe you will not be for speaking to me in my working clothes?'

'Indeed will I!' said V. V. 'I would walk with you in the Park and be proud.'

'Then what might ye be abusing me for?' said Sandy with cheerful carelessness. 'I'm coming to see you the morn's night. Miss Vivian Vivid. But what made you call yourself by such a daftlike name? To my mind Miss V. V. Jones would have done quite well, and just plain V. V. would have wiped the slate from an advertising point of view! Think of this for an ad:

'Who are you going to see to see? Who but that lovely lass, V. V!

Who are you going to hear, to hear? Who but V. V., my dear, my dear!

Erect as a lance and light in the dance, Ye'll never see the like in France, in France!

Miss Vivian looked at Sandy with admiring eyes, large with wonder at his readiness.

'Did you make that up before—or when?' she asked.

'Oh,' said Sandy modestly, 'that's just nothing. If

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it was not the Sabbath I would show you.'

'You are a poet?'

'Anything but,' said Sandy. 'I am a parcel-deliverer till the prices for poetry go up. Half a sovereign a go, is not good enough money for Sandy.'

'Go on,' said V. V. breathlessly, and speaking like a child; 'say me some more.'

Sandy shook his head determinedly.

'It's the Sabbath I'm telling ye, V. V. That bit jingle just loupit into my head as what one might put on a poster, like. It would be far better than your 'Miss Vivian Vivid,' I'm telling you.'

'I daresay you are right,' sighed the girl. 'In fact I know you are. But if you only knew the difficulty I had to get it down even to that. It used to be MISS VIVIENNE VIVID, and the sight of the horror on the hoardings used to give me cold chills. But, as you say, 'V. V.' would be ever so much better.'

'Can you write songs?' V. V. went on after a pause.

'Whiles,' Sandy answered, 'not quite up to Burns, maybe, but the lasses liked to sing them even if the editors would not pay for them.'

'Oh, the girls liked them,' said V. V. quickly and with a marked chill, 'what sort of girls?'

'Oh, all the girls,' Sandy answered cheerfully; 'how should I know? I never knew the difference between one girl and another till I met you!'

V. V. was speechless at the young man's audacity. But she could not be angry. There was something overwhelming about it. No woman born of woman could long be angry with Sandy. When he spoke, they were bound to believe him, and V. V. was like the others, though she felt that really with

her experience she ought to have known better. Still she was not ill-content; for Sandy, without pursuing his advantage, went on to tell of Fernielands and his mother, of how he stole the milk without disturbing the cream in the wide cool 'ashets' of the dairy. He inserted a straw at the edge and sucked; then his mother, finding the level of the milk in the basins lowered by a good inch, could not understand but took a hazel stick and licked Sandy on chance, as the only ingenious one of the family.

V. V. cried out at this injustice, but Sandy upheld authority.

'Perfectly right,' he said, 'she could not prove it that time, but she had the instinct, and she acted on that. But she let me off things she could prove, such as playing truant. For she knew I learned more lying on my belly behind a dike with my nose in a Shakespeare than at school on a hot day, devising devilments to play off on my neighbours.'

They had a very good time all that day in the little garden of No. 151, and the scantily creeped tonnelle became a memory to Miss V. V. like to nothing she could remember since she left the high Anglesea slopes overlooking the Menai where the towering Caernarvon mountains reflect themselves in the still waters.

Curiously enough Sandy recalled to Miss V. V. her life as Jenny Jones, till she caught herself humming over smilingly the ditty which ends: '*And sweet Jenny Jones, Jenny Morgan shall be.*'

And then quite suddenly, and without cause, she called herself a fool.

Sandy took himself off a little before six to see if he was wanted at the kirk at the corner of Kentham Road or if the session had secured somebody more

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suitable than a week-day parcel deliverer: this time he would by no means allow V. V. to accompany him. Once a day was enough, he asserted, 'till you were used to it.' So, in spite of her offers, Sandy departed alone.

However, he left the girl a scrap-book with many pieces of original verse, clipped from journals and magazines in the days when such things were not simply used as padding.

Sandy went in peace, found that a wandering Baptist teacher had been interviewed, but as his orthodoxy was doubtful, and his lack of credentials not doubtful at all, Sandy again preached. He would have knocked you down if you had called it 'taking duty.' Only Anglican Philistines spoke of 'services.' It was 'preaching' that was wanted and Sandy preached.

He returned to find a gloomy V. V. She had gone to her room, and as he looked curiously about the summer-house, he found his lyrical scrap-book thrown with a certain venom behind the little green garden roller.

Sandy picked it out, dusted the leaves carefully, tucked it under his arm and marched upstairs to V. V.'s apartment. He knocked at the sitting-room door, once, twice, and thrice.

At the third summons a rather sulky voice bade him enter. V. V. was sitting at her desk, severely upright.

She did not turn round.

'Well,' said Sandy still blowing the dust from his collected (but unpublished) lyrical works, 'pretty poor, aren't they?'

'How dare you say what you did about me!' V. V. broke out, swinging suddenly round, 'they are all

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written to different girls! What girls?’

‘That depended on the vignette they sent me,’ said Sandy peacefully, ‘if she was fair with plaited tails I wrote To Marguerite. If the print (it was in the ‘M.E.E.’ days) showed up dark and passionate, I started out as boldly as if I had never heard of Herrick—something like this:

‘Juliet sweet, come let me woo thee, By the dim carnation bed.

All the dews of night bedew thee ,From dainty foot to raven head!’

Very much like that it used to go, but fair or dark, Marguerite or Juliet, it was half-a-sov. all the same!’

‘Do you mean to tell me,’ said V. V., searching Sandy with mistrustful eyes, as if he had been a common man, ‘that all these creatures you wrote about are just imaginary?’

‘Purely,’ said Sandy. ‘What else? Do you think when I was tracking three professions and passing exams, every week that I had time to tangle myself up with a lot of girls? I wrote about the pictures they sent me the proofs of—sometimes three to the hour and good business, that is, if I got the rhymes right!’

‘I am sorry,’ said V. V. contritely all in a moment. ‘I hope the book is not damaged.’

‘V. V.,’ Sandy observed, with more than his usual share of the perfervid, ‘if you had stamped on it, I should have liked it still better!’

‘I did!’ V. V. exclaimed with a snap of her small regular white teeth.

CHAPTER NINE

SANDY'S ROLAND FOR V. V.'S OLIVER

The next night Sandy was to keep his word. He was booked to go to the 'Vic' to see V. V. in *The Boy and the Butterfly!*

Miss V. V. had brought him a good stall, but Sandy, who did not want V. V. to pick him out, at least not at once, preferred to give the ticket to the landlady, setting forth himself (to use a mode of speech recently acquired) 'on his own.'

Sandy had had a hard day that particular Monday. He had looked round to find the different Scots whom he had met at Kentham Road the day before, and had secured a good deal of work, after much arguing about hours and prices. He had now, indeed, something like as much work as he could do. Dr. Girmory arranged with him to call four times a day at his surgery to deliver medicines. The Doctor still struggled against new customs and made up his own prescriptions. Indeed it had been his habit to carry them in his pockets which were made large and deep on purpose. But a rapidly increasing practice and a newly married wife's sense of what was due to her dignity, made the advent of Sandy welcome to Doctor Girmory of Bannockburn House, Upper Kentham.

There was also a certain Alec Grey from Perth, agent for dye-works, and for all manner of cleaners of fabrics, from filmy lace to double tarpaulin. Sandy did not expect much out of him, so far as money went (agency profits being small), but he learned the

whole art of window-dressing, and how to make a good appearance on one roll of art-canvas and half-a-crown's worth of display goods.

Sandy took to Grey from Perth. He had often felt just the same about book reviewing— all the cheap unsoilable phrases into the shop window.

But as matters turned out, Sandy's most serious and hopeful client was not a merchant, but a private citizen. He was a 'Lost Ten Tribes' enthusiast. Being at a loss what to do with his money he wrote and printed books full of costly maps, all coloured and surprisingly logical, showing how tide after tide of invaders had poured into Britain—one tribe at a time, from North, South and East— never from the West — he made a strong point of that. For Jews, however far wandering, never came from the West, no such migration was known.

'You, my young friend, belong to the tribe of Issarchar!' he informed Sandy.

'Oh, I do, do I?' thought the new Israelite, 'then my terms are a shilling an hour to you. Sandy Pryde, M.A., B.Sc. Edin., Licentiate in Divinity, is not going to be called names at sixpence a go!'

So Sandy took round the wondrous booklets which were 'designed to awaken Britain from her sleep of indifference and set her in the path of her high prophetic destinies.' Furthermore, Sandy addressed envelopes to Mr. Burnside's direction. These were chosen mostly from Low Church and Sectarian Yearbooks, hospital donors and lists of births in prominent newspapers.

When he glanced at these Bernard Burnside lamented that another son of Reuben or Manasseh should be born into the world without the least idea of the antiquity of his family. So No. 2 Smaller

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Manual was forwarded by the hand of Sandy, who was to call again in a week to know if the family of the young Lost Tribesman wanted to subscribe to the 'Complete Illustrated Revelation,' price 12s. 6d., to be had only from the Author, Issachar Bernard Burnside, 22, Fulbert Park, S.E. (N. B. Payment on Delivery.)

'I can trust you,' said Mr. Burnside, 'you have the root of the matter in you, though like all other college-kenned young men, you are prejudiced and ignorant of the facts. Here is a book for yourself. Peruse it with care and perhaps one day you may become my first missionary to our mutual native land. At present the word is too true— a prophet hath no honour in his own country! My books have practically no sale in Scotland!'

'In the meantime,' said Sandy, giving the missionary-ship the go-by, 'I'll deliver your books, but I fear me the trade in the twelve-and-sixpenny articles will not be great.'

'Alas no!' sighed the enthusiast, leaning his elbow on a magnificent roller-top desk and toying with a gold model of the Ark of the Covenant which he used as a paper-weight, 'the fact is I published that great and epoch-making work at my own charges, and even now I have to give most of them away—an evil generation (I will not use the other adjective) even when a sign is given them, they will not believe.'

Sandy saw acute prospects of a livelihood in Mr. Issachar B. Burnside, and he recalled some lectures on Daniel and the Revelation he had once heard so as the better to be able to argue with his employer.

But when he got home to 151, Kandahar Road, he found himself tired. Also he had his delivering cycle to clean, so as to turn out fresh the next morning.

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Miss V. V. had already departed for her theatre, but a note from her was lying on the dressing-table.

'Please come and see me before nine. Ask at the stage door, I have left your name with the janitor. Don't be late. 'V. V.'

All day long, Sandy, with the exterior part of his mind on the next parcel, had debated with the rest the matter of his costume. He had a dress suit, rather ancient as to cut, it is true, but quite correct. Only for a quiet corner in a suburban Variety Theatre, it seemed a little too pronounced. He compromised on his dress trousers, which had a stripe down the side (adding a touch of gaiety), and wore his black coat and waistcoat— with a turn down collar and a black tie bought on purpose.

Before dressing he took a bath, made a hasty meal of he knew not what, and turned his face with native determination in the direction of the Victoria Theatre of Varieties.

He could not help catching sight of the gilt frame (like that of the famous 'Bubbles' advertisement) in which the spangles and black and cardinal tunic of 'Vivian Vivid' were displayed at full length.

His appointment being for before nine, Sandy secured a half-time ticket ('If you are sharp there will be lots of standing room then, not a seat, of course, for that will be Miss Vivid's turn, and she's our star. There won't be a vacant place in the house, and our tickets will be out').

So with a touch of proprietorship, deeply resented by Sandy, spoke the box-office man.

Sandy's ideas of music-halls were built upon an ancient dislike of Talmage's sermons, which (for the good of his soul) he had been compelled to read aloud — a vice Brother John self-sequestered in

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parts unknown. These compulsory lectures had sufficed to make him interested in the glittering lights and gay announcements which had smitten his face through the drizzle of an Edinburgh 'easter Haar.' but his Calvinist training had kept him all these years from ever seeing the inside of one of them.

The hour and the woman! He realized it as he stood in the grimy back street and paused to locate the stage door. That was V. V.'s life. He was going into it. What would come of it all?

Sandy was not at all awed, as young men usually are in such precincts. He encountered all unconscious the scornful gaze of the janitor when he asked for Miss Vivid.

'Don't you wish you may see her— better be off. We know your sort here!' said the man. He had expected half a sovereign at least, and so merely for raising fallacious hopes, he was rude to the young man in the morning coat. But something threatening in the set of Sandy's jaw and the thrust of his shoulders, taken along with that fatal absence of evening dress, caused him to change his mind. He limped out of his den, cursing the luck which compelled him to be civil.

'That chucker-out of ours is off on a spree again,' he muttered, 'worse luck! Haven't seen him since Saturday!'

And in the absence of Mr. B. Meares, burly but bibulous, he addressed himself to be civil in a sullen way to Sandy, the unmoved.

'Beggin' your pardon,' he said, 'but what with them dratted boys and their larks, and this 'lectric light a-flaring and a-buzzin' above my head, I didn't rightly see . . . who you might 'a' been.'

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'I called to see Miss Vivian Vivid at her request,' said Sandy, standing in the doorway to the obstruction of traffic.

'This way sir,' said the janitor, 'look where you are shoving—you—(to a call-boy in uniform) you'll find it more comfortable in here by a lot!'

He raised a wooden counter-flap and motioned Sandy into his porter's lodge.

'Miss Vivian did leave a name—I have it somewhere—yes, yes. Let me see—I don't exactly,'

Sandy handed him his card.

'Mr. Pryde of course, so it were— newspaper gent, I suppose. Of course she'll see you! Here, Theodore, you young imp, if I catch you tasting Mr. Elking's beer again, I'll report you. Go to Miss Vivian's dressing-room and ask when she can see this gentleman.'

He gave Sandy's card to the impish messenger with the beer, while Sandy, declining a chair, stood waiting.

There were three other young men in the lodge, each clean-shaven and admirably groomed. They ignored each other, however, and gazed in a melancholy manner into the empty grate, or meditated upon a crack in the floor. They seemed to have found themselves there by some queer Providence, alien to their will. One even sat very near the unclean hearth and had stuck his feet against the empty bars. The expression on his face was a sort of tragic boredom. But all turned their heads, as if moved by one concealed clockwork, as often as anyone came down the stairs. But the momentary spark that glistened there was extinct again before they turned their eyes to the dirty floor and the ashen fireplace.

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'This way, sir,' said Theodore, 'Miss Vivian is waiting.'

Sandy passed out, the janitor following him to the stair-foot, hope of a tip not yet extinct.

'It's you gentlemen of the press that have the chances,' he whispered; 'do you see them three in there' (he jerked a thumb contumeliously over his shoulder), 'they'll sit there the whole night like that—quiet as cough-drops—aye, and pay roundly for the pleasure too. You are not one of them that pays, I can see that!'

'No,' said Sandy, and strode abruptly away into the unfamiliar world where he was to see V. V. The respect of the janitor accompanied him.

'She's a fine young lady,' said Theodore, eager for his chance, 'universally beloved in the theaytur!'

'Look here, you boy,' said Sandy, 'if you speak to me about Miss Vivid again in that tone, I'll take you by the slack of your breeches and heave you!'

He made a gesture with his hands.

'Beg pardon, sir,' said Theodore, 'pressman, ain't you?'

'Yes,' said Sandy. 'What's that to you?'

'Oh, nothing!' said Theodore, sobered, and for once speaking the exact truth.

'This is Miss Vivian's dressing-room, sir,' he confided. And Sandy was surprised and a little disappointed to find the door wide open and the place flooded with light.

'May I come in?' he asked, with a look over his shoulder at the lingering Theodore, which sent that young gentleman downstairs with the news that Miss Vivian had got a mash—no, not a mash, a newspaper Johnny, who would knock the nut off you as soon as look at you!

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It behooved, therefore, Theodore and his comrades to walk warily.

'That you, Sandy?' said a voice from the unseen, 'wait a moment.'

And at the far end (if anything could be far in that breathless little box) a hand waggled in kindly fashion over a screen.

Sandy observed the large bare mirror, the inscribed photographs of comrades, on the table a box of colours— its purpose dimly guessed at by Sandy—several chairs and a little shelf with books— one or two his own, these carefully covered with brown paper to guard against dust and grease-paint.

A slim youth, with a dainty cap and feather, scarlet sashed and with blouse and trunks black, also slashed with scarlet, came from behind the screen.

Sandy did not at first take in the fact that it was really and truly V. V.

'I dropped the spangles,' she said, 'in your honour. This is the best they would let me do without spoiling the piece. I had to fight it out too, I can tell you. More than that, I had to pay for the dress myself,'

'It is— you are— fine!' said Sandy, unable to express himself, and falling back on the adjective of his Edinburgh days with the rich accent of the Bridges, 'Oh, fine that!' he repeated.

CHAPTER TEN

SANDY THE PEACEMAKER

'Sit down, Sandy,' said V. V., whom a severe dame in black; rusty and glistening with pins, accompanied. She had pins in her mouth, was parched and indifferent to all but the perfection of V. V.'s dress. She stooped with a plunge at intervals and made some trifling adjustment of a slipper-bow. V. V. smiled at Sandy's scrutiny of this lady.

'My dresser, Elise—she only speaks French,' she said.

'Worse and worse,' thought the granite Histriomastix who existed somewhere far down in Sandy. 'She speaks only French—in a music-hall!'

'What a fool you are!' countered the Sandy of experience. 'V. V. is the best and straightest girl you know or are ever likely to know.'

To which Histriomastix sullenly agreed.

'Now,' said V. V., 'there is not much time but I wanted you to see me before I go on the stage. I have to do something you will not like, but it can't be helped.'

And sitting down before the glass she spread a dash of pale blue under her eyes, broadly and surely laid down with an artist's sweep.

'That is for the footlights,' she said, 'one needs it in a place lighted like the 'Vic'— not so much in ordinary theatres.'

Sandy watched V. V. 'make up.' She had always seemed to him the acme of sweet purity. It was his joy to get her bath ready for her every morning.

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He would run the water to the proper temperature, poise the big cold-water sponge on the rack, and see that the towels were warm and dry. Then he would go to her door and say quietly but with a certain compelling force, 'V. V., your bath is ready. 'Thank you, Sandy!' a young voice would say, sometimes muffled a little, sometimes ringing through the panels like a bell. Whereupon Sandy would skip off to his own room, keeping an eye, however, on the bath-room stairs in order to prevent any belated 'commercial' from appropriating what he had so carefully prepared for V. V.

Knowing this, it seemed a desecration to Sandy that rouge and grease paint should defile that for which he had taken such thought in the morning—spending one of his precious half-hours in this voluntariat—often, indeed, returning to it.

Still the thing had to be, he supposed, and he offered no remarks—only sat and watched the deft fingers manipulating here, smoothing and fining off there.

'Rather noisy in front tonight, I think?' she said to Elise in French, and at the sound of the foreign language Sandy started. He understood, however, and before the mahogany-faced woman had time to answer except by a shrug of her shoulders,

'Greenwich Races,' he explained, 'lot of shady characters will be about all the week!'

'I hope they will be quiet during *The Boy and the Butterfly*,' said V. V. with a little tremble in her voice—'I remember once at...'

'There will be no disturbance where I am!' said Sandy.

But from afar came the noise of stamping and whistling.

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V. V. looked up quickly, interpreting the progress of the performance.

'You must go,' she said, 'but please wait and take me home—outside, you know—stage-entrance.'

Sandy withdrew, and going round to the front swing-doors was met by a noisy, shouting crowd of young men pouring into the street. At first he was checked, but by vigorous elbow-play, he forced himself within. As the clerk in the office had foretold, there was plenty of standing room, and Sandy quickly placed himself snugly behind a pillar on the right-hand side near the entrance.

The curtain was just rising on *The Boy and the Butterfly* when the tide Sandy had met on the ebb, flowed back into the theatre. The respectable people in the stalls and pit stalls looked a little uncomfortable. There was a hum of chaff which drowned the voices on the stage.

'Hush— hush—quiet there!' said an old gentleman, turning a choleric neck.

'Hush yourself, or I'll marble your blessed chump for you!'

The retort came truculently enough, from a young man very spindly about the legs and beaky about the face. He shook a large fist under the objector's nose.

'Want to taste them mauleys o' mine?' said the youth, 'the last toff wot cheeked me when I was running a bit large, ain't out of horspital yet!'

The old gentleman rose to his feet.

'I have held Her Majesty's Commission,' the old gentleman began, purple to the crown by this time.

'Hold your noise. Here comes little Vivvy. Hooraar for Vivvy!' the young man joined in the thunders of applause which greeted V. V. 's appearance.

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She looked slim and boyish in her slashed scarlet and black.

'Viwy's got a new suit,' shouted the young man; 'who stood you that little lot, Vivvy?'

A perspiring official pushed his way towards the interrupter.

'Out of that, you!' he cried, 'if you can't behave out you go!'

'And who is to put me out? Fetch him out,' sneered the young man with the big hands; 'not you, if I see right, you bleeding blighter of a suet-bag.'

'Where's Ben?' cried the official, 'we'll soon show you.'

'Forrard there, fetch on your Bens—there's more than one of us here, and my name is Humpy Jo—give you the hump in no time, my son!'

An attendant whispered something in the official ear.

'Hang—of course he would just when he was wanted. I'll sack him tomorrow!'

He withdrew in some disorder, and Mr. Humpy Jo continued to distinguish himself by remarks addressed to the stage. He particularly affected Miss V. V., and his victory over the auditorium official had given him a standing, for it was well known that the policy of the Victoria precluded the calling in the officers of the law. The management preferred the old-fashioned 'chucker-out.' No police court report in the morning would give the house a bad name if they could help it.

But Mr. Ben Meares was not to be found, and his colleagues had quite enough to do in their own departments. The entire floor of the house was for the moment the preserve of Humpy Jo and his

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mates.

People in evening dress drew farther back into boxes and gentlemen took the places of ladies whose shoulders blushed at the young gentleman's facetiousness.

Then he returned to V. V. She had just finished singing:

'Sweet falls the evening on Craigieburn Wood,'

when Humpy Jo called out, 'Well done, Vivvy. You remember me. Shall we say 'Ighsters and porter—same as last time. Don't say no, Vivvy darling. Tonight at eleven? Eh, Vivvy?'

The floor rose at him, but he set his weasel face impudently to the angry crowd and asked whoever wanted a taste of his quality to come on. He had only to say where he preferred to be hit, and Humpy Jo could accommodate him. But he was not prepared for Sandy's length of arm.

The Humpy One felt himself suddenly seized by the throat and his head banged against the wall. Once, twice, thrice the breath was battered out of him.

A comrade launched himself to his defence, but Sandy had a spare hand and knee, so the next moment the pair of disturbers found themselves going along a narrow corridor, Sandy supporting them and banging their heads impartially against either side. The weasel-faced young man had the outer wall and suffered rather more.

Presently they were flung into the street, from which they picked themselves up, tremulous and dazed. They strove to return, but the road back was barred.

Inside the manager called urgently for Sandy. He had an idea. 'Get inside that uniform,' he muttered

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quickly, 'you'll be murdered else. Besides, if you will act as head chucker-out it will be a sovereign in your pocket'

'Will the job be a permanency?' said Sandy before committing himself— 'and my afternoons free?'

'Certainly,' said the manager, 'no use for you at matinees—only nights like this. Into the rig—quick! No time to lose!'

So Sandy at the enormous pay of a golden sovereign a night, took yeoman service as interim 'chucker-out' at the Victoria Theatre of Varieties, Kentham.

He was in his light blue and gold when he next saw V. V.

'Got a job here,' said Sandy easily, for he saw nothing extraordinary in the affair, 'my own clothes are in this bag. I'm to see you home official-like. There's a cab. The manager ordered it.'

'Sandy!' said V. V., scandalized; 'and you a preacher on Sundays!'

'I ken,' said Sandy, 'but I am here as peacemaker and there's an even down blessing on that. The Book says so—Matthew fifth and something. All things to all men. If yon lot I fired down the steps come to Kentham Road, I'll preach the gospel to them. If they make a row here, I shall surely reprove them for their soul's good.'

V. V. said nothing. She knew the world better than Sandy and she was certain that no man could serve two such different masters as the Scots Kirk at the Park Corner of Kentham Road, and the famous. Theatre of Varieties, commonly called the Kentham 'Vic.'

Sandy, on the contrary, was quite clear in his own mind. This was as honest a way of earning

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one's livelihood as preaching. He was keeping down the bad—teaching evil its own place, and the more drunken citizens who might burst themselves suddenly out on the cool streets and so fare on their way home, the more was Sandy advancing the interests of sobriety and morality.

V. V. could not argue with the past-president of the Logomachic Society, but she had her doubts. In the meantime the news of Sandy's courage and readiness had already become a legend in the theatre, and many were the girls who sighed and pursued him with liquid glances. He was even pointed out to visiting 'stars.' 'Cards' were sent to him to such an extent that when his ability and trustworthiness as an accountant were revealed to his employer, a standing instruction had to be given to the doorkeepers of the private office:

'No lady is allowed to see Mr. Pryde!'

The management of the Kentham 'Vic' scored heavily over Sandy. For it was his custom in hours of stress to slip the blue and gold-braided coat over his evening waistcoat, and in a little while his mere appearance was sufficient to put down any ordinary disturbance. Specially was this the case after Mr. Meares had played a losing game with Sandy on the pavement outside, had been nursed into convalescence, made to sign the pledge, and (by his supplanter's advice) reinstated on the promenade deck, where Sandy, promoted to higher functions, agreed to keep an eye on him.

Ben Meares let it be known that whoever had a grudge against Sandy would have to settle with him first. So between them they became at the Kentham, as it were, 'all the law and the prophets.'

One Sunday morning, however, before service,

Sandy was summoned to a meeting of the elders and deacons. He knew in a moment that what V. V. had feared and expected had come to pass.

The principal shareholder of the 'Vic' was there in a stiffer and whiter waistcoat than ever, a deeper frock coat and a glossier hat. But it was a keen-visaged and logical Dumfriesian car-manufacturer who explained that it was impossible for them to retain Sandy's services, much as they would have liked to do so.

'And why?' said Sandy, quite prepared and even anxious to argue the matter, 'have you any fault to find with my doctrine?'

'None,' said Mr. Shieldhill, 'your preaching is widely approved. Indeed we have had larger congregations, and better collections, than ever in my time.'

'Especially the last,' said the Treasurer, who regretted what was coming, in the face of the certain return of narrower congregational finances.

'But,' Mr. Shieldhill continued, 'it has come to our knowledge that you have been frequenting a music-hall, and even acting as what is termed 'chucker-out.' It is impossible, as you will understand, for us to pass this over.'

'There are several young policemen in the congregation,' said Sandy, entirely logical and undaunted; 'are they to be expelled and deprived of the means of grace because they do exactly what I have been doing— keeping the peace and in precisely similar places? Do ye think I would go there for pleasure?'

The cases are not parallel, Mr. Pryde, as you, being a logician, must know. You are engaged to preach to us on Sundays, which implies that during

the week you shall so conduct yourself as to give the enemy no case to speak against us or you.'

'I told you about the parcel-delivering,' said Sandy, 'and there are those here who can say whether the work with which they have entrusted me has been done to their satisfaction.'

'Entirely—entirely!' came from several quarters.

'Yes, but—there is another matter,' the elderly man with the white waistcoat interrupted hastily, feeling that there was too much sympathy with Sandy in the meeting, 'I know for a fact that Mr.—that this man is in the habit of walking home each night with a woman employed at the Variety Theatre—a singer and dancer—named, I believe...'

'This is the Lord's Day,' exclaimed Sandy earnestly, 'and I respect it. But oh, man, if your life is of any value to you—it is none to anybody else—I advise you to take care how you speak of that young lady.'

At this point Mr. Shieldhill from Dumfries resumed control, calm and unruffled as Sandy himself.

'We are not judging your way of life, Mr. Pryde. You are, I believe (I may say I know), a brave lad working hard for a living in this great Babylon. But you will see that you cannot mix things. Or, if you don't see now, you will see by the time you are as old as I am. We wish you well, very well indeed, Mr. Pryde—and I am sure that this will make no difference to our business relations during the week, which I for one will endeavour to extend.'

He held out his hand, to which Sandy, ever cordial, gave the grasp of peace. Then, saying 'Good day to you, gentlemen,' he entered the little kirk, and sat quietly down as a simple worshipper by the

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side of V. V., leaving the elders wondering if they had done right.

‘I will tell you afterwards,’ he whispered to V. V.; ‘shove along that hymn book!’

Courage of that kind in Sandy came from the simple approval of a conscience void of offence. He knew he was doing right. Therefore he did not trouble about other opinions. The elders read portions of the Scripture, Mr. Shieldhill said ‘a few words’ on the character of Paul considered as a church-founder and church-leader. The congregation looked occasionally at Sandy, who sat rapt and sphinx-like gazing at Mr. Shieldhill. When occasion occurred, V. V. and he sung together, Sandy so lustily that V. V. had to nudge him to stop. He bent his head reverently at the benediction and went forth into the bright busy Sunday throng, V. V. by his side, [with his head high, and the most unimpaired serenity on his brow.

The session were doubtless right from their point of view, but then, so also was he!

CHAPTER ELEVEN

SANDY JUSTIFIES HIS TITLE

On the following Monday morning Sandy was up and doing bright and early. He had Mr. Shieldhill to see. His parcel delivering business was extending with such rapidity that a central office and assistance became necessary for him. He knew that Mr. Shieldhill had recently migrated from the corner cycle shop looking down Tenterden Hill. Big ugly boards protected the windows with 'TO LET' bills upon them. Sandy knew by this sign that the property was still in Scottish hands, probably in those of Mr. Shieldhill himself. A mere Englishman would have printed with bald correctness, 'TO BE LET.'

No shadow of yesterday's troubles was cast upon the white morning page of Sandy's business arrangements. At first Mr. Shieldhill feared that Sandy had come to plead for a reversal of sentence. But he was soon reassured. The little matter of the kirk session was never mentioned, for they met on Monday.

'Mr. Shieldhill,' said Sandy, 'I am of the opinion that you consider me an honest man. Well, I am; but the most honest man may whiles be out in his calculations. Now, will you let me your old premises at the upper corner of Tenterden Hill? I will pay the rent monthly—or weekly if you prefer. But I can offer no sufficient guarantee.'

'You have a family in the North, I think, Mr. Pryde,' said Mr. Shieldhill to try the lad, 'your father

is farmer of Fernielands, if I mistake not—a substantial man.'

'Yes,' said Sandy, 'but when you were starting out for yourself, did you ask your folk to run risks that they kenned nothing about?'

Mr. Shieldhill smiled at some things which recurred to him.

'Well, no—not exactly,' he said.

'No, you shouldered your obligations yourself, and made your ten fingers your guarantee—the same I am offering to you.'

'What capital have you, Mr. Pryde, if I may ask?'

I have made a hundred and fifty pounds since I came to London, out of this I have paid back my father and my brother John, but I'm not saying that is all the capital I can put my fingers on. I have the offer of more, if I like to take it.'

Mr. Shieldhill pinched his thick clean-shaven chin thoughtfully and studied Sandy intently.

'Any objection to telling me where that extra capital is to come from?'

Sandy hesitated and Mr. Shieldhill glimpsed possible war in his eye.

'I've been a good while here,' he explained, 'I think I might advise you.'

He was going to say 'help,' but he recognized that Sandy was a singularly difficult person to help. The word was not a safe one to use.

'A lady,' said Sandy deciding, 'Miss V. V. Jones; but the name is very private.'

'Oh,' said Mr. Shieldhill, his gaze travelling from Sandy's boots to the ceiling with grave thoughtfulness, 'why don't you marry her?'

Sandy was on his feet in a moment. For the first time in life, words almost failed him—almost that is,

but not quite.

'The lady,' said Sandy, 'is a lady. She is both richer and younger than me' (Sandy's Galloway grammar is apt to escape at such times). 'She would not look at a poor fellow like me.'

Mr. Shieldhill's eyes were lost in a vacancy of ceiling, distant apparently as the vault of heaven. He spoke out of the quiet of a great experience.

'Young women who are willing to lend young men money are usually willing also to marry them.'

'Oh,' said Sandy, 'but I had no thoughts of marriage.'

'Then the more shame to you,' said Mr. Shieldhill. 'You go about a good deal with Miss Jones. I observe even that she accompanies you to the church on Kentham Road.'

'That is because I have proved to her satisfaction the superiority of Presbyterian doctrine,' was Sandy's entirely unexpected reply.

'So because of that she comes with you regularly. It is certainly a marvellously sudden conversion, if one may believe Mr. Scoville!'

Sandy's brows clutched together into one deeply-marked vertical frown. His under jaw stuck out and when he spoke again his voice was hoarse and menacing.

'Tell Mr. Scoville that the first time he says a word against . . . the lady we have been speaking about, there will be little left inside his braw white waistcoat but what ye leave on the road after setting your foot on a toad!'

'Good,' said Mr. Shieldhill, 'but oh, man, don't you see that is the very reason for marrying the lass? It would shut the mouths of all such cattle!'

'She would never look at me,' Sandy affirmed. 'I

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would think her a fool if she did!’

‘A woman is generally a fool when she marries any one of us,’ said Mr. Shieldhill; ‘we are a pretty poor lot. But at least we can keep her from regretting her folly. I have tried.’

‘Thank you,’ said Sandy, ‘I will think it over!’

‘Do,’ said Mr. Shieldhill, ‘and as to the old premises, you are welcome to them. If they are worth two pounds a week to you, go in and possess the land.’

You can have a lease if you like, but try for three months first to see how the thing suits you.’

Sandy shook hands and was going out of the door, when Mr. Shieldhill called him back.

‘Have you considered that it is anything but fair to the girl?’ he said.

‘Eh, whaat?’ said Sandy, astonished.

‘Oh,’ said Mr. Shieldhill, ‘I spoke yesterday as a church official. Today I speak as a man of the world. I have made it my business to make sure, and the young lady is worthy of all respect.’

‘Damn your cheek,’ cried Sandy, who never swore. ‘Of course she is. I knew that from the beginning. I don’t need your confounded certificate.’

‘Don’t you,’ said Mr. Shieldhill gravely, ‘that’s all right and I like you for it. But in London we don’t take many things for granted. But in this case you proved to be right. I grant it!’

‘Thank you,’ said Sandy dryly. ‘Ye had better! And hear ye, sir— if you go sniffing round to find out things about Miss Jones, I, Alexander Pryde, will come in here, lease or no lease, and break your head with my knuckles.’

You won’t get the chance,’ smiled Mr. Shieldhill; I am wholly of the lady’s faction. I only desire that you

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should do your duty by her and that promptly.'

Sandy walked round by the Tenterden Hill premises, and, as he whistled, saw his way to extensive operations. He would bring his brother John, a wise, silent, clear-eyed man, to superintend. He supposed it would need to be horses at first, though his soul yearned for quick motor deliveries. He worked at his plans and gave his mind free play. But all the while Mr. Shieldhill's advice to marry V. V. at once, rankled in his mind. It was true—he had never asked her. But then he was in no position to marry and he, Sandy Pryde, did not mean to depend on his wife. V. V. must surely understand.

Still that clear-headed, keen-eyed beast's words stung him. 'It's not fair to the girl!' he had said. Was it really true? He flushed suddenly hot, and then a chill dew came out upon his brow. It was as if he had been about to faint, as he had done when he heard that he had passed his B.Sc. with Honours—his most vivid emotion to date.

He thought of V. V. sitting beside him in church. Of the pleasant neatness of her gloved hand, the warm little breath that enbalméd him like a flower garden as she rose from kneeling—Sandy had never been able to break her of kneeling, and had now grown to like it, though it distracted his attention from higher things owing to the froth of tiny curls that crisped about her neck.

But on Sandy's table when he got home there lay the letter, which Destiny, always spying out weak places, the hard-bested moments of a man's life in order to intervene, had laid there to be in waiting for him on his return from the interview with Mr. Shieldhill. Of course, it would arrive just when the 'not fair to the girl' was lying upon his soul, heavy

and bitter as the Waters of Marah in the desert.

It was from his mother, and Sandy opened it with pleased anticipation. It brought with it a pleasant odour of peat-reek enclosed in the envelope. He knew where these were kept— inside the calf-skin cover of the old family Bible. There was a whiff of that too, and of the corner cupboard at Fernielands where his mother kept the tea-caddy.

Altogether the missive, so far as its outside went, calmed Sandy.

Far otherwise its contents.

'My dear Son' (so it began),

This is to tell you that we are all well in body, but sore vext in mind, at least your father and me, for John says nothing, and when he does not, the rest dare not.

'But we hear terrible news of you, my son. The elder Miss Sykes has written to Miss Glendinning down at The Lodge, and she brought the letter up yestreen. It was waeful. She says that ye had gotten a very good kirk and were brave at the preaching, till ye lost it by takkin up with a theayatur woman. So ye were deposed—oh, Sandy, tell us that it is no true. But I'm feared—I'm feared. For it was one of the elders that telled her— a Mr. Scoville or Stewill— some name like that. You will ken him. This Miss Eelan (though de'il kens what business it was of hers) wrote very kindly to warn us and to see if we could do nothing to snatch you from the claws of the Woman. Oh, Sandy, I'm feared— for I mind once how that your grandfather was ta'en that way by a lass that danced in front of a booth at a fair, and if my mither had not followed him with the kitchen poker, he would have been off and awa' after the besom like a masterless collie dog. I aye thought

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that ye favoured him. He was a fine man.

'But you have none to guide you in a far land, Sandy, and ye will not mind a mother's word of advice, ye aye took your ain gait all the days of your life. Oh, Sandy, if she was only fitting for ye and a good Presbyterian of the kirk, it's gladness would be nestling this nicht in the heart of your auld mither. But Miss Glendinning said that ye were not even married to her. Oh, Sandy, Sandy— me that carried ye in my arms, on my bosom, now can only carry you in my prayers to a throne of grace.

'Dinna break my heart, my dear, dear Sandy, whatever ye do bethink ye of

Your puir auld Mither.'

Sandy stood a moment white and grim, surprise and rage dividing his swift mind. Then his soul began to release itself in short, disconnected phrases which sounded like expletives. 'Poor Minny,' he muttered, 'that old meddler— why couldn't she stop at The Lodge? What a confounded girl! What business was it of hers? Wait till I get my fingers on old Scoville— he shall rue the day, the white-waistcoated hypocrite!'

He choked with anger, and, seizing a pen, sat down to answer his mother's letter. He had not written four lines when he flung away. He was not in the mood, he recognized that not thus must a son write to a mother— at least one like his. Accordingly he stamped out of the house and set off on a long walk all over Blackheath. His mind kept shaping phrases only to reject them. He came home at last and a telegram awaited him in his garret room at 151 Kandahar Road, S.E.

'Will you accept four hundred on advance of

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royalties of twenty per cent on your book 'Greying Gold' Above offer conditional on your agreeing to let us publish your second, Bungay Brothers, Paternoster Row. Reply paid.'

Before writing acceptance, however pressing Messrs. Bungay might be, Sandy had one or two matters of a private nature to arrange.

First, he must write to his mother. This did not delay him long.

'Dear old Mother' (he wrote),

I did not expect you to believe any lies that might come to you roundabout. The man Scoville lied. Miss Glendinning meddled, and what Miss Sykes has to do with it, I don't know, but if I see her I shall ask.

I never was a minister. I never was deposed. I only preached a few Sabbaths to get the congregation which I attend out of a difficulty. I am to be married to a Welsh girl, a convinced Presbyterian, who sits in the same pew with me. Her name is Janet Jones, and if you want any true account of her, you can ask Mr. Shieldhill (late of Dumfries). He is ruling elder of our congregation and admires the character of Miss Jones very much. It was he who advised me to marry her. His address is 'Triumph Garage, Chatham Hill East, London.'

Tell John to come up at once. I have now two businesses on hand, besides getting married, and that is more than I can attend to with credit. There will be horses to buy, so I need John's advice. Love to you, Mother dear, and don't believe anything or anybody— Except your affectionate Son,

'Sandy.'

Then Sandy stepped out to send a return wire to Messrs. Bungay, referring them to his friends and

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agents, Messrs. Longevity and Son, for all business arrangements. He also posted his mother's letter and immediately felt better.

As he came back he was aware of a whitish prominence gliding to and fro on the opposite side of Kandahar Road. The attached head seemed to be turned in the direction of the first-floor front windows of No. 151.

Sandy almost prayed it might be Scoville.

Scoville it was.

He tried to scuttle off like a frightened rabbit when Sandy's huge strides crossed the road in his direction.

'Police!' he gasped as a huge paw descended on the back of his neck. 'Help!' The last word came in a gurgle.

There was, in fact, an officer in sight. He was coming their way.

'Look here, man,' said Sandy in a low growl; 'if you utter a word now, I'll tell all about your bar profits at the Vic, and a few other things. The summer Congregational meeting is next Friday night. I am going to be there with my wife— now Miss V. V. Jones. D'ye hear?'

'What's this?' said the constable, stopping in front of them. 'Did one of you gentlemen call for help?'

'Certainly not,' said Sandy with great promptitude; 'we have a little bit of Church business to arrange, that's all!'

'Church business— yes!' gasped Mr. Scoville, Sandy's too friendly grasp heavy on his shoulder.

'Well, I did think I heard someone calling— boys up to larks, I suppose!' said the constable and spoiled off, a ponderous dark-blue mechanism.

'And now, Mr. Liar and Hypocrite,' Sandy bent

and looked fiercely into the shrinking face of the Vic's chief shareholder, 'understand short and sharp. I won't break your ugly neck— this one I have my fingers about, I mean—that would be wrong and get me into trouble, which as a married man I bar. But there are three of us who know enough about you to get you bundled head-first out of all decent society. The other two are the lady whose windows you were watching just now and—Mr. Archibald Shieldhill. There, be off with you. Go and hang yourself elsewhere. I must wash my hands after touching you!'

It occurred to Sandy as he was soaping the aforesaid hands that he had better tell V. V. about the marriage, so, having completed a summary toilet, he tapped at her sitting-room door, his wet fair hair still tangled into ringlets.

'V. V.,' he said as he came in; 'you and I are going to get married!'

'Oh!' said V. V. faintly, and rose to her feet without knowing she did it.

Sandy drew her close.

'Yes,' he said, 'I have told everybody and written home to my mother.'

'I think,' said V. V. faintly, 'you might have let me know first!'

'In most cases, certainly,' said Sandy, 'but ye see I was a bit pressed. I had to answer half-a-dozen of them at a time and I knew perfectly well that I could depend on you!'

A faint murmurous rustling pause ensued, while Sandy silently reassured V. V. that his course was the only one left for them to pursue.

'But you didn't break his neck, I hope,' said V. V. when she came to herself, only to discover that by

some mysterious agency she had been installed on Sandy's knee—also that her feet did not touch the ground.

It was, however, rather nice. How big he was, seen from this position. Strong, too. He might easily have broken that man's neck. V. V. shuddered comfortably, like one who, safe indoors, hears the storm blatter without.

'No more theatre!' said Sandy.

'What am I to do then?' said V. V., abandoning the main question—that which had never been asked.

'I had let my mind run on a little house on the Surrey Hills, but as I shall have two businesses to attend to, I think something small and comfortable by the Common or out Blackheath way will be best; in the meantime I was looking at two or three this afternoon.'

'Well, of all the...' began V. V., a certain false indignation in her tone, but her phrase tailed off miserably with the words— 'Oh, you wonderful Sandy!'

And for the first time her arm went about his neck—which somehow advanced things amazingly.

'How are we to live if I leave my work?' V. V. demanded presently.

Quite calmly Sandy exhibited the telegram from Bungay Brothers, and told her also of the coming of John to direct the Delivery Agency.

'But I don't quite see what I am to do,' she hazarded. 'We must have a division of labour. I have been a working girl all my life. I could not bear to be idle.'

'Oh,' said Sandy, 'that's easy as falling off a log. I will write great works— and YOU will do the

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typewriting and correct the proofs!

‘Very well, sir,’ said V. V. with the grave becoming meekness of the new employee, ‘I shall endeavour to give the firm every satisfaction.’

PART II

CHAPTER ONE

THE EVIL EYE

Hitherto Sandy had been triumphant. It never crossed his mind that he could be beaten. He might, indeed, find a notice up— 'No Traffic this Way!' — but he could take another road, a little more roundabout, perhaps, but equally warranted to get there. He would only quicken his pace, and the result would be the same.

Why else had he taken many bursaries, two degrees, and qualified as a Licentiate of Divinity?

In the course of the negotiations with hard-headed Mr. Shieldhill, late of Dumfries, Sandy Pryde, man of letters and head of a remarkable Parcel Delivering agency operating all over Kentham, Parkdown, Blackheath and Tenterden, had been in the habit of looking in somewhat frequently upon his new landlord.

Mrs. Shieldhill, a rather faded, fair little woman with thin lips and a stomach-ache smile (as one who had eaten green gooseberries unwisely but well), often received him on such occasions. He did not greatly like her, but she was evidently a power in the land. For Mr. Shieldhill never decided anything at home without turning to the little arid woman, and saying with what in a less determined man would have been weakness, 'Well, Laura, what do you think of that?'

It was clear that Mrs. Shieldhill approved of Sandy. She liked his ways, even when they were a little blustering, and his laughter, which could 'golder' forth like a blast from off the Atlantic, if V. V. were not by to check him with a warning glance. Laura Shieldhill came from the Cumberland hills, which he could see from the very door of Fernielands, and on the strength of this, she took what she called a motherly interest in Sandy. Besides, she approved of broad shoulders, well and easily carried, and of blue eyes that could be bold without insolence—because they were Sandy's eyes, and Sandy, was far too straightforward ever to be insolent.

As usual, Sandy's mistake was in thinking that he could handle men and women by the same methods. He did not know that the subtilty of women could turn his own strength against him. He had won so easily with V. V. He had taken so much for granted, that the time of his humiliation could not be far distant. The day of reckoning was waiting around the corner.

Think of it! He was engaged to one of the prettiest and straightest girls in London (or for the matter of that in the world)—a certain Miss V. V. Jones, who was going to give up the theatre for him. But he had never yet fought his first losing battle, nor recovered from his first defeat. He did not know the discipline with which failure and heart-anguish balance the character. Hitherto he had simply driven his way through the press by sheer horse-power, and what came near to being abuse of confidence in himself.

Anaemic Mrs. Shieldhill caressed Sandy with her pale eyes, and really made many things—such as taking over the stables and the installation of

brother John—wonderfully easy for him. Also she took an interest in him as a literary man, and told him tales of the great folk of her country who had been Lake poets in their day.

'I doubt,' she said, 'if you will find it possible to combine two careers so different. Yes, of course, there was Charles Lamb, as you say, and Burns and Hogg—well, perhaps Scott, though that was different.'

'Oh, very different from delivering parcels,' admitted Sandy cheerfully, 'but when John gets down, and we have the fast 'Express' service inaugurated, with four cars to take up the wholesale orders three times a day—I need not have very much to do with the business, except to keep an eye on things generally.'

'After that, I suppose,' sighed Mrs. Shieldhill, 'we shall see very little of you on this side of the town. You must have chambers in Lincoln's Inn or at the Albany—every successful author does that—I have read about it often.'

'Nothing of the sort,' said Sandy briskly. 'I mean to settle here where I shall be near the people—the real people who count. What would the like of me be doing in these little literary cliques, gathered for the purpose of admiring each other and abusing everybody else?'

'Mr. Pryde,' said Mrs. Shieldhill, bending over towards him and laying a little dry hand on his, 'you must marry suitably—all your future depends on that.'

'Why,' began Sandy, 'it was,' He was going to say 'your own husband who put the idea of marrying V. V. into my head.' But, with an instinct that assuredly did not come from his father, he forebore.

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He would not cast flints on the nightly path of that good man Mr. Shieldhill. But Sandy was no faint-heart.

‘I thought you knew, Mrs. Shieldhill,’ he said, squaring his shoulders and leaning back in his chair as his custom was when clearing up a difficult point in a logical manner (the manner of a past-president of the Logomachic Society), ‘I was under the impression that I had told you I am going to be married to Miss Janet Jones of Llanfaes, in the county of Anglesea, North Wales.’

‘Oh, not the singer—the girl they spoke about at the time when— when you had to give up preaching? I suppose I shall offend you dreadfully, but neither I nor any lady in the congregation think the match at all a suitable one!’

‘Infernal brutish pigs!’ said Sandy under his breath. ‘If I were only speaking to a man—he would not forget, but—I will study to be quiet, and so triumph over this woman, whose name is certainly Philistia.’ He added, as an afterthought, ‘Over Edom will I cast my shoe!’ The application of which might not be very clear, but Sandy had been brought up to pasture on the Psalms, and whenever he came to a narrow place the phrasing of the old Geneva version returned to him. When you are angry, it is a fine thing to know the Psalms by heart.

‘I think,’ said Sandy diplomatically, ‘that when Mr. Shieldhill chose the most perfect wife in the world he did not submit his choice to a committee of the good ladies of the Kentham Road Church.’

‘No,’ said Mrs. Shieldhill, somewhat taken aback, ‘but that was quite another thing. I had never done anything in my life since I left school, except to keep up my piano and read.’

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'Let me see if you have kept it up?' said Sandy, who had learned more from V. V. than he had taught.

Rather surprised, but meeting his humour, Mrs. Shieldhill gave him her hand, and Sandy felt for the little callosities where the finger tips meet the ivory of the keys. He shook his head.

'You have not even done that much—since—since you married Mr. Shieldhill,' he said. 'How do you put in your time?'

'The cares of a household,' said Mrs. Shieldhill, blushing a little, 'and reading.'

'Let's see the book!' quoth Sandy, glancing at the sofa on which a library book lay face down. 'Oh, the 'Ninth Moon,' by Miss Euphrasie Capua! Well, Miss Capua may please herself, but I should be sorry if her cantharadine mixtures should please you!'

'Oh, they don't—I assure you, quite the reverse,' said Mrs. Shieldhill hastily. 'I merely wished to see what sort of thing is being praised in all the papers, and I presume being read.'

Foolish Sandy, with no experience of women to guide him, took the line he would have taken with a man. He bullied.

'I would rather see you earning you money respectably on the stage of the Kentham Victoria, than rotting your mental fibre reading trash like that!'

Mrs. Shieldhill was exceedingly shocked, and naturally so.

'I do not know by what right you address me in that tone, Mr. Pryde?' said the lady.

'I was telling you the truth, or as near it as possible,' said Sandy calmly, 'and more than that.'

'I do not wish to listen,' said the lady tartly. 'You

are not a fit judge— you who have been a preacher of the gospel, to be led into such society. I wonder what your professors would say?’

‘If they were not so far away I should ask them all to the wedding. I think I shall ask the principal in any case. I dedicated ‘Greying Gold’ to him.’

‘I wonder you dare even to dream of such a thing,’ exclaimed Mrs. Shieldhill. ‘It would be enough to lose him his position!’

‘I think not,’ said Sandy dryly; ‘but here comes your husband, and there is all that business of repairs to settle.’

‘Oh, no,’ said Sandy, as she gathered up her fancy-work, ‘I had much rather you would stay, please, Mrs. Shieldhill. Your advice on things like this is worth far more than that of all the good ladies of Kentham Road as to my marriage with V. V., bless her!’

CHAPTER TWO

THE PURPLE CAMEL

Mrs. Sheildhill put herself immediately into tenue of campaign. Without the least intending it, Sandy had made a dangerous enemy and V. V. one infinitely more dangerous. A woman can always, if she puts her mind to it, make things nasty for another woman.

Besides all which, these were difficult days for Sandy and V. V.

John had come and was busy with the purchase and installation of the horses. Bungay's four hundred pounds melted away, as well as another four hundred which Sandy borrowed from V. V. (as he had told Mr. Shieldhill), at the legal interest of four per cent. That gentleman did not trouble about the rent of his premises, but the order for four automobile delivery vans had to be reduced to two new and two secondhand, the latter just come in from Sarrod's limited, who were experimenting with something quite unheard of before.

Yes, times were hard at 151, Kandahar Road, and Sandy was glad to get an additional loan of fifty pounds from his brother John, to whom he gave a share in the concern much superior to his moneyed interest therein.

Sandy wanted John to stay with him in his rooms at Kandahar Road, but John at once declined.

There was a good stable loft over the garage at the comer of Tenterden Road, and he would be nearer the horses. John had no opinion of London grooms.

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'They might forget to gie the poor beasts their suppers,' he said, 'and then Guid kens if I might not break His Law and their rascally necks at the same time!'

John had a great respect and a greater admiration for V, V., and had been the avowed friend of the young people at Fernielands, when things were at their darkest there, after the receipt of the letter of Eleanor Sykes, sent up from The Lodge by her aunt, the distinguished but meddlesome Miss Glendinning.

But John was adamant. He had an equal respect and admiration for the proverb that two makes company but three confusion. So he stuck to his determination and fitted out a bedroom for himself in the garret of the garage—a little room, but so arranged and furnished, that it took Sandy by the throat each time he entered it, so like it was to the one he used to occupy on his rare visits from college to the small hillset farmtown of Fernielands where dwelt his mother.

During these troubles V. V. bethought herself of her old occupation, and by means of the Countess of Balmaghie, at whose concerts she had sung with much success, she got enough engagements to impress the agencies favourably. She did not want after that, for London was in full season, and every penny she made was used for the bills at 151, Kandahar Road, or poured regardlessly into Sandy's treasury.

'Greying Gold' was climbing steadily from edition to edition. Messrs. Bungay and Company were as safe as the Bank of England—so everybody said. But Sandy could get no more from them for six months. Meanwhile, amid the daily needs of finance incident

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upon the settling down of his great enterprise, he was already deep in the first chapters of 'Cold Steel,' a romance of the Roundheads, with Cromwell as a hero and the charge at Marston Moor ever before his eyes, making his breath fetch itself short and his palms tingle. For like every Scot of his upbringing, he was Cromwellian, Carlylean, Cameronian to the marrow, and not even Dunbar could shake his faith in the Lord Protector.

Meanwhile Sandy had become a famous man—that is, for those few who read books, or make them—and for the many more who listen to the talk of critics, or read the sixpenny weeklies. This was mainly fictitious and due to curiosity. His real popularity came later, when men and women wrote from the uttermost parts of the earth to beseech him to save a heroine who was evidently set aside for doom, or miraculously to restore to life a favourite character done to death in a railway accident.

He received many invitations, and if it happened that he could spare a night from John and his figures, or especially if V. V. happened to be out singing, he would accept and go. These were busy days and often Sandy Pryde and V. V. had to keep each other aware of their several engagements by notes left in charge of the landlady—to be laid on their several tables.

One evening V. V. had sent a note of this kind. Sandy was not to wait for her. She had to go to one of the big houses somewhere near Regent's Park. But he was not to trouble or worry. She would drive home in a cab all the way.

'Confound!' said Sandy. 'I wish V. V. had told me where.'

And he went to the mantelpiece and after some

delay fixed upon an invitation for that evening—Lady Balmaghie of Quentainespie, Gloucester Gate. Well, after all, he might as well go as not! Henry Dorset would be there—also MacMaster, his brother Scot with whom he fought at sight, like a couple of neighbouring collies, but notwithstanding loved like a comrade— because he had the understanding, and because, even about his ruffled hair and ill-cut dress-suit, there hung the tang of the peat reek.

Yes, there would be women too, but it was a pity—that V. V. had not told him where she was singing’— Gloucester Gate—he might have got off in time to see her home—always a great pleasure to Sandy, especially in these crowded days of work and separation.

Sandy was heartily received by Lady Balmaghie, a countrywoman of his own, wedded to the Lord of the land which Sandy was celebrating in the opening chapters of ‘Cold Steel,’ just beginning to be famous in the pages of the Graphic chiefly because it had the good fortune to be illustrated by certain magnificent drawings of Mr. Seymour Mathews, R.A.

‘I hope you will like my little gathering, Mr. Pryde,’ she said, with the gently severe tone of condescension which great ladies of the older school are wont to use towards artists and literary men. ‘I have arranged it as much as possible in the keynote of your beautiful book, ‘Cold Steel.’ The Graphic people are doling it out with provoking parsimony, don’t you find it so?’

‘Well,’ said Sandy, ‘it is very nice of you to like what is done of the book. If I had not all the trouble of my parcel-delivering business on my mind at the same time, I dare say I could do better.’

‘Do you mean to say that you have more to do

than to write such a work of art?' said Lady Balmaghie. 'To me your work sounds like a Voice speaking out of a great Silence!'

'I think, Lady Balmaghie,' said Sandy, 'that speaking out of a great noise into a great silence would be a more exact description. You are the first person I have ever heard say a word about it—except the sub-editor, who complained that I was at least a thousand words short in the first half!'

Lady Balmaghie deigned to smile. But she was not put off her subject nor diverted from the purpose she had settled in her mind to speak about when first she had thought of asking Sandy.

'I hope you will let me say one thing, Mr. Pryde, about your new book. I observe the same laxitude in it which I deprecated so much in 'Greying Gold.' You are not sufficiently alive to the terrible progress which Papal Domination is making in this country! It seems to me that you are much too lenient. Especially I grieve to notice that many of your most sympathetic characters are Roman Catholics.'

'But you see they were, Lady Balmaghie,' said Sandy. 'I did not make them so. It is a historical romance, you understand, and as accurate in detail as I can make it.'

'But would it not be better, in view of all that is taking place at present—the invasion of our country by foreign monastic orders, and the daily defections that one reads of in the Rock, to—ah— well, might I suggest that you should make the villain and his accomplices of that idolatrous religion, and the good people all fervent Protestants?'

Sandy did not know whether to laugh or to take the matter gravely. He had not become accustomed to the astonishing things that people will suggest to

authors, but luckily he remembered that all interest in his writings was so much to the good. So he answered quite soberly, 'The idea might be a good one, Lady Balmaghie, but, for instance, your own ancestors, the Douglasses of Tantallon, were Catholic at that time, and your cousins of Portpatrick are so still. What would they say, if in my book I were to write them down as of the reformed religion?'

'I was not referring to the old families,' said Lady Balmaghie, annoyed and somewhat taken aback, 'but I think you might show a little less sympathy for such men as the Prior of New Abbey. He could not have been so much beloved among the people as you make him— not in a country filled with good Protestants.'

'I fear he was, however,' said Sandy demurely. 'But, you see, except in the case of a very few early scholars of high family, the Catholics never wrote the word 'Persecution' across Scotland. That was left for the second Charles, his brother James, and Lauderdale— with their henchmen, Claverhouse and Lag. They were the enemy and have so remained. To this day the Scot thinks of the Catholic chapel as a place where poor Irish folk go because they know no better. But the reason that keeps Scotland Radical through the centuries is the gathering of lairds' carriages and motor-cars about the Episcopalian meeting-house. Then a Scot always (as the French say) sees red— through the bloody mist of the Killing Time!'

'But,' said Lady Balmaghie, rendered immediately nervous, 'I worship there myself—so does my husband, when he goes at all!'

'Ah, yes,' said Sandy, 'that is education, of course— public school training, and long sojourn in

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the South. I do not wonder. Nor essentially is there any real religious difference. But the political results of the experiment of the later Stuarts will take many centuries yet to be forgotten in Scotland. We forget slowly in the North.'

'Sheer prejudice!' Lady Balmaghie exclaimed bitterly. Sandy smiled with tolerance.

'Yes,' he admitted, 'there is a good deal of prejudice on both sides. But I was only referring to facts.'

His hostess retired from the unequal fray. A licentiate of Divinity who could write 'Cold Steel' must be left to his fate. Besides, she had heard of Sandy's mother and her folk at Shillinghill and of the Prydes of Fernielands. They were a stubborn race, people said, and went their own way. So Lady Balmaghie introduced him to one and another who were interested in the latest and most difficult of lions literary. Fantastic tales of his past circulated rapidly.

This was the more strange because the plain tale of his adventures—nay, of his present daily life, would have beaten them all hollow.

Sandy had a bad habit of giving names to people to whom he was introduced, while he smiled and listened and talked. He happened to be left for a long season to the tender mercies of the Purple Camel, a Western woman-writer, who found London much more congenial than her native land. The lady was high in colour, well developed in figure, and her locks had the purple gloss of the raven's wing. A certain uncertainty as to whether she had not put on her dress wrongside foremost, specially conspicuous about the shoulders, was responsible for the substantive.

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Though the name leaped up unbidden into his mind, Sandy had the grace to be ashamed of himself, and contrition added to the charm of manner which never forsook him with women— nay, which kept them from disliking him, even when he bullied them in the same way as he bullied men.

But Sandy did not yet know that though this failing might be forgiven in himself it would certainly be revenged tenfold upon his women-folk, whoever they might be.

He was standing thus, deep in defence of Bret Harte, whom the Purple Camel had denounced as wholly untrue to the conditions of life in the California of today, when the preliminary chords of a song were struck upon a piano hidden somewhere in a recess. Then, with stunning unexpectedness, he heard the voice he knew best in the world uplifted in song:

'I've heard them liltin at the you milkin' Lasses a liltin' afore dawn o' day,

But noo they are moanin' in ila green loanin', The Floors o' the Forest are a wede away.'

The matchless lament rendered him deaf to all else. The Purple Camel continued her argument closer to his elbow.

Sandy forgot his manners entirely.

'Hush,' he said brusquely, 'it is V. V.!'

'It's who?' said the Purple Camel, turning indignantly round to see what was interrupting her survey of the fruit-farm crops of the Golden Gate.

Sandy recalled himself to good breeding with an effort.

'I beg your pardon,' he said quickly, 'The Floores o' the Forest' is a kind of sacred anthem to us—a mother's cry for her children—Scotland's wail for her

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first great national disaster! It is as if you had lost Washington and his army!

'I think I understand you,' said the Purple Camel doubtfully. 'But why did you say "There's V. V.!"?'

'Miss V. V. Jones is the lady who is singing,' Sandy explained sweetly. 'I have known her for some considerable time, though not for as long as Lady Balmaghie has done.'

'Lady Balmaghie?' said the Purple Camel, who had come to London purposely to be amused. 'She is our hostess, isn't she—the rather stupid-looking woman dressed like a frump?'

'Do you know I don't think we care much in Galloway how Lady Balmaghie is dressed,' said Sandy, with dangerous quietude; 'she has always the crowning grace of being Lady Balmaghie, you see!'

Whereupon the Purple Camel recognized an acquaintance on the other side of the room, and took leave of Sandy with an entire absence of formality.

CHAPTER THREE

THE UNRECORDED COMMANDMENT

There was a pause in the music and the talk hummed like a thousand tops. V. V. did not speak to the slim Paderewski accompanist. She looked quite calmly round the company, once only, failed apparently to see Sandy and then settled to read a collection of music bound in small folio form which she held on her knee. She turned the pages just as if she had been reading a book. Sandy, whose decisions, right or wrong, were always prompt, made his way across the cumbered floor towards the piano corner, and suddenly loomed up before the girl.

'V. V.,' said Sandy, so unexpectedly that she jumped in her seat, 'why on earth did you not tell me where you were going to sing? I might quite easily have missed you or not come at all.'

'I didn't want you,' said V. V., suddenly pink.

Now Sandy was not as other men. He was quite devoid of jealousy. Any girl who loved him as V. V. did, would never care for anybody else. It was a comfortable code, and one, so far, endorsed by results. So Sandy knew very well that there was some other reason than the usual tertium quid for V. V.'s not wanting him to meet her. So he sat down, with his usual determination, to get it out of V. V. She would tell him everything, even if he had to have recourse to the famous interrogatory called 'of the third degree.'

V. V. knew his persistence, and delivered herself immediately.

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'I knew that Lady Balmaghie came from your own country,' she said, 'and—I thought you might mind if tales were told!'

Sandy seemed to grow two yards taller, a yard thicker, and a yard wider. He obscured the Georgian rooms and the chattering throng. He formed a complete Vauban fortress about V. V., shutting her off from all else save the fervour of his indignation.

'Me mind!' he said, tensely. 'Me!' The smallness of his care for raconteurs of any kind in his own country (or in any other) almost deprived him of speech. But not quite.

'Glory!' he said. 'Sandy Pryde's none of the mindin' sort!'

In spite of her protests he persisted in remaining beside V. V. all the evening, and when finally torn away by Lady Balmaghie to be introduced to an Admiral of the Fleet who had been before Cronstadt, he exacted a promise from V. V. right in the face of his hostess, that she would wait for him to take her home, otherwise Sandy would not let her out of his sight—'would not move a foot' was how he put it.

The frown gathered on Lady Balmaghie's brow—the trainer's menace which precedes the whip. Her lions were misbehaving—and of course it was V. V. who was to blame. When one came to admit that sort of person into one's houses—one never knew! She linked all the artistic professions as untrustworthy with the candid prejudice of a twice-born aristocrat.

Of course the Prydes of Fernielands were really very decent people—for farmers. In the lad's case Lady Balmaghie resolved to work on the sense of awe which she knew she inspired by the dignity of her life and by merely being Lady Balmaghie. Sandy

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was of her parish, too, and so in a manner under her care and tutelage. But Lady Balmaghie did not know Sandy. He could snub on her behalf, any number of Purple Camels. He would gladly do battle for her, and for the parish, for the emerant meads thereof, and the cool, veridian-coloured turnip-fields wet with dew, and for its purple heather, and for his mother's milk-bines, and for everything that was Galloway's.

But it must be clearly understood that V. V. was outside any question or discussion. Now Lady Balmaghie could not know this, and so while piloting Sandy in the direction of the Admiral of the Meet, she remarked in the responsible-condescending strain which all such good ladies drop into without knowing it, 'You appear to know Miss Jones very well— where did you make her acquaintance?'

'We are neighbours out where my works are,' said Sandy, 'and it happened to render her a small'— he said 'smawl'— 'service to her terrier dog.'

'I hope,' said Lady Balmaghie, 'that for the young lady's sake you will not let the matter go any farther. The world is so censorious.'

'I don't exactly know what your ladyship means by letting the 'maitter go farther,' but as for the world, it can be just as noisy and as idiotic as a puppy-tyke chasing its tail— it can run around yelping till it drops. As for me I am engaged to be married to V. V.—I mean Miss Jones.'

The kindly speech—the mid-Galloway accent, the bright glance kept Lady Balmaghie from any serious anger with Sandy. From Pisgah heights she could see it all. He had been entrapped. He would spoil his career at the very start. It was a thing to be seen

to— and that immediately— for the sake of good Mrs. Pryde on the hill-top at Fernielands and the reputation of the cleverest laddie the parish had ever sent out. Lady Balmaghie felt somewhat in the position of foster-mother to Sandy, who was perfectly unconscious of the need of any clucking watchfulness even on the part of his own mother. But then his own mother knew her son better, and left him alone.

‘Engaged to Miss Jones!’ said Lady Balmaghie, ‘surely not with the approbation of your family?’

‘Oh, I told them— my mother first,’ said Sandy.

‘And did they approve? Surely not?’

‘Approve?’ repeated Sandy. ‘I never asked them. What for should I? It was a private matter for myself and V. V.!’

By this time Lady Balmaghie ought to have been warned. She was of the country. She knew the breed—tender, loyal, devoted to its gods, parochial and provincial, but in the matters of the heart, still, dark, dour, passionate, Pictish, ready to tear in pieces the obstacle-builder.

Lady Balmaghie stopped in a hall round which were tapestries, armour of the latest period, with trophies of swords from Steinkirk and the days of Lord Angus's regiment of Cameronians.

‘I think such a marriage both fatal and prejudicial. It would end your career so far as all right-thinking people were concerned.’

‘Would it? Why?’ Sandy demanded sharply, his eyes uncomfortably level.

Lady Balmaghie sighed. She was a kind-hearted woman, but smoked by the incense of local deference to the point of desiccation. Still she had a duty to do, and she was the woman to go through

with it.

'I suppose you do not know, Mr. Pryde,' she said, 'that our poor Miss Jones has been for a considerable time on the music-hall stage?'

'Well,' said Sandy, looking across the room at young Charters of Drumbeck, a Galloway laird fast going to the devil, 'that is far more respectable as a profession than winning money at race-courses.'

'But in a boy's dress— and, oh! those horrid, horrid posters.'

'Did you ever see her act?' Sandy asked suddenly.

'No—well, it was elevating, I can tell you! She looked just as sweet and good as sitting in your drawing-room this very minute.'

'I do not doubt it,' said my lady faintly, but still unconvinced.

Sandy nodded grimly and this time without deference. Lady Balmaghie was Lady Balmaghie, and not to be answered as he would have answered any man—say, for instance, my Lord. Still V. V. was quite sacred and apart.

'But the place was so low, I have heard say,' said Lady Balmaghie; 'so vulgar, and, I believe, so noisy and altogether rowdy.'

'Not while I was chucker-out!' quoth Sandy unexpectedly, 'and that was as long as V. V. stayed there!'

'Chucker-out!' the lady gasped; 'am I to understand?'

'It was a wholly honest employment,' said Sandy, 'good pay, an opportunity of exercising a firm moral influence—and also of looking after V. V. She could not have been better protected if she had been your own daughter at boarding-school!'

When Lady Balmaghie heard her own daughter

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thus referred to, she suddenly turned her back. She had been warned by her sisters Lady Kirkanders and the Countess of Portwarren that you never gained anything by being too familiar with the lower classes. But she was never so sure of it as now. In her own way, and to the limit of her ability she imagined that she was helping Sandy who was a genius, and might even aspire to a knighthood, if he would stand in the right interest for a backward county or a group of hopeless burghs. But V. V.—ah, that was a different matter. The girl could only hope to go on and on, so long as she found patrons such as herself. And then, if she behaved exceedingly well, she might eventually set up as a music-teacher in some little county town like Drumfern or Cairn Edward, where people had never heard of The Boy and the Butterfly.

But there was something about Sandy that kept even my lady from saying these things to him. She remembered a picture of an ancient Lord McGhie lying stricken on the ground and his squire standing at bay over him, with shield and sword—a squire who had always seemed to Lady Balmaghie, ever since she was a girl to represent one of the stalwart Prydes of Fernielands. She now saw quite clearly something of this menace in Sandy's present attitude and, though she turned away in dudgeon, some little admiration mingled with her resentment.

But she went straight across the room to V. V., and said to her in chilly tones, 'I don't think that we shall want any more music tonight—the company appears more inclined to talk. But I shall be glad if you will call and speak with me, one of these afternoons. Come early, I have something to say to you.'

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And with 'Good-night, Miss Jones,' which might have been spoken from one of the far-out planets, so remote was the sound, the martyr to social duty took herself off.

Sandy saw V. V. on her feet and was on her trail in a moment. He paused only to bid farewell to his hostess. She did not reply at once, but as he was evidently about to desert her presence with his eyes still on V. V., she spoke her mind, 'I think you will regret this, Mr. Pryde!'

'Good-night, Lady Balmaghie!' said Sandy and in an instant was half-way down the stairs and by V. V.'s side.

'Lord what a gift it is to be able to mind one's own business!' he said, as the girl and he emerged upon the street into the fresh coolness of the night. 'It is more, V. V. It's the Unrecorded Commandment.'

CHAPTER FOUR

BLACK MONDAY

V. V., with the placidity of a full convent sister, sat waiting on the spark from heaven to fall, and meantime confecting for herself a new blouse with the 'duckiest of tucks' down the front. To the eye male this chef-d'oeuvre was not much to look at, and of course Sandy had been unsatisfactory in his praise. For man judges by the large, with the comprehensive eye-shot which takes in the effect of the woman within. Unoccupied clothes are merely clothes to him and are nothing more. The exhibition of them causes him to yawn, as they do themselves, when held up for him to admire. A wise woman never asks a man to look at her new things till she has them on.

V. V. had rebuked Sandy for his behaviour the other night. Sandy had shown as much penitence as was to be expected. That is to say, he had sworn that he would behave three times worse the next time he had the chance, and especially if any more old women came bothering him. He had only put up with her catechising and flustering because he meant to put her into a book. Oh, not as Lady Balmaghie, but as a type!

'Oh, take care what you are doing, Sandy,' V. V. had pleaded, 'remember there are two second-hand Sarrods' delivering-vans yet to be paid for to Mr. Shieldhill!'

'There is no guiding Sandy!' she sighed after he had gone. But she smiled also. For in her heart of

hearts she desired Sandy no whit different. A meek Sandy who looked at his boots and stammered in his speech would have been no Sandy at all—at least not hers. She liked a strong man who shouldered his way through things and as it were 'imposed' himself.

She had worked only a little more at the tucks when Mrs. Shieldhill came to see her. V. V. started at the name. Could it be about the unpaid-for delivering-vans, for which Sandy was even then at work getting the money together. No, in that case her husband would have sought Sandy himself. Besides the Dumfries man had always told Sandy that he was in no hurry, that he believed in him, and that he could pay according to his convenience.

Why, then, should this distinguished local lady come to see her?

V. V. was soon enlightened. Indeed she might have known if she had considered the toilet which Mrs. Shieldhill had made. But V. V. was always carefully, if plainly, dressed herself, so that the calling attire of the lady magnate of the district did not make any particular impression on her.

Mrs. Shieldhill was a spoilt woman. She suffered from being misunderstood, a disease still common in the remoter suburbs. Her husband was first offender. He said, 'Tut, Laura, if there is anything the matter with you—take a dose of Gregory—or—shall I send in old Dr. McNab?'

Every word was an insult to a soulful woman—one who, in the silence of Kentham parlour, poured out her confidences to kindred uncomprehended souls. She tried to make Sandy understand, but had struck on a vein of his character which was distinctly gross and material. She had been

surprised in the case of such a man as the author of 'Greying Gold' and 'Cold Steel.'

She had planned conversations, slow rendings of the veil, a strong man's sobs, and then the confession torn from his quivering breast that this was the first time he (the author aforesaid) had ever really loved—and she, 'The only woman in the world' for him. Of course at this point she would have reproved him with the sweet, grave tenderness of a sister, mingled with the warmer protection of a Guardian Angel—two persons never far from suburban female imaginations. But he would have been hers all the same—hopelessly, wistfully, with a grace and pitifulness that would have made all her life a Passion Flower (without the passion), and which, in addition, would have been the envy of all her lady friends, the admiration of all the neighbours—to be hidden only from the excellent and hardworking Mr. Shieldhill. The Misunderstood One felt that, on these terms, life even in Kentham would have been bearable.

But here was Sandy refusing to march in the combination—the sole element wanting—but that an indispensable one. She must bring the matter to a head, so she called upon V. V. at 151 Kandahar Road.

Mrs. Shieldhill tried to come to an understanding. She searched for 'a common ground' as if she had been a diplomat of much experience.

'Miss Jones,' she said, 'I understand from my husband that both you and he are interested in the welfare of our friend, Mr. Alexander Pryde.'

V. V. only broke off a thread, and did not in any way indicate acquiescence.

'I shall wake her up!' thought the elder lady

viciously.

‘We both feel, Mr. Shieldhill and I, that the young man must act wisely now, if he is to succeed in the future. And it struck me that you of all people could convince him that he must—for instance, clear his feet and pay off his debts—establish himself, in fact—before he dreams of getting married. Of course Shieldhill married me when I was very, very young, but then I had a father who was a well-to-do man. I am of course speaking quite privately.’

V. V. broke off another thread without looking up.

‘What a cold and disagreeable girl,’ thought Mrs. Shieldhill, ‘utterly soulless. And not nearly so good-looking when one sees her near—paints, I suppose. All that class does. They must or their power would be gone.’

Then she continued with a little more bitterness.

‘It has come to my ears (though I cannot believe it) that Mr. Pryde and you intend to marry soon. I am, of course, too much a woman of the world to believe any such foolish report. You are too sensible a young woman not to see that such a step would be his ruin. His clients are to be found almost wholly among those, who, like my husband, knew him at Kentham Road Church. In such an event he would lose all that connection—I need not tell you that. You see the folly of that yourself. And such a business as his cannot be established, nor even kept up without constant credit. He will need to develop the social side of his business to the utmost—make friends, extend relations, all which he can do best as a bachelor.’

‘And pray, Mrs. Shieldhill,’ said V. V. in the most casual way possible, ‘what is your particular interest in Sandy as a bachelor?’

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'I have no interest in Mr. Pryde,' said Mrs. Shieldhill, taken aback by the sudden assault delivered over the top of the work-basket, 'none except my desire for his well-being, for the good of his family, and if I may mention the fact, that he owes my husband a good deal of money!'

'Oh,' said V. V. with a gasp, 'I thought most of that was paid!'

'Some, I daresay,' said Mrs. Shieldhill; 'the young man means well—not a doubt of that—and by the help of some little self-restraint, in which I venture to ask your co-operation, he will yet do very well in Kentham. So able a young man, and one so generally deserving, will not want friends—that is, if he keeps himself clear of entanglements.'

'You mean me, Mrs. Shieldhill?' said V. V.

(How disconcerting and unladylike she is! thought Mrs. Shieldhill.)

'Not entirely Miss Jones, but I hoped you would understand—I assure you I would not interfere except from the highest motives—the welfare of a young man who is well thought of by all the neighbourhood, approved by quite the best families!'

V. V. rose to her feet, letting all her sewing properties tumble about her.

'What would you have thought,' said V. V., 'if your husband had gone to Sandy and tried to separate him from me? You would have thought (and with reason) that he wanted to have the field left clear for himself!'

'Oh,' cried Mrs. Shieldhill, 'how dare you!'

'You should not say it in that way,' said V. V., 'it is quite amateurish. like this—' (and she frowned and stamped her little foot)— 'How dare you!'

After this little lesson she rang the bell for Janet,

but before that hard-worked domestic came she added, 'Be good enough to tell your husband that all the money owing to him by Mr. Pryde shall be repaid to him at an early date. Or perhaps I had better tell him so myself. You might forget.'

'You will make a great mistake, madam, if you think you can abuse me to my husband,' said Mrs. Shieldhill, by this time quite white with anger; 'remember I made this advance quite privately and in your own best interests, whatever you may be pleased to insinuate. It is only in keeping with what I should have expected from people in your sphere of life!'

'You had better tell that to Sandy!' said V. V. calmly. 'Janet, be good enough to show this lady out!'

Which was well and very well, but did not prevent V. V. from having 'a good cry' after Mrs. Shieldhill had gone. She could not hide from herself that there might be something in what the woman said. Could she possibly be a drag on Sandy—at least for the present? Besides—and she thought of an alluring prospect for paying for the Sarrod's delivery vans which would shut the mouth of that horrid woman, who wanted so badly to take Sandy from her.

If so be she must, she would give up Sandy—but it would be of her own accord. She would not be driven to it by any spitting Kentham cat!

The afternoon meeting with Lady Balmaghie was conducted on a very different plane. Just, immeasurably sure of herself, somewhat dictatorial, knowing that she saw more and farther than any other created being into the problems which concerned her. Lady Balmaghie had never known a difficulty. Politics were as plain to her as the

multiplication table. The Honest Party, 'the Stakers of the Country'— for them she instructed my lord how to use his influence. She beat up the 'factor' on the estate to renewed vigilance. She visited the farmers and such of the cottagers as had votes, all on their behalf.

So this matter of Sandy's 'entanglement' was quite plain to her. Indeed Lady Balmaghie was not accustomed to find anything difficult. So she simply ordered up V. V. to lay her commands upon her. She would be gentle, but—oh, so firm in the interview. She was quite accustomed to this method with the upper servants, and when Balmaghie had been culpably slack with gardeners and wood-foresters.

Her guests must not express themselves in her house as Mr. Pryde had done. She could not have scenes, such as that of which she, V. V., had been the cause. Oh, the innocent cause, no doubt, but still the cause. If Miss Jones had not been there, for instance—what would have happened? Nothing! Mr. Pryde was the son of one of her own tenants—a good, yes— quite good and most respectable family. He was also a genius—or so they called writers in these days, when even ladies of title wrote. But Miss Jones must from that date consider all her engagements cancelled.

'Including,' said V. V. with apparent meekness, my engagement to Mr. Alexander Pryde!

'I particularly advise you to suppress that in the interests of the young man himself' snapped the Lady of Balmaghie, piqued by the reply of V. V., which she felt somehow to be falsely submissive—and, if she could have imagined such a thing, in relation to a peeress, spoken in mockery of herself.

Adieus were chilly on both sides, and V. V.

silently owned that the paying of the Shieldhill money was farther off than ever.

Still there was that letter in her pocket signed 'De Lisle Adney.' He was the manager of many theatres and music-halls, and he offered her either a good starring turn in the provinces, or, if she had the cash or the backing, he would sell her the whole provincial rights of *The Boy and the Butterfly*.

There was the chance of her life. She could, she knew, get a good leading man, Victor Berrick, and she would dress the part to her liking. The spangled posters could be left behind or merely used by her advance agent to arouse public curiosity. Besides there were other plays that she could use without paying for them. Sandy might be persuaded to write new songs for *The Flower Girl*. *The Bells of Enderby* would be easy to put on, also *Pretty is that Pretty Does* in the sentimental line—oh, with Victor Berrick she could soon make up a repertoire.

Then the company could settle for a week in a place—none of the endless miseries of 'one-night-stands,' early trains, night journeys, hasty packings after the play, and all the thousand annoyances of twenty-four-hour strollers.

CHAPTER FIVE

V. V. DECEIVES SANDY

When V. V. arrived back at 151, Kandahar Road she was quite resolved to do something— but as yet was not sure what. They all thought—yes, all of them—that somehow she was spoiling Sandy's career. Of course, it was no use telling Sandy a thing like that. He would curse them all uphill and down-dale for a set of interfering old harridans— and he would take advice from no one.

This knowledge imparted a particularly tender and happy easement to the troubled breast of V. V. There was one person, at least, she was absolutely sure of, and that was Sandy. A reflection singularly comfortable and comforting, because, after all, Sandy was the person really concerned. Yet the next moment V. V. sighed. Why should women be so officious? Men would never go round solemnly warning her that she was spoiling Sandy's future by being engaged to him. V. V. wondered whether if they had the Vote, it would make people like Mrs. Shieldhill and the great Lady more content to mind their own business. The thought almost made V. V. a suffragette.

Nevertheless she determined that she must see De Lisle Adney immediately, and pay him for The Boy and the Butterfly. So with this on her mind, she gave the greatest attention to her bank pass-book as well as to the list of 'bits and bats' of shares which she possessed. Luckily they were all good and saleable. But first she must write to Victor Berrick to

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see if he were open to play leads for her in an extended provincial tour.

Victor had been a good friend in old days, had never presumed on his position as the only well-looking, companionable, and well-educated man in the company—in short had never made love to her. For all which, V. V. was duly grateful to him. He was a capital actor, of much and varied experience, and V. V. knew that with Berrick to help her, she could do with a much cheaper stage-manager—an important matter in the wage-bill of a company such as hers.

It is significant of the comradeship which existed between Sandy and herself, that she never once thought of Sandy being jealous of this pleasant-spoken, good-looking young man who had travelled all about the country with her. Now Sandy was not, except for his height, his shoulders, and his rippling hair, particularly good-looking, and no one who knew anything of him could ever have called him pleasant-spoken.

Sandy had meantime been gently but firmly blackballed at the Shakespeare Club, where a tall, stooping fellow-Scot, a critic who admired his work, had put him up, and the week after at the Laodicean, the club where all the members turn round each time the doors open, with this question plain on their faces, 'Who the devil are you?'

For this it certainly was not Sandy who cared a button. It was V. V. who did the caring. Sandy was too deep in the final burst of 'Cold Steel,' and when he was at home he liked V. V. to sit and knit or sew, with a book on her knee, while he worked at the fierce, clanging, wintry chapters, the descriptions of a Scotland desolate and bare, the cattle driven to the

hills, the beacon-fires ready to be lit if the English crossed the borders, while all the stern dour pageantry of a poverty-stricken court went on about a guarded Holyrood.

'Cold Steel' was nearing its climax. There was hardly time, and not space at all, for half of Sandy's materials. He did some grim thinking before deciding what he must leave out.

Meanwhile V. V. matured her plans. She had had her answer from Victor Berrick. It was in her pocket at that moment, as she knitted away with a book on her knee, while Sandy flung himself white hot at the paper.

'Dear V. V.' (it said), 'I am as free as any other vagabond stroller with empty pockets. I shall be glad to come with you if you get old Adney to sell you *The Boy and the Butterfly*. Mind, don't you let him rook you. He made a tidy bit out of you in that same, during the last two seasons.

I shall be all right in the other plays you mention, and can lay my hand on some other good people for general business without costing you very much. McCallum will make a capital stage manager, as you suggest. I am sorry he is down on his luck. Why spend money on new posters when Adney will let you have the old ones for nothing? See to it that he sells you the dresses also. Or had I better go and arrange that part of the bargain with him? The scenery of course will be included, but he is just the brand of old pig who might say to himself that he could utilize the dresses for something else. I don't think he will—with you. He will certainly want you back some fine day—when little K.'s star is set—and then he will want you badly. So he will not quarrel now. What do you think of Bradford as a starter?

Openings are generally good there. Then we might work across to Manchester, where people wallow in music of all sorts. By the way, we must pick up a second singing girl, ingenue, pretty, and uncostly. Do you know anybody? I don't—at least nobody not too stupid to know when to stand up.

I am, very promptly yours to command,
'Victor Berrick.'

There was enough money in the bank in the securities to give her company an excellent start, so with her heart full of the consciousness of doing right—which curiously did not help in the least—V. V. set out to run away from Sandy for his good.

Yes, of course, it would be for his good. Everybody said so. She saw it herself. She was the obstacle. Even those two horrid women spoke some of the truth. Had he not been blackballed at two literary clubs? Had not Bungay and Co., hitherto so courteous, refused him an advance? Somebody was telling lies about Sandy and herself. Sandy would kill them if he knew. Therefore she would steal way like an Arab, quite certain that with the plays she had and the first provincial tour of that London favourite, *The Boy and the Butterfly*, she could make enough money to pay for all the four delivery cars and leave Sandy quite free to write still more and better books.

It was with a thrilling compunction that V. V. looked across at Sandy running his fingers through his hair as he scribbled ever more fiercely. He dug at the ink bottle. He smeared his fingers and bedropped the wood of the cleared table. The villain, she understood, was having a bad time. Now he was standing at bay, for an expression of sneering triumph came over the author's face. He could not

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help acting the story as he wrote it. She had often laughed at him for it, but she had no heart to laugh now.

Sandy looked up so suddenly that V. V. was disconcerted. He had curious intuitions sometimes, more like those of a child or a woman (a nice woman, not 'a cat') than a mere man.

'See here, V. V.,' he broke out, 'I can't stand this much longer. This is not going on. I won't have it.'

'Have what?' said V. V. faintly feeling that he could read every word of Victor Berrick's letter which was in her inner pocket, and that the very thoughts of her heart were not safe from him,

'V. V.,' said Sandy, 'I'm uneasy—deuced uneasy. Let's get married. I don't half approve of using your sitting-room to write in like this. Has any old tabby been talking? I suppose I ought not to be here, but I am a selfish dog. I don't think for anybody but myself. But suppose we get married and have it put in all the papers, so that everybody may know. Then we need not make any difference nor set up house till I can give you a proper home!'

'No,' said V. V. firmly, 'when we get married, I shall want my husband to myself, and if I have to meet him when he comes in with my sleeves rolled up, I shall be able to tell him that dinner is just ready to put on the table, and that I cooked it myself. No lodgings, thank you, Sandy. A house of my own, if it is only a garret!'

'Well,' said Sandy gravely, biting his pen as he looked at her. 'There's John's place over the garage. It would make two rooms by carrying the partition a little higher. And I could put in a range and the stovepipe could come through the roof. Only when people came to see you they would have to go

through the stables and climb a ladder!’

‘I should not mind that in the least,’ said V. V.; ‘nobody who mattered would come to see me, but— I would not have people find the author of ‘Greying Gold’ and ‘Cold Steel’ there, and have them say I had brought him to that!’

A sob rose in V. V.’s throat which threatened trouble. Sandy was instantly advised, and circumvented the table with alacrity to assure her that he was not in earnest.

‘Oh, don’t deceive yourself,’ said V. V., ‘for myself I should like it just dreadfully— nothing better on earth. It is the sort of thing I have dreamed of all my life. But I— am not— not—going—to have women— saying that—I have— dragged you down.’

‘Who has been saying that, V. V? Out with it. It is that accursed she-brute of a Mrs. Shieldhill—!’

‘Oh, no—no!’ V. V. denied, anxiously, ‘nothing of the sort. It was just something I got thinking. I am a silly little fool!’

‘You are all that,’ Sandy agreed grimly, ‘but you are sure about Mrs. Shieldhill? If I thought—Gad, I would wring the inf—infamous, I mean—the woman’s neck!’

Again V. V. lied in the interests of peace, or as Sandy would have said, ‘to keep doon din.’

‘No, Sandy, no,’ she asserted, she had nothing to do with it. But I can’t marry you, Sandy, to make myself an additional burden on you. If I did I should be quite unworthy of you— more than I am.’

‘Lord,’ said Sandy, ‘will you hold your blether, V. V.? You are worth ten of me any day. And John, he says so too. Besides, what else do I pray for every night than that I may get away from all this abominable self-seeking and ambitioning, and be

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made more worthy of you, V. V.?’

So they were reconciled, and Sandy sat down to what he called a ‘tattering chapter,’ of which he wrote the first draft with lightning speed, his left-hand fingers beating tattoos, his pen alternately dabbing the ink and flying over the paper. But all the while V. V. sat looking at him with eyes that were sad and self-reproachful.

‘I am a traitor’ (she was thinking)— ‘I am deceiving Sandy— poor, poor Sandy. What will he do when he finds that I am gone? What when he reads the letter I shall leave him on the mantelpiece? Of course it is all for the best, for him and for me. But why does one's conscience make one feel like what Sandy called Mrs. Shieldhill just now, ‘an infernal woman whose neck should be wrung,’ when a poor girl is only trying to do her duty!’

CHAPTER SIX

V. V. RUNS AWAY

The next night Sandy came home early to continue the 'tatterer' of a chapter, and on the mantelpiece he found a letter for A. A. Pryde, Esq., M.A., B.Sc, etc.

'Dear Sandy' (V. V. wrote), 'I have not done this in a hurry. You are the best man in the world and the truest, but you are not the easiest to tell things to by word of mouth. You would have trampled me and my poor arguments down, if I had as much as hinted at them.

'Now, Sandy, I can't marry you till we are able to care for nobody, till everything is paid for, and I won't spoil your career, as everybody says I am doing.' ('God help them,' groaned Sandy, 'if I get my hands on any one of the busybodies!') 'So there is but one thing I can do—that is, to act. I have bought *The Boy* and *the Butterfly* from Mr. Adney. I have also got an old friend, Victor Berrick, as leading man. I have a decent company which won't cost much, and four or five other plays that we can do with a little rehearsing. I stole the collection of songs you wrote for the half guineas—and now I don't care if they were written to other girls— f or some of them are capital to sing and—quite new.

'You will think I am horrid because I am not going to tell you where we are to open; if all goes well I hope to send you something in two or three weeks which will go to pay off our four delivery motors.

'The hardest part is that, for the present, I shall

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have to go without your letters, but that is, maybe, a blessing in disguise, for you will be so angry that you would be wanting to wring my neck in every letter!

'The Boy and the Butterfly Company,' starring with Miss V. V. Jones, the famous London light-opera comedy success, had been billed for a week at Bradford. The Theatre Royal had been obtained, and the bookings had been excellent. On the night there was at first a good deal of noise in front, for that is the way of the Bradford audiences before the conductor waves his wand. After that the silence is sacramental unless some unfortunate does not sing to the liking of the Bradford gallery, when it is time to start on the band again.

V. V. was always a little disturbed on opening nights. This time it was not because of her part—which she knew from stem to stern, commas and all—but the fact that this meant the venturing of her all for Sandy, and for the home she and Sandy were one day to gather about them.

'Poor Sandy,' she said, as she looked at herself in the corner mirror of her 'star's' dressing-room, 'how angry he will be. He will know by this time!—Gracious, what is this?'

A letter was pinned to the corner of the table, near a vase full of flowers. She had not noticed it while she was being dressed in her charming but unspangled array. It was no note from any peeping Tom of an admirer who had bribed a dresser or doorkeeper. It was a good stout business envelope with 'Pryde's Instant Delivery Agency—Motor and Horse Vans to all parts of South London'—printed clearly across the top.

Tremblingly, V. V. opened it. Yes, it was in

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Sandy's upright, most 'no-quarter' hand.

'Dearest,

'Herewith my blessing and a word of cheer. I am glad you took the books of rhymes. If you have need of more send me the scenarios, I shall always forward the verses by return post. I also supply Ben Meares along with this. He is to go with you to the theatre, doing anything that is needful there, then he is to see you home wherever you are staying. Ben is a reformed character and has been in the garage with Brother John for two months. But looking after you, and running your messages, will be a job he is fitter for than mere motor-vanning. Give him no tips. He will just be compelled to refuse them. I have warned him about this. We are forging ahead at the garage, and the returns are so far excellent. 'Cold Steel' goes on all right. I mean to make it finish at full gallop— full speed and no brakes.

'Now, don't worry, V. V., Sandy is on hand even when he is scribbling his hardest in the old sitting-room at number 151. Yours to count on,

'S.'

V. V. sank into a chair with the letter in her hand, and as she waited for her call, she asked herself the question, 'How did he find out?'

As she made her way into the wings to be ready for her entrance she smiled, and as she smiled she murmured to herself, 'After all, it is a thoroughly satisfactory old Sandy!'

Presently she was amused to see Ben Meares in a new uniform of crimson and gold, with a cap of the same colours, clearly lettered 'Boy and the Butterfly Comedy Company' perambulating the passages of the theatre, seeing that the programme girls did their part^ and showing the pit and amphitheatre

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how to stack itself more closely to make room for new arrivals.

This put a thought into V. V.'s mind.

'He must have known long ago—for it would take Ben Meares some time to get these clothes and that banded cap. Just think of Sandy sitting there writing with the ink flying, and looking up to ask me to marry him on the spot—while all the time...'

V. V. would have laughed if she had not had to make her momentous first entrance just at that moment.

'I believe there is nothing that he does not know,' summed up V. V. afterwards to herself.

But indeed the methods of Sandy were not all due to exceptional brilliancy. They were rather owing to chance, that best policeman in the world.

Ben Meares had many friends in the world of the footlights. No one drunk or sober could be more obliging than Ben Meares. And since brother John had reformed him, Ben had picked up again with many of his older friends, of whom for some months he had fought rather shy.

He heard, quite naturally, that Victor Berrick was going out with a first provincial company to play *The Boy and the Butterfly*. Then that the 'out-of-town' rights were owned by Miss V. V. Jones. Old De lisle must have been deuced hard up for cash (they said) when he let a good thing like that slip. But of course V.V, must have strong backing and have come down pretty stiffly for it.

Besides, Ben Meares read the *Era*. He read it with care, especially the provincial bookings, where he saw the whereabouts of scores of his old-time friends. Consequently the announcement that the first *Boy and Butterfly Company* would open at

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Bradford on the 29th at the Theatre Royal, did not in the least take him by surprise.

He thought, however, that 'the Boss ought not to be left out of the know' in the matter. So he took the paper to Sandy, who pondered over it, but said no word. The next day the order for Ben Meares' uniform was given and he was put through a severe course of wrestling, punching the bag, and general work, with an approved tutor.

'Little enough time till the twenty-ninth!' growled Sandy.

'Am I to go?' asked Ben Meares, sure that he was. Of course, to look after V. V.—you see I can't!

'I see, sir,' said Ben, 'but if I may be so bold, has your young lady said nothing to you about all this?'

'Nothing,' said Sandy, passing the possessive pronoun with calmness, 'why should she?'

'Well, sir, if I were in your place, I should expect.'

'But you are not,' said Sandy, 'your place is to look after Miss V. V. when she wants to be looked after, to keep the King's peace in the theatre, and to see her home. None of the spy business, of course. If V. V. wants to tell me anything, she will tell me. But if anyone insults her or any of the lady members of the company— well, Ben, you remember what we used to do at the old Kentham Vic?'

'That I do, sir!' Ben grinned and rubbed his hands. 'Muscle coming up beautifully, sir. That new trainer knows his little job.'

Sandy nodded and dismissed him with the exhortation to say no word as to how he, Sandy, had come by his information. He could, however, send him lists of the company's future engagements, and any newspaper cuttings which, in Ben's opinion, Sandy ought to see. He was to make sure that V. V.

lived in good hotels and not stint herself. If she did, or if she began to look peaky and thin, he was to inform his master, who would be on the spot at between fifty and sixty miles an hour—and go into the matter himself.

With these instructions Ben Meares was sent back to his trainers, and owing to them and a third-class ticket to Bradford, he found himself, early on the twenty-ninth of the month, interviewing the business manager of the B. and B. Co., an old friend of his own.

'Hillo, Ben, I did not know that you were on my pay-sheet?'

'No more I am. I am owner's man—I look after the 'star,' and keep order. Take hold of that Mr. Pitt, what do you think of that for an arm?'

'Why, you are ready for the championship of England, Ben,' said Mr. Pitt, spanning the great deltoid with both hands and feeling the skin ripple over it as Ben bent his arm back and forward.

'Might ha' been, sir,' said Ben modestly, 'but now I'm a bit over weight, even for the heavies. If there was an extra class, now, I might try a flutter. You see I lose if I train down too fine. John L. Sullivan would have been about my tonnage in his good days—but I was too much of a kid then.'

'Well, Ben, I don't care who sent you, but you will be a mighty comfortable thing to have about the theatre, and Miss V. V. will be safer with you than if she kept a tame tiger, like the great Sara!'

'Dun know about tigers, Mr. Pitt,' said Ben, 'but I have strict instructions not to go fighting promiscuous. I'm not paid for that, but for looking after Miss V. V. and the company generally, mainly the ladies—also keeping order in the house and

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such like. But it's hard on a man in condition like this— and by what they tell me, this here Yorkshire is the very devil of a scrappin' country! I daresay, however, something will turn up to cheer a man!

'And who pays for all this?' said Mr. Pitt, who was curious; 'of course, I understand we have a boss in the background, as usual.'

'You must keep mum. He's an old chucker-out, like myself,' said Ben, growing surly all in a moment, 'He hit me once straight into Kingdom Come—or all but! So don't you go inquiring into what is no business of either of us. You see that ring Miss V. V. wears on the fourth finger of her left hand? Mind when you gave one like that to your missus? Well, you would not have liked any back-talk about such a thing— no, nor questions neither, asked contemptuous. You would have waded in with your fists, and by Jehoshaphat, he could simply eat you.'

CHAPTER SEVEN

'McCOMIE'

So much calm and the absence of the slightest reproach on the part of Sandy rather took V. V. by the throat. She was not at all sure whether she would not have preferred an outbreak of anger, an old-fashioned lover's quarrel, and so be done with it.

She had gone her own way without consulting him, yet, knowing all about it, he kept her surrounded with his thoughtfulness and such delicate attentions as she would never have expected from Sandy.

Little bunches of flowers, roses or violets mostly, were on her table every time she dressed for the theatre. She did not need to be told whence they came. She always wore them—those and no others. They were her big Sandy's daily thought, expressed in a six-penny wire to Ben Meares. She knew how the great fellow in London must turn aside from his morning visit to the garage in the Tenterden Road. She could see how gravely he would write on the crisscrossed telegraphic form, such words as 'white roses if you can— if not lily-of-the-valley, then tea roses, red roses, violets— in that order.'

She guessed at the words and speculated how much he had probably paid. For on one occasion Ben had so far forgot himself as to wrap the telegram about the long stems of some California roses bought in Liverpool. She had resolved—she resolved frequently— to write to Sandy to stop such a foolish daily extravagance. But somehow she could

not. Coming from a man like Sandy, the thought was altogether too sweet. It made the perfume of the flowers rather heady, like that of old wine.

Besides which, it was more than likely that Sandy would have bidden her attend to her own business.

Well, so she did, but for all that it was much longer than the two weeks she had promised herself before she could save enough to send Sandy a cheque to help with the motor payments. Brother John sent her a monthly balance sheet and a weekly statement of accounts—takings and outgoings—without a word of personal matter added. When V. V.'s first cheque for fifty pounds reached Sandy, he did not grow furiously enthusiastic over it. He got John to send her a receipt by return of post, and a legal acknowledgement that she owned so much more of the property and goodwill of the firm, but personally he did no more than say, 'thank you.'

This was rather a blow to V. V., but she soon found that an extra note, ever so short, intercalated between the two regulation letters a week aroused Velino cataracts of gratitude. Sandy exhausted quires of large office quarto, destined for calculations, designs, blue-pencilled suggestions to his subordinates—in telling V. V. how her letter had cheered him. He was insatiable of details as to her daily doings, her surroundings, what she had done and said, where she had been, with whom she had encountered, and if she were looking pretty. This last V. V. had to declare upon oath every time, or she might have expected her Scot up by the night train.

Of course Sandy had much briefer daily reports from Ben Meares. 'Could do Malmaison carnations yesterday. Will get Frau Pretzel roses tomorrow—

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could not manage them earlier. Miss V. V. looked stunning. There was a big house, and all as quiet as an old maid's party. Some fun, however, at the coming out. Had to stop two coal strikers from fighting. Went for me, both of them, also some of their mates. It was quite refreshing after only the bars and punching the bag. I went and saw the poor chaps this morning—took them oranges—only one in hospital now. No complaints!

As they progressed northward fortune was not of course always equally favourable. And Sandy, who had not used all of V. V.'s money, promptly returned part of it to Ben Meares with instructions to pay it out as occasion might demand. But, as Ben, though excellent with his fists and invaluable in all warlike exercises, was not exactly a financier, Sandy, who was busy with the last chapters of 'Cold Steel' and the first book proofs of the same, sent his brother John to take over for a time the direction of the company's cash. This meant much extra work for himself, but at Sandy's age that did not count.

Now silent John was a wonderful book-keeper, and had covered folios without number of double and single entry under the care of Dominie Robinson at Clachan Laurie. He had also a natural turn for organization, and though he considered the whole theatrical business as of the most doubtful description, it was his duty to see that Sandy's V. V. got her 'own money' out of it.

Lingard, the little dismal-eyed cashier who bet at races, found himself on the street in such a hurry that he did not dare to call back at the Theatre Royal, Southport, to reclaim his hat and overcoat till after the departure of The Boy and the Butterfly Company.

But it soon became obvious that John could not be spared permanently from the Tenterden Road business. He had a slow steadfast way with him which conciliated the men, and no class are more difficult to manage than motor-drivers for small business houses in London. Sandy, when he came upon the scene, was apt to settle everything in one or two lively minutes, during which he usually held the delinquent at arm's length, lecturing him on the errors of his ways, before flinging him out upon the pavement. But then he had one delivery-van out of service next morning, which, with the natural contrariness of things was apt to be a specially busy one.

Then complaints poured in—personally, by messenger, and by post, so that the writing of 'Cold Steel' was grievously retarded, Sandy's temper was irritable, and he became as his landlady averred 'not at all like himself.'

'Oh, he's fretting,' said her daughter Emily; 'it's easy to see that, mother. He never was like that when Miss Jones was here!'

'Tut, nonsense—it's too much business. It's that quiet Mr. John, his brother, he will be missing at the works!'

So it came about that Sandy, driven to desperation by the literary exactions of Messrs. Bungay and Co. on the one hand, and the difficulties of keeping in order his staff of drivers and delivery-men on the other, turned his thoughts to the youngest of his family, Wilfred Lyon Pryde, who already had passed through part of his medical course in Edinburgh, living chiefly on the orts and scrapings of Sandy's many bursaries.

He still lingered there, much beloved by his

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mother because of his good looks, but shamefully lax in the matter of passing his final examination or obtaining the degrees, certificates and medals which Sandy had lifted as a matter of course whenever they came in his way.

'Fred' Pryde was a handsome lad, but though he had decided upon the career of a medical man, he had never done more than pass his 'second professional,' through which Sandy, in his last years, had forced him at the point of the bayonet.

At last The Boy and the Butterfly Company came to Edinburgh where Sandy had arranged for excellent rooms for V. V. near the theatre, with his old landlady. Here it was that Freddie Pryde made the acquaintance of V. V. and decided on the spot that his career was to be, not that of a doctor, but that of an actor.

John, who introduced them, uttered nothing which could indicate either assent or disapproval, and all that V. V. said was, 'Amateur experience does not really count for much. And in any case we should have to see what Sandy would say.'

'I do not care what Sandy would say,' exclaimed his younger brother.

'Well, then,' said Miss V. V. Jones, 'in this company we do care—so I am afraid.'

'Freddie,' put in his silent brother at this point, 'ye are makin' an awesome spectacle o' yourself.'

On the way home—for John Pryde was putting up in Laurieston Road with Freddie—John explained that Sandy and V. V. had long been engaged to be married, and further that if he (Freddie) had anything to say about Sandy, he had better say it to him, John Pryde, who would thrash him on the spot for impudence, as an elder brother should, and so

be done with it. But to V. V. he must not utter a word.

'For,' said John, out of the store of his experience, 'women do not forget these things.'

At Edinburgh, in the midst of a season of solid success, there came to Mrs. Ewing's, quite without warning, a tall girl with changeful eyes and hair which under the false pretence of being brown, showed flakes and splashes of shining copper, even of purest gold in the highest lights. When she took off her hat it seemed to coil about her head, an aureole of vivid young life. It was so glorious that it seemed to be alive and even vivify everything about her.

The girl's eyes were now sea-blue, now glaucous-green, now the colour which a grass country takes under a pall of blue-black thunder-cloud—together a remarkable girl to look upon. Yet never was anything sunnier or readier than her smile. Sufficiently plump to make her face dimple all over, Alice McComie let loose a myriad of these on a usually observant world each time she smiled. Also she was a generous girl and she smiled often.

She had come to see V. V. in her dressing-room. She wanted to act. She had a little money. Her father had married again and did not want her. Neither did her 'cat' of a step-mother. She had not long left school, but she admitted that she might have got married several times already if she had wanted to. She had not wanted to, especially not since she had seen V. V. No, she was not a 'matinee girl'—and she had never taken such a fancy before. She had not been very often to the theatre—mostly with her father to the pit before he went and got married again. That was on her holidays. She had

not cared much about it before. And now she dared not go to the half-crown places except in the afternoons. People stared so, and some of them

'I know,' interrupted V. V. with an expression of deep disgust. 'That is because you are too pretty. I wish Sandy were here.'

'Sandy— what Sandy?' said Miss McComie from Leith. 'I knew a Sandy. He used to give the Ramsay boys lessons at number three of our terrace, and I always waited for him at the end of the street and walked with him to the car station. I told him often and often that I loved him, but he only laughed.'

'Was he tall and strong, with light hair that kinked and fluffed out every way when the wind blew?' V. V. bent her eyes, now become very watchful, upon Miss McComie. Alice McComie clapped her hands.

'Exactly—you knew him—how fine! He is Sandy Pryde—my Sandy Pryde -'

'Your Sandy Pryde? Why your Sandy Pryde?' V. V. asked this in an even tone. But nothing could abash or diminish the enthusiasm of McComie as she revealed to V. V. that everybody called her.

'My Sandy— why was he my Sandy? Because he WAS my Sandy. He used to take my hand all the way and kiss me when we came to the corner of West Pier, where the big gates are, just within sight of the car-lines!'

'Indeed!' said V. V., to whom this was a new view of Sandy's character.

'Of course,' said the girl, 'that was ages before father married and they sent me back to that horrid school. But I would be quite eleven or twelve at the time. I am eighteen now.'

V. V. laughed, but the colour came back slowly.

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‘So you know Sandy,’ she said; ‘he is very dear to me, and you are a dear also for his sake. But, do you know, you are far too pretty to be running up and down in this big city by yourself.’

‘Two cities,’ said McComie. ‘Edinburgh and Leith. I know everybody in Leith. Since I left home I have been staying with the wife of one of our timekeepers—such a nice woman. I am not going back to that wretch's house any more!’

‘That wretch’ was her step-mother.

V. V. gasped.

‘You have just left school. You are no more than a kitten, and should be shut up with a saucer of milk. Besides you are—oh, heaps too pretty to be allowed to do anything of this kind. We must see to it at once!’

‘But you,’ retorted McComie, looking at V. V., ‘you look younger than I, and you go about where you like!’

‘Certainly,’ said V. V., ‘but as a matter of fact I am a good many years older than you even by the parish register, and I began to be taken on the stage and taught how to look after myself when you were still in the nursery. It is a sin and black shame. Does your father know where you are?’

‘He doesn't care!’

‘Nonsense,’ said V. V. ‘Of course you can't be allowed to go on like this—you must go back.’

McComie at once began to put on her gloves and look for her hat, which she always took off ‘to rest her hair!’ ‘There is an agent down near the Theatre Royal, at the corner of Picardy Place, who has asked me to call again.’

‘Stay where you are,’ V. V. commanded, in her sternest voice, one that Sandy even had never

heard. 'I daresay we shall find you something to do. Can you sing?'

'Well, I don't know,' said McComie with a sigh, 'but I really don't remember to have done anything else all my life. It has always been masters—masters—masters— at school, and after. Oh, dad wasn't stingy, if he could only keep me out of the way!'

V. V.'s eyes grew perceptibly more hopeful.

'I should like to hear you,' she murmured, but as soon as she said the words, she had to hold up her hand. McComie was moving her neck pouter-pigeon wise, in the act of beginning to repeat some of her favourite morsels.

'Not here,' said V. V. 'We will go back to the theatre presently and then we will have the advice of Mr. Berrick, you know, my leading man.'

'You must love him very much,' said McComie, in all simplicity; 'he looks at you as if you were just the thing he most adored in the world.'

'Bless me,' cried V. V., genuinely astonished. 'Mr. Berrick is a very nice man and I have known him for a long time, but often I don't speak half a dozen words to him off the stage for weeks. He has his own friends. I have mine.'

'Oh,' said McComie with a little gasp of satisfaction, 'then it is Sandy after all. I had so hoped it would be ever since I knew you knew him.'

V. V. bit her lip and tried to look severe, but the dimples were dimpling all over the face that fronted her. The bronze-gold hair was flashing and changing, and the eyes were dark as a Highland tarn when the early stars are beginning to mirror themselves in it. There was no good getting angry with McComie. Or rather, by no power on earth could you 'stay vexed' with her. V. V. was getting her

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first lesson in this solemn fact.

And in that moment V. V. knew, somehow, that she would be able to take the place (still vacant) of singing ingenue which had caused so many cuts in the songs and dialogue. She knew that Victor Berrick would be pleased with her, that brother John at the receipt of custom, and Freddie Lyon Pryde (who was just learning how not to do nothing) would worship and be a nuisance, and how speedily the whole company would bow down to the irresistible simplicity of McComie.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE SILVER HEEL

The singing rehearsal passed off well. McComie had been severely exercised by her professors, but retained a natural voice of the 'Wood-Notes-Wild' type which was unspoilable. Yes, she would soon learn the songs. In the meantime she must come to Mrs. Ewing's, where that lady and V. V. herself would look after her. For if ever any girl in the world needed looking after, it was McComie.

V. V. had her first experience of this as they came out of the theatre after the rehearsal of *The Bells of Enderby*. There was the usual little crowd of young men in two rows. Students for the most part, with nothing to do, who had taken a turn down that way to 'see the girls come out.'

This, of course, was as familiar to V. V. as her breakfast, and she minded it much less. V. V. could walk through half a mile of ranged admirers and never see one of them. For her they simply did not exist.

But what was her horror at the sight of McComie turning her head a little round and not only smiling but dimpling. Half a score of hats were off in a moment.

V. V. felt herself going red and then white. She only waited till she had McComie alone.

'Did you know any of these young men?' she demanded in her most managerial voice.

'I was not quite sure,' said McComie, in the most innocent way. 'One or two looked as if they might be

Leith fellows!

V. V. nearly fell down, and immediately began to establish for McComie's benefit the laws of the Medes and Persians as applicable to girls who are on the stage, who respect themselves while there, and who must do so with far greater strictness than ordinary girls in society.

A girl like V. V. or McComie (so went the lesson) must see without looking. Men, especially young men, must, unless very well known to her indeed, appear to be of such stuff as dreams are made of—insubstantial dream fabrics, to be looked through—by no means looked at.

'But how am I to know?' wailed McComie, whom this new view of things afflicted deeply; 'I know such heaps—for whenever the Lady of the House was extra horrid, I went for a walk—and of course a walk by one's self—you understand?'

McComie did not finish her sentence because of the fiery anger she saw flushing pink to the very ears of V. V.

'But we always do things like that in Leith, and there is no harm,' she explained anxiously; 'always with somebody one knows, of course, and whose people you know all about. But there are such heaps of them in Leith and the shipping offices—nothing in their heads, of course, but quite nice enough to go a walk with.'

'What sort of walks—general servants' afternoons out with the district policeman in plain clothes, smoking strong tobacco?'

'N-n-noooo!' stammered McComie, 'though there are some nice policemen, too, really quite good-looking. But I mean nice boys in insurance offices, the Leith and Rotterdam Shipping— and oh, all

sorts.'

'But where to?' queried her inquisitor sternly.

'Oh, just round the Nether Hill, at Arthur's Seat, or the Arboretum, or along the shore and back by Prestonpans— anywhere to keep out of the house and have a little peace. And they were really nice boys— afraid of me and all, never kissed me unless I let them!'

'Alice McComie!'

'Oh, what have I said now?' cried McComie in despair. 'Oh, about the kissing. Well, I know that's not the proper way. The hero ought to take the stairs at three bounds, catch the heroine in his mighty arms and kiss her whether she will or won't. Generally she wants to, if only to see what it will feel like. But he would do it just the same if she kicked like a Pilrig tracing horse! Oh, of course, nothing like that ever happened to you, V. V.?'

Well here, as a matter of fact, V. V. blushed and the trained eye of McComie caught her slight momentary confusion.

'Oooooooh!' she half whistled, half exulted, pouting her lips out like the delivery end of a wind instrument. 'So Sandy did it like that! From what I saw of him I should just think he would, but all he ever said to me was 'Good-bye, little cub!' And then he lifted my chin up with his forefinger and the kiss lifted somewhere, generally on the point of my nose, which he said was tip-tilted on purpose. It must be awfully nice to have Sandy make love to one. I wish I had been big enough when he was the Ramsay's tutor. Then I should not have needed any silly boys to take me walks for you to scold me about.'

It was quite plain at this point that the innocent McComie had turned the tables unexpectedly upon

V.V.

But McComie only sighed and gave herself a little hug while the changeful eyes grew darker blue-green with thought, the colour of a following wave in mid-ocean.

‘It must be so splendid!’

‘What must be so splendid?’ demanded V. V. rather irritated, but walking warily in fear of traps and snares.

‘Why, not to be able to box their ears!’

V. V. laughed, and all was over. Reproof certainly could not proceed farther along these lines.

‘Well, at any rate,’ she concluded, ‘you are now a part of The Boy and the Butterfly Company and you must keep up its good name.’

‘I’m sure I shall try hard,’ said McComie wistfully, ‘but you must teach me. You see it is so different in Leith. Everybody who is nice knows everybody else who is nice!’

Lessons in deportment began that very afternoon. The Boy and the Butterfly combination was rather a hardworked company. They had generally, at least in the early part of their tour, three matinees a week. It happened to be a day when the classes at the hospitals and medical colleges were devoting themselves to subjects considered excellent for skipping. Many cards were ‘put in’ by others than their owners— some stalwarts handing in a packet of a dozen assorted, with the calm insouciance worthy of so noble a cause. They were, in fact, getting several hours of release for their comrades, without any penalties incurred.

Many of these illegal ticket-of-leave men went down to see V. V. and the girl with the gold-flecked hair— the one who dimpled and smiled.

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As to this last, however, they were disappointed, for V. V. had been lecturing McComie on her duties, and had reduced that young woman to a very subdued frame of mind indeed. It would not last, of course. Nothing except good-nature lasted with McComie, but meantime she was of a quite nun-like meekness. V. V. did not know Alice McComie well enough to scent the danger. It was no use sitting on McComie's safety-valves. The explosion came all the sooner and was the more disastrous. But V. V. had not yet mastered her McComie 'Baedeker.'

'I don't see how you can walk through all these,' sighed McComie, 'without taking the least notice of them. It would be thought dreadfully 'stuck up' in Leith.'

'Be good enough to leave that abominable town out of your vocabulary for five minutes,' snapped V. V., 'and devote yourself to watching me. Do you see that pillar-box at the corner? Well, I am going to post a letter there and come straight back. You watch, and then you will be able to do it too.'

Poor McComie watched with all her eyes, anxiously and earnestly, but if she had had a hundred eyes and as many years to live she could never have done what V. V. now did.

A whisper went round the precincts of chronic Noodledom as V. V. appeared alone. She was still stamping her letter with one ungloved hand. Then she swept her skirts round and caught them exactly in the right place to keep them clear of the muddy back-street in which the stage-door was situated. Then with her eyes on something infinitely more distant than a star of the sixteenth magnitude, V. V. walked up the roadway towards the pillar letter-box—alone in the desert, or afar on the veldt—with

Arthur's Seat and the Calton as distant kopjes— like a wanderer on the pampas, like Peary the discoverer, walking his last hundred yards alone only to find that the pole was carefully painted red, had a slit in one side, a list of clearing-times, and that it was surmounted by the gilt crown of George V.

Easily, quietly, without pressing her step, V. V. went, not with her eyes fixed at all, but observant of the objects of interest on the double route—only, strangely enough, these were to be seen through the hedge of young men. No one felt himself looked at.

No glance was for him. Once she stopped to pat a fox-terrier because he resembled Adney, but even then it seemed to be the recognition of two waifs in the Sahara—the friendly greeting of two 'ships that pass in the night.' The crowd was hushed to stillness and stood wider apart as V. V. returned.

'I say, you fellows,' the voice of Home, the navy surgeon, recently appointed, had been heard as he passed while V. V. was slipping her letter into the South Pole, 'such a set of beastly cads it never was my lot to behold. Come out of that!'

The crowd thinned visibly, but still many held their places. And through them V. V. sauntered distant and unconscious.

'How peaceful,' she seemed to say, 'hark—the bleating of lambs on distant hills, the far-off murmur of the sea, the mountain-tops set sixty miles away in sunny weather.' (Those were the things that V. V. seemed to see.) She gave a little sigh as she set her foot upon the step, the eternally greasy threshold of the stage-door, as if to say, 'How good to be alone, to taste for a moment the airs of solitude and liberty.'

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And then she vanished.

'Oh, you magnificent creature!' cried McComie, hugging her. 'I did love you. You made them all so dancing mad. And when you sighed and shook out your skirts like the people in the Bible—oh, you were just the finest actress in the world. They looked as if they could eat you. I would give all my mother's money, and that is all I have, to be able to make men as angry as that! And you never laughed—nor smiled. Not a quiver! Oh, if only.'

McComie became silently regardant, visualizing the wide horizons which such power would open out to her— if only she could enrage men and torment 'fellows' with the unconsciousness of V. V. Ah, if only— well, perhaps she could learn. At least she would try hard.

'But it was quite natural,' said V. V. in protestation, 'and more than that, you must learn to walk like that, if you are to be any good to The Boy and the Butterfly Company!'

'Now,' she commanded, producing an envelope, 'here is another letter. You take it to the post and I shall watch!'

'Oh, please not,' moaned McComie. 'I never could—never, never! Wait till I get to Glasgow or some other town. It won't be so hard there!'

'It is your duty,' said V. V. severely; 'don't be a shirker, Alice McComie!'

And when she was called that McComie knew the game was up. She was patient while V. V. put her through her paces in her dressing-room before going downstairs, and at first McComie was as solemn as a Red Judge in circuit time. But stage fright seized her as she neared the door.

'Are the pavements very slippery?' quavered

McComie, grasping her friend by the arm. 'Oh, I wish you would come with me. I never can go through with it all alone—I know I can't!'

'Nonsense,' said V. V., giving her a shake. 'I don't ask you to look about you—or to look through people as you will learn to do after a while. Only keep your eyes on the ground and you will be back in a minute— mind, don't hurry, all depends on that. There now, go and do as I did!'

McComie found herself in the street, deserted by her fellow woman. The 'boys' were sparser set than they had been before Mr. Home's reproof, but still they were there.

McComie flushed to a warm rose-cream colour, but she did not dimple, nor smile, nor yet lift her drooping eyelids, nor do any of the McComieish things which she was dying to perform. V. V. was watching her. Still with so many safety-valves shut and the hatches battened down, it was hardly to be expected that McComie could make the trip in perfect safety.

Really V. V. tried her too high. That is the unanimous opinion of all McComie's friends now—even that of V. V. herself.

McComie almost deserved a Victoria Cross. She was certain that there were several young fellows with whom she had played lawn tennis, yet she did not lift her eye to look for Robert Holt nor to recognize Archie Berry. McComie would have been champion at lawn tennis if only she had played as well as she looked when she was playing. Also she served beautifully, only generally out of court.

To her antagonists and to the spectators she was a pure joy. To her partner a more chastened rejoicing. He could neither watch her attitudes nor

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retrieve her mistakes, however close he might stand to the net.

But from the Red South Pole, McComie returned. The letter had been honestly posted and she had kept her countenance. Tall and erect she stood as born to rule the storm—a creature of heroic mien (and so on)—but who was not in the least proud of it.

She was almost in shelter when she tripped over somebody's foot.

Now Alice McComie was a warm-hearted girl. She was tall and also conscious that she was no airy-faery Lilian. She trod habitually rather hard and she had a mania for having the heels of her little French shoes shod with rough silver which she could scratch and abuse with the point of a pair of unfortunate scissors.

So she lifted her eyes to apologize and the young man got it full—all the pent-up electricity, all the attractive force gathered behind V. V.'s tightly shut valves. McComie smiled. McComie dimpled. Two big eyes, dark as the night canopy at sea, and, in their swift surprise, apparently about as large, flashed out upon the astonished young man.'

'Oh, I am so sorry!' said McComie. 'Please forgive me.'

Then, lifting her skirt, she ran for the door and clasping V. V. round the neck, she sobbed, 'Oh, don't scold me, V. V. I am really dreadfully bad. I did not mean to speak, but truly I did give him rather a stamp!'

And then it was that, for the first time, V. V. began to have an inkling of what she had taken on her hands when she agreed to receive Alice McComie into her care and guardianship.

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As for the young man, he changed utterly, as in a tale of the Arabian Nights. The stormy sea-green eyes metamorphosed him out of all knowledge. He took immediately to his books and passed in rapid succession his 'professionals,' medical and surgical. He had previously finished his classes for the finals.

'By hangs!' he exclaimed euphemistically. 'Sandy shall not be able to tell that girl I'm a 'chronic'!

For the name of the curly-headed youngster on whose foot the silver heel of McComie had trodden was Wilfred Lyon Pryde, who, unless cut down in the flower of his age, the next pass list would see a genuine M.B., CM. of the University of Edinburgh.

And yet women want the vote.

CHAPTER NINE

ADAMANT AND ADAMANT

V. V. could not scold McComie for the fiasco of the pillar letter-box. After rigorous self-examination she found that the McComie nature could not be expected to alter after one lesson. V. V. could only hope that the benefit of her society would in time steel the McComie besom. She did not realize that Alice McComie held the pleasing theory that it was cruel to be so hard on the boys. They were so easily satisfied and, whatever V. V. might say, to be nice did not cost anything to anybody.

But there was one point on which V. V. was adamant. If Alice was to join her company she must interview her father in person—she, V. V., as the responsible guardian, and she must put before him his daughter's intentions and prospects.

Against this decision McComie strove in vain. She petted and pleaded. She wept till she blurred her wild, changeful, North Atlantic eyes—all to none effect. The coils of her hair fell down to no purpose—scattering coppery sheen, flaky gold, and cunning braid, jetting sarchus and carbuncle and cairngorm in the rays of the setting sun!—Hard, hard was the heart of V. V. No man could have refused—and been a man. But against the subtle barrier of sex, the blandishments of McComie beat in vain. To her father they two must go—and they did.

Only they went to the little office which he occupied by preference in the corner of the works on which he was for the moment engaged. The

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McComie bureau was made of wood, built in sections, and it could be moved. The wind whistled through its joints, but paste was cheap, and old McComie soon made things snug with scraps of wall-paper and old newspapers.

McComie entered the stone, lime, and sand-littered yard as if she lived there. V. V. followed, and at the farthest corner of the contractor's patch of desolation, they ran the old man literally to earth. For the office door only opened half-way, owing to a mountain of clay which had been shovelled out to clear the foundations for the new swimming-baths ordered by the common council.

Old Matthew McComie was a man, as the Edinburgh evening papers say, 'well known in philanthropic circles'—circles which, needless to say, no reporter on either staff was ever known to disturb with his presence. In visage he was a grim, frosty-jawed man with the merest frizzle of beard, a cleanshaven upper chin and grey hair which lay in swirls or stood up at casual angles like a field of tall corn, 'laid' by rain but still erect upon the higher ground.

McComie introduced V. V. as 'Miss Jones, father, with whom I am working!'

And V. V. accepted the description with clear-eyed calm, but with certain mental reservations as to the work.

'Work!' her father exclaimed, as if struck by the same thought, 'work! Well, that's more than ye ever did at home all the days of you. Fess (fetch) a chair, Ailice.'

To do this Alice had to pass through an outer room where a youth was endeavouring to busy himself with letters. He was a handsome, rather

ne'er-do-well cousin of her own, also a McComie, whom her father, who recognized family obligations of a sort, was endeavouring to drive (by no means to lead) into better ways.

Of him McComie had taken no notice on entering; but had stared through him at the water-coloured plans on the wall behind. These represented the baths which her father was constructing for the municipality.

The youth was sulking because of this treatment, and as he occupied the only chair in the outer room (visitors were not encouraged) McComie was in a difficulty. But she remembered V. V. and uttered this remarkable sentence:

'My father wishes the chair—you will find a desk with a high stool in the corner!'

McComie returned in triumph with the chair. She had merited well of the country under the eyes of her Professor of Maidenly Behaviour.

'Don't overdo it, McComie!' whispered V. V., but the old man heard. He had gleg ears, though his eyes were a trifle rheumy with the lime dust of half a century.

He rubbed his chin on his favourite scrubby place, where, indeed, he had worn it a little thin with his forefinger.

'Ye'll be the actress leddy, I'm thinkin'— her that Ailice has ta'en up wi'?'

I sing mostly,' said V. V. quickly. I hope ye'll no begin here, then,' said the contractor, 'there's heaps o' my horses that are broke to syrens and thae' (adjectivally described) 'moty-cars, but what they would do if ye were to sing, I wad not be responsible for—and me no sure o' my insurance policy.'

Smiling, V. V. shook her head. Such was by no

means her intention. Instead she had come to know if he was willing to entrust his daughter to her charge, for a period afterwards to be determined between them.

The old man rubbed his chin still harder.

'I have been watching you and Ailice,' he said presently. 'It was you that learned Ailice how to mak' that fule Henry, in the outer office, yonder, mind his P's and Q's. It's more than ever I could do wi' Ailice, and ye have ma compliments and my respectful admiration. Ailice is a good lass, but it's a God's truth that her and ma present wife doesna hit it. Na, there's nae peace about the hoose wi' the two o' them. And least o' a' for me, her legitimate and oncontested faither!'

'It's true,' he continued, 'I hae nae muckle 'goo' for play-actin', but I heard it's a money-making business when ye get weel up. Of course, I am no expectin' that Ailice is worth onythin' the noo— any mair than a week-auld 'prentice, but she has some siller o' her ain, and I am willin' to gie her a wee pickkle mair every three months— that is, I will send it to you, Miss Jones— and tak' your word for the way it has been spent.'

V. V. admitted that for some time to come his daughter would not be of great value to the company, but she was very anxious to have her as a companion. 'She was fond of Miss McComie.'

'Oh, fond!' said the old man contemptuously. 'Of course, you are fond o' Ailice— that's juist her stumbling-block. A body canna help bein' fond o' the besom— not even me, her faither, that am auld enough to ken better! But it's little ye ken what ye hae ta'en on your hands. I suppose ye gang to the kirk— yes— well, then, dinna let Ailice sing in the

choir. That has juist been the ruin o' her doon in Leith.'

'I'm not ruined,' said McComie, firing up suddenly and unexpectedly; 'I don't build silly brick sheds and sell them for houses. I don't cut down the plaster so thin that you could lick it off like the gum off a postage stamp. If a dozen or so of your young asses were mistaken about my promising to marry them, was that my fault? Why should you believe them before your own daughter? Would you give any one of them a share in your business?'

'Guid Lord, no!' cried the horrified contractor, lifting protesting hands.

'Then why should I give any one of them the whole of the money that was my mother's—and myself with it? Answer me that?'

'Maisterfu' Moses! the lass has been learnin'— I never heard her stick up to me before like that!'

'Besides,' continued McComie unabashed, 'if I took one— there would still be the bother and sorrow of discontenting the other eleven. I told the entire dozen that they were being saved an awful lot of trouble, as it was, by me refusing them!'

'Lord kens, Ailice, but that's His ain truth!' acquiesced her parent. 'But I will not have ye go from this place abusing your faither's honest trade.' (Here the contractor recurred to his daughter's words, which had evidently, more than all else, flicked him on the raw.) 'I cannot allow you, who has profited by the best eddication that a lass could get, to gang awa' without protestation after having lightlied her faither's honest trade before this young ledly. The plaister will do oor lifetime at least. It all depends on the good laying of the stones. I dinna hand wi' clutterin' on lime like so muckle soft soap.

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The Romans, that biggit for all eternity, did without plaister at all! Plaister was nothing but a barbarous invention of the dark ages, so I have been telled!

CHAPTER TEN

THE ENLISTMENT OF ROB

Sandy was perplexed. His mind was troubled. John, on whom he had placed his dependence as David on Jonathan, had of late been making palpable excuses to remain in the North with The Boy and the Butterfly Company.

There was (it appeared) 'shameful expense, waste beyond telling.' V. V. was being cheated right and left. And indeed, so long as Wilfred had been busy with his examinations, there had been something to be said for this view of things. But now that Fred was on the spot, ready and apparently willing to take over the duties of Brother John, Sandy, writing repeated pressing appeals from the garage, could not make out why the Ever-Faithful paid so little attention to his wishes.

The P. P. P. D., or Pryde's Prompt Parcel Delivery, was going forward with great strides—almost too great indeed for the finances of its chief partner, A large local emporimn, Messrs. Tomling and Hard, Limited, had interviewed Sandy as to the possibility of his doing their whole parcel business. And this would mean at least four or five more motor delivery vans. Sandy had gone to his lawyer (recommended by Mr. Shieldhill) and had demanded a five years' contract with a penalty clause. The lawyer thought that the price of the cars, or a part of it would not be difficult to raise. The P. P. P. D. was now a well-known concern.

'You couldn't authorize me to state that your firm

started business in the eighteenth century, could you?' said the man-of-law, looking up from his drafting.

'No,' said Sandy, 'I could not. I started myself last year, with a second-hand tricycle barrow!'

Sandy, with the last chapters of 'Cold Steel' heavy on his mind, busied himself in financing the P. P. P. D. He succeeded in getting together a good range of cars, and a decent set of men, taking them direct from the training-schools, without having undergone the spoiling which the public deals out to the ordinary taxi-drivers of London.

He succeeded none so ill, but it was decidedly dreary work, and at night he said to himself: 'Two of my brothers are employed looking after V. V. I have two businesses here to look after myself, and my father has two other brothers to help him with the farm. Better send them along to help out V. V., and I shall run up to Fernielands once a week to give the old man a hand!'

He knew, of course, that Fred was capable of 'playing himself.' Indeed, till his last furious burst of work (where, as he admitted himself willingly, he showed his blood at last), Sandy considered him quite the reverse of serious.

But what to make of Brother John?

In this difficulty he sat down and wrote a letter to Rob Gilston at Dumfries Station, the same who had helped him in the small matter of the engaged compartment, when he saw the Sykes girls up to London in times old —oh, so much older— than Prehistoric.

'Deab Rob' (he wrote),

'Do you care to come up and join me? I have need of somebody like you, smart with parcels and

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accustomed to dealing with people. I can stand two pounds a week just to see how we get on. It will be a long time before the Company with the Green Engines will give you as much. Of course, my business is young and you won't have the same security, but if there is an off-chance that I should blow up like a too dry 'peeoye' there is a still greater that you will be managing a department for me before long. I have four motor delivery vans running, and more ordered. I have eight horses which I am gradually getting rid of, as the press of business is driving us all into the motor line.'

'If you feel inclined, send in your notice, and wire me when you will be up.

'For old sake's sake,
'A. A. Pryde.

'R. Gilston Esq., Dfrs. Stn., Dumfries, N.B.'

Rob Gilston started work on the Monday week. Sandy spent most of the Sunday in the empty works, showing Rob the ins and outs of every part, but they had gone dutifully to church at Kentham Road in the evening.

'I used to preach here,' said Sandy confidentially: 'I preach first-class when I set my mind to it!'

'I believe ye!' whispered the admiring Rob; 'and what came in the road? Did they not pay ye?'

'Oh, as to that— nobody, but, it was something else.'

'Oh,' said Rob, mindful of his country's blot, 'some small maitter o' a lass.'

'Aye,' said Sandy, 'but no in the way you mean!'

When they came out Sandy took Rob to the empty rooms at 151 Kandahar Road, where were many photographs of V. V. And there, among exclamations of 'Michty!' and 'Mercy on us!' 'D'ye say sae—oh,

man!' and the like—all the tale of V. V. was told—the chucker-out-ship, the beginnings of the parcel business, the invincible loyalty of V. V., and the strange obstinacy of Brother John in remaining in the North when he knew from repeated letters that his presence was so badly wanted in the South.

Of course what Rob Gilston thought of John's absence he knew better than to communicate to Sandy. Brother John had fallen in love with V. V. himself, and careless of fraternal pre-emption, he was staying behind pushing his own suit. There was another brother, too, Freddie, but of his case Sandy made little. It was John he wanted to look after the rolling stock, to receive and try the motors as they came in, to settle with the men, and generally to keep order.

Then he told Rob about the new work for Tomling and Hard, Limited— work which would very nearly double the business, and for which he was hiring vans at exorbitant rates till he could get the delivery of his own.

'It's there that ye will be the help, Rob,' he said. 'Ye are accustomed to parcels, and ye will see that the lasses send them to the proper vanmen, and not waste time. The delivery sheets are not more than half made out at present. You will do the checking and watch the signatures. They will do ye if they can, up here, Rob! As for Tomling and Hard, it all depends on the first fortnight.'

So Rob promised faithfully that he would serve Sandy and V. V.— for Sandy had revealed the partnership in the firm of that lady, and Rob was still under the spell of the photographs.

'I fear that I shall have to go North myself for a day or two,' said Sandy, 'just to see what is to be

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done. They need Brother John badly at the garage, and what with my writing to finish, and everything here on my shoulders, the fact is— he must come back with me, or frankly say me nay!’

‘He will never do that!’ said Rob Gilston, but he said it without conviction, for he thought of the foolish things he had done for girls in his time.

‘There's something uncanny about the craiteurs,’ he said to himself. ‘Wi' a laugh in their e'e, they wile ye to do the very thing ye hae sworn a solemn oath not to do!’

‘That's them!’ said Rob Gilston who had seen plenty on the passenger-platforms of Dumfries, especially on Wednesdays when he wore his smartest uniform.

Rob passed that night in the chamber of Brother John above the garage in Tenterden Road. He did not sleep much, but wondered rather at the strange noises, and why Sandy had forbidden him to get up and go for a walk in the country without him. It seemed that by passing the station and keeping along the Kirkmahoe Road he must come on the moonlit wimples of the Nith, beyond which the wide misty meadows stretched away towards Galloway.

After an hour or so of this he went to the window in the brick gable, sparred with inch iron on the outside, and opening it, listened to the midnight growling of the monster which was London.

‘Could two pound a week pay for all this?’ he asked himself.

No, but the chance of helping Sandy could—not to speak of Sandy's unseen Junior Partner, one of whose photographs Rob had shamelessly annexed.

Next day, joiners were busy putting him up an apartment next to that of Brother John above the

garage, and the whole place was fragrant with pine-shavings. He learned to walk alone that day, but Sandy did not move from his elbow. It was the same the next day, but Sandy eclipsed himself longer and oftener, watching through a skylight the acts and deeds of his new subordinate, ready to descend to his relief in case of need.

He had not to descend, for he murmured to himself: 'I knew he had it in him—Gilston blood is good blood!'

All the same when he strolled in he carefully refrained from making the least acknowledgment in words. By Thursday Sandy had passed the last proof of 'Cold Steel,' and had not been near the Delivery Offices till three in the afternoon.

There he found a confident if rather hustled and dishevelled Rob, masterful and irate, but perfectly adequate.

'You didn't come,' he said, 'so I sacked a man!'

'What, another driver,' said Sandy, with sad visions of a renewed AEsopian search for an honest man to drive his hired car number eight.

'No,' said Rob, 'a despatcher who would not keep his time-books properly, though I warned him repeatedly. I have been doing the work myself at odd times.'

'Of course,' said Sandy, 'what else was there to be done? Anyway, I never thought much of Hills. We are better without him. He was posing as a kind of strike-leader in a small way!'

Sandy was a liberal by birth like most of his countrymen, but as an employer he liked to deal with his men personally and without intermediaries.

That night Sandy, completely reassured, bought a copy of Bradshaw—sixpenny edition—and spent at

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least an hour over it, noting down times and seasons, and turning down pages. There were signs in the air that Sandy was going to make a swoop upon the first company entitled to represent The Boy and the Butterfly in the provinces.

Brother John— Brother John— beware!

CHAPTER ELEVEN

SHE ANGERS MEN; AND PLEASETH THEM

Sandy arrived in Edinburgh at six-thirty, by the day train from King's Cross, and went at once to Mrs. Ewing's, high above the corner of Montague Street—Davie Deans' cottages to wit— from which you can see the Salisbury Crags and a little green hump of Arthur's Seat.

Mrs. Ewing nearly hugged her former lodger, if she did not do it altogether.

'Eh, but, Maister Alexander, ye are the fine man noo to look upon. Aye, ye tak' the e'e, that ye do. There's no comfort in the world like a fine big, face-able man—says I that kens. Miss Jones? Did ye speir? There noo! Did I not tell ye? I kenned frae the first time that ever I set e'en on her bonny face, that ye were trappit at last! Oh, she's a braw bonny lass, and honest— never mind about that, says you. But she's oot the noo. She had to gang to the theaytur for a kind o' special rehearsal— a new lass to hear say her bit lines. But Miss McComie is in there— ben the house. Ye ken the road to the parlour. They will be at the music nae doot!'

'But who's Miss McComie?' said Sandy.

'What, you not to ken Miss McComie!' cried Mrs. Ewing, 'preserve us—then ye soon will!'

And indeed the next minute landed Sandy in the little parlour, looking unfamiliar with its feminine adornments, and the big new piano. More unfamiliar still looked the tall girl who sat there with her skirts swirled about her feet, her hair swirled about her

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shining head, hair of six separate colours, and the changeful light of tempestuous eyes swirling about the room as she turned to look.

She was apparently playing scales and exercises. She was thrilling and criss-crossing her hands on the keyboard, and otherwise performing miracles of musical gymnastics. She was jangling the good Paterson piano to pieces, and, as it seemed to Sandy, making a most intolerable noise if a man wanted to write to any purpose.

But as his eyes grew accustomed to the light, filtering dim and diffused, under the half-drawn blinds, he became conscious of two men, one tall and slim standing by the piano who turned over the leaves whenever the young pianist cried out, and the other a grave, steady-eyed, short-bearded man who sat leaning forward, his fingers lost under his square chin, while he watched the performer with a fixed and hungry solemnity.

'And it is for this,' thought Sandy, 'that I have been running myself off my feet in London.'

Sandy felt just in the mood to execute justice, and so far as his brothers went he meant to do it. With regard to Miss— what was her name?— yes, McComie (fancy anyone not knowing that name!), he would have to see V. V. first before he could make up his mind.

'Well!' said Sandy magisterially, with the doorknob in his hand.

'Oh!' cried McComie, 'if it's not Sandy and V. V. not here! Oh, Sandy, she will be distressed. I am distressed for her. I know what it would be like myself!'

And without the least warning she threw her arms about his neck and kissed him heartily— half

for his own sake and half to annoy the others.

'There,' she said, when she had finished to her satisfaction, 'you shall not come home without a welcome. Why, I knew you at once. They always said that you were the only good-looking one of the family. Have you had tea? Oh, Jessie—Mrs. Ewing—some tea and ham and eggs for San—Mr. Pryde, haste ye, fast. He has been travelling all day and had nothing to eat!'

It is not on record that Mrs. Ewing winked at Sandy. She was too respectful so to do, really. But the difference between that improper action and what Mrs. Ewing did do was so short that even an expert could hardly have told the difference. To Sandy, who had known her a long season, the slight droop of the eyebrow, entirely personal, conveyed much— among others an intense appreciation of the situation, an assurance that all was right, and especially most sincere congratulations that Sandy was on the spot to take the whole business in hand without delay.

Sandy briefly acknowledged the presence of his brothers.

'Well, Fred!' he said to the dumb-stricken youth at the piano.

'You, John!' was his greeting to the other.

The most culpable of the three was wholly unmoved. Continual immunity had armed McComie as triply as if her quarrel had been the justest.

'Oh, I'm glad you've come—I was getting so tired of practising,' she confided, motioning Sandy to a place beside her on the sofa. 'Oh, goodness, not there— why, there's a spring broken right under you—sit on my skirts—so— that's more comfortable, eh? Oh, what a darling V. V. is. I believe she saved

me from suicide, the dear. Why have you taken so little of your tea? Oh, of course, how stupid—because you want to see V. V. So do I, but she left me after making me promise to practise for an hour and a half—such a worry. But don't you find that nothing is a worry if V. V. asks you to do it? Yes so do I. And these two gentlemen have been so kind and helpful— one by turning over the leaves when I didn't want them turned, and the other by sitting with his mouth open, that the time passed somehow. And now you have come, how happy we shall be!

Sandy had growled at the beginning of this harangue. But he smiled grimly at the description of the usefulness of his brothers, and now things became somehow changed when McComie clasped her hands about his arm as if she had known him for ages and ages, and said, 'Oh, I can hardly bear to sit still. I do so want to take you to V. V., only she won't be ready yet for twenty minutes, and I am so sorry for you! I should be sorry for her too, only she does not know what she is missing.'

McComie clapped her hands at unseen things. McComie's hair flashed metallic. Her silver heels rang excitedly. There was an odour of Lily-of-the-valley, somehow connected with the broken spring on which he was sitting and McComie's face dimpled as she looked worshipfully at the picture of V. V. on the wall, one with a little electric light over it. It was his favourite one and stood quite three feet by two, a masterpiece taken directly without enlargement.

McComie sprang up suddenly and turned on the electric light above. It was rose pink. The frame was surrounded by rich miniature curtains of cream and gold worked with blue.

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‘I call that ‘The Shrine!’ she said, ‘I did the curtains myself. I should love to have had dinky little wax candles burning before it, only V. V. wouldn’t let me, but I do have some nice smelly China incense when she is out. Wait till I get a house of my own and then V. V. shall have something like a shrine. She saved me, you know, if ever one girl saved another.’

‘Nonsense,’ said Sandy, who feared that the next minute she might cry and then what should he do, with his two brothers looking frostily on—as it were, biting their thumbs at him.

‘Yes, she did,’ McComie continued; ‘of course you know nothing about it, but if you say she didn’t save me, you are not worthy of your good luck.’

‘That I know I am not,’ said Sandy, his ill temper fading quite away under the influence of McComie.

‘Now then,’ she ordered, ‘be off with you, Fred and John—I can’t for the world think what you have been doing—filling up the place all this time so that one has hardly room to move. I shall put on my hat and things and walk down to the theatre with Mr. Pryde.’

The two men silently obeyed, and the girl vanished, only to reappear as soon as she had seen them safely down the stairs.

‘Sandy,’ she said, with clasped hands of petition and eyes that brimmed, ‘I know that you have come all the way from London to get rid of me. But oh, please don’t! I should have to drown myself off the Pier—Leith Pier, where I belong. It’s a hard-shell fact, Sandy. V. V. saved me, and if you put your foot on her caring for me (as of course you can), there is nothing for me but to get out of the world with as little fuss as possible. My father has made V. V. my

first guardian, and you my second— and that is partly why I loved you so nicely when you came in. Of course I don't love you as much as I love V. V.— yet. But if you are nice to me, I shall. And when I want to be nice— well, I am nice. Just you ask V. V., don't ask any silly men, but just V. V. She will tell you that in time I shall be quite a model girl, and a credit to you, after she has given me some more lessons in deportment. I've never done anything very bad, you know—except slapped my stepmother. But then she slapped me first and hardest, so that doesn't count, does it? And my father has given up all rights in me—deeded me away. I have only you and V. V. in the world now. And I am going to be a fearful trial to you, father says. He is glad to have found two such fools as V. V. and you to take me off his hands! And all because of that slap— I wish it had been harder, and because I refused to marry twelve very stupid young men that father wanted me to have.'

What,' said Sandy, 'not all twelve of them?'

'No,' said McComie sadly, 'not all at a time. There would have been some fun in that. I could always have kept eleven of them mad with me, and that would have been a relief. But I believe it's not permitted or something— at least father would not hear of it, and said I was an ill-tongued minx when I mentioned it to him.'

'You little streaky-haired, dimpling Mormoness!' cried Sandy, laughing in spite of himself. McComie leaped in the air and clapped her hands.

'Now I know you won't send me away,' she said. 'I shan't have to drown myself. You have laughed and I know what that means. Dear Guardian Number Two, come and kiss your ward!'

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Sandy stood a little way off. Man is but man, after all, and, at best, doubtfully monogamous.

'No,' he said, 'I'll be your guardian all right, but I shall not kiss my ward till V. V. is there to show me how!'

They found V. V. just coming out, a tired little air about her, on her face the look of one who has not seen the sunlight all day, and now emerges into the red glow of its setting.

'Sandy—Sandy!' she whispered stilly, quite below her breath. But Sandy had heard, and so did McComie, who, proud to have brought him, was just turning on her heel to take herself off.

But Sandy and V. V. were not of those who make public demonstrations of affection, so they only shook hands soberly.

'I have finished the last proofs of 'Cold Steel,' said Sandy simply, 'so I came off to see you.'

'And you have, I see, already made acquaintance with McComie,' V. V. smiled. 'I hope you did not frighten her. Did you find her shy?'

'Not precisely shy,' said Sandy; 'but where did you disinter her? She is like no other girl I ever saw. She is like the pictures of nymphs and goddesses in my old Smith's Classical Dictionary—Iris or Hebe, or someone of that sort, or let me think, Pomona perhaps!'

'Oh,' said V. V., 'you won't find her at all classical—only innocent with a kind of pre-Adamic innocence. She seems to have escaped—what is it you say—'the burden of original sin,' and yet it takes all one's time to keep her out of mischief.'

No original sin in her,' said Sandy, misquoting, but death and destruction on actual transgression!'

'Oh, no, not in the least!' said V. V. seriously. She

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has no bad about her anywhere—only—only— I'll tell you about it again, Sandy. She is different, that's all. She needs looking after!

'Yes,' said Sandy, 'I can guess a little of that from the attitude of my two dear brothers— I would never have believed it of John!'

'I suppose,' said V. V. demurely, 'that he would never have believed it of you, if he had seen us when I came down the path at 151, Kandahar Road, to watch you cleaning the old delivery tricycle— bless it!'

CHAPTER TWELVE

ADDRESS 'McCOMIE, EDEN.'

Sandy was not long in getting V. V.'s views on the crisis. She had never expected much of Wilfred, though she did not deny that he had passed his final examination with amazing celerity. But to think that John, in whom she had trusted—in whom they both had trusted—should leave Sandy to struggle with all his London worries alone—should never answer his letters! That passed her comprehension.

'Useful?' Of course old John was useful to her. He had all the qualities, but—V. V. would rather give up the whole tour than that Sandy should be at his wits' end about the business and his writing!

Then Sandy told her of the coming of Rob Gilston, and he prophesied great things of the good team John and he would make together at the garage in the Tenterden Road.

'Of course he will go when I put it to him,' said Sandy, who was utterly unaccustomed to be disobeyed; 'the difficulty is to know what to do with that young ass Freddie. What do you think, V. V.?'

'He is doing no good here,' said V. V. meditatively; 'but, of course—so long as it is McComie, it is rather good for him than otherwise. But after all, he is getting no nearer his future career.'

'He is no use to you?' began Sandy with a frown. 'He has never been of any use?'

'Don't look like that, Sandy,' V. V. hastened to say; 'he means to be, but as a matter of fact we are not a penny piece the better of him in the fortnight.'

SANDY'S LOVE

'Well,' said Sandy, 'I can't buy him a practice—I wouldn't if I could—the fact is he has had too much done for him as it is, the young shaver. Yet, I don't like sending him away in a whaling ship—there is his mother to consider. I wonder—I wonder...'

'Suppose,' said V. V. quietly, 'that we go down and ask her!'

This was plumbing the deep sea of Sandy's affection, but he never hesitated a moment.

'Splendid!' he cried; 'but how can you give the time?'

'We shall have a good week between our closing here and our opening in Glasgow.'

'Good,' said Sandy, accustomed to swift decisions and determined carryings out. 'Now we shall have to arrange with John.'

At the theatre they called for John. He was more carefully dressed than of old. His beard and moustache were trimmed to a marvel. He wore a new suit and a tie which came from some shop where they do not have cheap sales. Altogether he was a much changed brother.

'John,' said Sandy, 'did you get those three letters I wrote you, telling you about the need we had of you at the works?'

John nodded gravely. Remorse gnawed at his heart, but a devilish something was keeping him from quite making it up with Sandy.

'And you knew that I had all the burden of the works, of the men, and the customers on my shoulders—that at the same time I had to deliver my book?'

A groan was wrenched from John's tortured bosom, but he only said, 'I knew!'

'Let me speak to him,' said V. V., who could not

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bear to see the giant suffer, 'you have the hand too heavy, Sandy!'

Then V. V. turned to the blond broad-breasted Titan and let her eyes rest upon him—calm eyes, firm, steadfast, trustable eyes, the eyes of V. V. Jones.

'I know also,' she said, 'and I understand better than your brother. But you have put Sandy in great difficulties. He has a great deal of money to pay back, and he was depending upon you for the garage work. Rob Gilston has come from Dumfries to check the parcels and the parcel deliverers. But your work is waiting for you. Now if you are a man, take the return half of Sandy's ticket and be at the garage in the morning. Sandy will have time to look about him for a day or two and perhaps put his hand on a little money. Will you go, John?'

'Aye,' said John, 'I will go. But first I must see and speak with Miss McComie.'

'I think you are wrong there,' said Sandy.

John turned on his brother the eyes of a cornered wild thing in the angle of a park wall, and Sandy's anger melted, remembering the pipe. John had long forgotten it—for something stronger had come into his life.

'I must see McComie!' he repeated dully, 'I cannot go else!'

'Has McComie—?' began V. V., prepared in certain circumstances to be very angry with that young woman.

'No, she hasn't,' John spoke out, not looking at anybody, 'no more than to your terrier Adney—not so much indeed, because she pets him. But—you are a woman—I can't explain before Sandy. Only I must see her.'

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He spoke drearily, doggedly, like a man without hope, and who yet goes through with a duty because it is a duty.

'Well,' said V. V. with a sigh, 'you will do no good by seeing her again. I do think you are foolish!'

'Thank God for that,' said John, 'such foolishness is better than the wisdom of the wise. I only wish I had known it ten years earlier.'

Silently he went out, and V. V. instantly reached both her hands to Sandy.

'Don't be hard on him,' she said, 'you are younger and more compelling in your ways. Also I am not McComie. She is a most hopeless young person to be in love with, and what satisfaction your brother can hope for..'

'He is a fool,' said Sandy without sympathy, 'but a day or two with the Tenterden Road men will help to restore him to his senses. I can't imagine, V. V., how you let it go so far.'

V. V. made a gesture which signified that as for herself, she washed her hands of the whole affair. It was certainly not her fault. Neither did she believe it was McComie's, at least not wilfully. McComie got into trouble as the sparks fly upwards. But her intentions were of the most innocent. As to that Sandy would see and judge for himself. It happened because the generality of men were such simpletons, like his brother John. She (V. V.) intimidated men for the most part. There was something about her that said 'Hands off!' so she had no trouble. It was all as easy to her as breathing the good clean air of Arthur's Seat at Mrs. Ewing's door. But McComie was different. Did Sandy remember showing her the knife blade of magnetic steel—Swedish, wasn't it? Well, that piece of steel was not to blame if the iron

filings followed it whichever way it turned. It was precisely the same with McComie—the thing was a parable, but a true one.

‘I can well believe it,’ said Sandy grimly; ‘if it were possible that young woman would deceive the very elect!’

V. V. laughed.

‘You are right as to the effect, Sandy,’ she said; ‘but utterly wrong as to the cause. McComie deceives no one. She does not even, like the rest of us, deceive herself. If men were half as innocent as McComie, no harm would be done. She is still in the Garden of Eden. No flaming sword has ever shut the door for her. It is the rest of us who are outside the wall. In a conventicle of sinners like ourselves, McComie alone could cast the first stone. Only she would never do it. She would be off to see about the tea and cakes for the sinners!’

Sandy held up his hands.

‘That will do, V. V. I was wrong. I looked upon McComie with unanointed eyes!’

At this moment came an irruption—something hasty, glancing, tempestuous, warm, heartbreakingly genuine, entered (as it seemed), in a swirl of windblown rose leaves.

‘Oh, you dears,’ cried McComie, ‘having a nice time, aren't you? Will you mind if I go to the late train at the Waverley and see poor old John off? Just myself, mind. No, nobody else! It will comfort him so. Yes, I promise to take a cab home and you can stop it out of my salary!’

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE WAY HOME

Matters were much more easily arranged with Wilfred Lyon of the recent degree. He had been secretly pleased with Sandy's words of appreciation— Sandy, to whom an exam, more or less was just like putting his hand on a hurdle and vaulting over— Sandy, who had taken his first medical 'Professional' in order that he might occupy the post of assistant to the professor of Botany all one glorious summer at the Botanical gardens. The praise of Sandy was sweet to his brother Freddie— because heretofore 'waster,' and 'slacker,' and 'chronic' had been the ordinary small change of Sandy's fraternal appreciations.

'See here,' said Sandy, 'here is your fare to Mossdale Station. You are to be off tomorrow morning and carry this letter to my mother. Give it to her by herself, do you hear?'

'Why can't it go through the post?' murmured Wilfred in a disaffected tone, 'I am needed here!'

'No, Freddie, you are not needed here any longer,' thundered Sandy, with a conquering glower, 'and you have your career to think of— if not I shall think of it for you!'

'Oh, I wish I had never passed one of these infernal exams!' burst out the young man.

Sandy slowly erected himself, his head a little forward, his jaw prognathous, and primitive as the beauty of McComie, ex-nymph and present vocalist.

'You say that again before V. V. and I will heave

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you out of the window,' he threatened. He knew that threatening was the best way with Freddie, who hated to have his clothes disarranged.

'All right,' said Wilfred, 'I'll take the letter, but I don't see...'

'There are lots of things you don't see—and won't till your nose is held stiff at the grindstone. Wait till I find you a town assistantship, young man, with the night bell within three inches of your ear—then you will pick up a few hints as to the meaning of work!'

'I should like to— talk the matter over with,' he hesitated.

'Well, then you won't,' said Sandy brutally. 'McComie is seeing off your brother at the London train tonight, and if you go near the Waverley departure platform, I'll break your neck. (Hold your tongue, V. V. This is my job!) And you be off tomorrow morning by the first train. You hear me!'

'I hear,' said Freddie, thoroughly cowed; 'can I take my bicycle?'

'Of course,' said Sandy, 'but you had better spend some hours packing everything you possess and sending the trunks on to the care of John at the Garage, Tenterden Road, S. E. I don't mean that you shall loaf about at home. I began by delivering packages for tuppenny-ha'-penny shops and being chucker-out at a music-hall. You are no good for that job, but I'll find you honest work if you have to roll pills all day long. I'll have another bunk fitted up for you above the Garage, alongside Rob Gilston and Brother John. I know what's good for your complaint, young man. Now be off and pack, and you can leave behind all the collars that are so high you can't work in them without getting a red rim under your ears. They will be of no use to you! And

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see here, if I find you make any poor mouth to mother about her darling Benjamin boy that is being put to work for his own good— well, Freddie, dear, you shall hear from me!

'I do think that you were very hard on him,' said V. V., after Sandy had apologized for bidding her be silent during his 'dealing' with Freddie, 'he is not at all a bad boy—only...'

'He has all the qualities which, if encouraged, spell 'waster,' ' said Sandy; 'that is why I began with Freddie, dear, as I mean to finish. I have kept him seven years at college and now it is quite time he did something for himself. He never would, if he were let turn over a girl's music, and think what a slim waist he had— grrrrh!'

Sandy fairly snarled with contempt.

'Don't you think that you and I, Sandy, being workers in our blood, expect rather much from other people who are not built like us?'

'Not a bit—not an atom,' asseverated Sandy; 'if a man work not, neither shall he eat. And if Freddie is going to be a do-nothing, I would rather make him mix himself a little dose, order him to take it, and have a respectable, inexpensive funeral. Remember, V. V., there is no room in our family for any 'Weary Willies' or' Frizzled Freddies.' I have not the inclination (nor you the time) to put he-dollies back in their bandboxes, and wrap soft silk paper about them. Neither one nor the other of us will rock that young man to sleep. But if we can find one job that's more granitic than another, that's the job Master Wilfred Lyon is going to have, and is going to do— otherwise my name is not Sandy Pryde.'

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V. V. shook her head and mentally resolved that she would do what she could to temper the tempestuous Sandy-wind to the carefully shorn lamb, which was Freddie.

'You will not say anything of this to his mother, she suggested gently.

'Of course not,' said Sandy— 'not unless he whines! Mother thinks that London is a sort of green velvet lawn where you look about among the daisies till you find enough sovereigns to make a fortune. Then you buy a gold watch-chain, don a white waistcoat and come home to show them off. That is why I wear a gun-metal Waterbury and one of your old black neck-ribbons, V. V., to show that I am still struggling with evil days!'

The Boy and the Butterfly finished in a blaze of triumph for V. V. She could have walked knee-deep in flowers. McComie also had a good many, but the charms of McComie did not carry so well across the footlights. Besides she was a new comer, and the Philistines of Leith know not the Sadducees of Edinburgh.

'Ah,' sighed McComie disconsolately, 'if only V. V. would consent to give just one performance at the Leith 'Royal.'

It was true the 'Athletic' boys would have turned out, and the officers at the fort— the whole town, with the provost and magistrates in their robes. They would have carried McComie shoulder high, carriage and all—the dock stevedores and the football clubs would have seen to that. Only, most unhappily, V. V. would hear of nothing of the kind, and wondered that McComie had not more respect for her people on the East Promenade.

'That's the very reason,' said McComie, 'it would

have fairly scarified the Old Cat!

McComie was nothing if not primitive— in spite of Eden.

All the same she did not utter a word as to what happened when she saw off Brother John at the Waverley Station, and a discrepancy in her accounts, to which the careful V. V. called her attention, resolved itself into the difference between a third and a first-class ticket, and the half-guinea for a sleeping-berth.

'It will be good for Sandy's business,' said McComie unabashed. 'John could never have done a good day's work at the garage, if he had gone up in a fusty, smoky third.'

'Well, anyway, McComie,' said V. V., 'I don't see what business it was of yours. What will he think? It is a direct encouragement.'

'Oh, if one has to stop to think of that,' said McComie, 'everything is an encouragement for a man who wants to be encouraged. You might hit him over the head with a spade, and he would think it an encouragement because you did not hit everybody else!'

McComie, in a form somewhat out-at-elbows, was speaking the eternal verities. Nor could V. V. contradict her. All the same she was sorry for Brother John. Less so for Brother Freddie, who really had by far the worst time of the two.

The next day brought a letter from Sandy's mother. At sight of it V. V. felt her heart beat more irregularly than it had ever done on a first night. Sandy brought it to her little parlour, hot from the postman's hand. V. V. was standing by the table, calm and cool, in her dressing-gown of cream and pale blue, but another figure (which might have

been McComie and might not) disappeared through an inner door in a twinkling of bare ankles and the fluttering banner of the Bourbons.

Sandy read aloud carefully, with the respect which he always put into his voice when he perused his mother's letters, the lines which follow:

'Dear Son Sandy,

Your letter was brought by your brother Fred, in what, if I were not a communicant, I should call the de'il's ain temper. What has putten him into sic a like fyke? I suspect ye have been frightenin' him about the wark, or maybe some 'tirrivee' among the lasses. Aweel, no matter for that.

'It's your ain auld mither that will be the glad and the prood woman to see Miss Jones and her friend—the lassie frae Leith. They shall have your room, and ye can tak' to the stable loft wi' the lads as oft ye have done before. Your faither says that he hopes she is a douce lass—she is, ye telled us, a fervent Presbyterian though English by birth. I have a great deal more fear for the other yin, the lassie frae Leith, her being, as ye say, a U. P. and given to singing in the choir and siclike flightiness.

'Let us ken the train that ye are coming by and we will meet ye at Mossdale—the faither wi' a cairt and maybe Allen or Joseph wi' the waggonette. The leddies will travel wi' a good deal of luggage, I daresay. The Misses Sykes are here just now, and I saw their 'trantlums' arrive. They borrowed two cairts frae the faither, and there was hand luggage forbye! Scribe me a line (private-like) to tell me if there is onything that I could get frae the toon. Freddie has nothing else to do and it will aye keep his discontented face oot o' his faither's road. I'm while feared he will tak' the 'rung' to him. Yet what a

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bright merry wee laddie he used to be! Warn Miss Jones that it will be an unco change to come down to country fare after London. The lass frae Leith will ken how to sup porridge and she will not be put about onyway— wha ever saw a U. P. put about?

I houp, though, that she will gang to the pairish kirk on the Sabbath and behave seemly.

If ye bring onything (which is mair nor I expect) let it be a half of tea and a half of coffee from Law's in the Square. But mind I am no looking for anything—and you wi' a' thae terrible expenses in London!

'Glory and praise be to Him that put it into your mind to come so far to see your auld mither, that never lets ye oot o' her mind, nicht and day!

P. S.—The Leith lassie is as welcome as ony o' ye. We will try and mak' her brave and comfortable. How can a lassie help the religion that her parents baptised her into—nae mair than the haythen on the far isles of the sea, that Maister Jeffray prays for ilk Sabbath day.

'Love to all three, from your well-affectionated
'Mither.'

It was a long letter for Mistress Pryde to write in the midst of her multifarious business calls, and Sandy felt the gratitude well up within him. There was only one paragraph, however, which he did not find to his taste. That was the information that Eleanor and Lily Sykes were down at The Lodge with their aunt. He could very well have dispensed with them.

Still the thing could not be helped, and it was not likely that they would disturb the visitors at Fernielands on the Hill. But he hastened to send a telegram to the station master at Mossdale Station

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(to be forwarded to the farm by the first passer-by) to say that no cart should be sent for luggage. The girls would have a bag apiece and Sandy his suitcase—an arrangement which V. V. afterwards modified. He could carry all three at a pinch—for changes at Carstairs, Lockerbie and Dumfries made the cross-country journey a particularly harassing one.

The train drew up under the purple front of the Bennan of Mossdale in the midst of a green and brown wilderness of moss flowe. Wild wastes of thyme and bog-myrtle scented the wind even in the station—a lonely little station, as it were anchored, not too securely, in the midst of the boggy fastness which, within Sandy's memory, had been made firm railway track by an infinity of trouble and many thousand tons of rock.

But oh, the welcome! The station master seemed never to have done shaking hands with him. The solitary porter lad from a neighbouring farm (Sandy had known him as a 'crow-herd') could hardly ask for his ticket without emotion, while V. V. and McComie seemed to strike the entire population dumb with admiration.

A light four-wheeled dog-cart was waiting as ordered, but his father was driving it himself—an honour indeed. The like had not been seen since Mossdale ceased to be a shebeen and became a station with its name in white letters enamelled on a blue board as long as the one at Cairn Edward.

Mr. Pryde had been helped down from his driver's seat, for he was lame, and now leaning on his staff, he came forward uncovered to receive his son's friends.

'I make you most welcome!' was all that he said.

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But then the manner, the dignity. If he had owned the land from sea to sea, instead of leasing a homely farm on the Balmaghie estates, he could not have spoken more nobly in the antique fashion.

Apparently he did not pay much attention to his son at first, except to ask him if he was sure he had all the luggage.

'Sandy usually lost something when he came from college,' he said, 'but I expect London has sharpened him up a bit!'

Mr. Pryde took V. V. beside him, while McComie and Sandy occupied the back of the four-wheeled dog-cart.

'I have a message for ye,' said the master of Fernielands, soon after they had driven over the bridge and before the rush of the black water of Dee died out of their ears, 'you are to get off at the wee green yett— I mean the little gate, at the corner of the garden. Sandy's mither wants to meet ye there first— just by yourselves too!'

Whereat, with a swift inexplicable rush of tenderness, the water rose in V. V.'s eyes. She had entered into a world of gentle folks where all had beautiful manners and where they did the least thing delicately!

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

TWO WOMEN ALONE

Sandy's father had little to add to his first welcome during the mile and a half of the beautiful drive from the Mossdale. He was a silent man by nature and conviction. Except on one subject he was the listener of the house—and John (so they said) was the only one who took after him among all the Prydes of Fernielands.

The meadow spread away among willows and the dewy guttering of stray dwarf birches, like those dear to Millet and Corot, to the Black Water itself. Pools black as ink were spread with white lilies as with a carpet, and the rapids sang shallow over the pebbles. The hunchbacked bridge lost itself among the opposite pines long before it came to the end of its appointed span.

But Mr. Pryde, driving carefully, his eyes on his horse's ears, pointed out none of these things, though he loved them himself, and since the hills were barred to him on account of his lameness, he often came down to the waterside and worshipped 'upon the top of his staff.' But Mr. Pryde's idea was that those who were born to admire did not need to be shown, while those who were of the profane could not, though the beauties were pointed out to them three times a day.

Besides, it was the stile and the little green gate of the garden he was thinking of. So, with ninefold greater force, a force aided with something of apprehension, was V. V.

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Presently they turned up a 'loaning' which in Galloway is the avenue of a farm and often prettier than those attached to the most 'commodious country mansions.'

Little sand-papery alder trees followed the course of a trotting brook. The horse's feet cooled themselves here and there in its overflow. They passed great trees, oaks and beeches, perhaps pertaining to the ancient Forest on the Hill, which had named the steading. Then came a solid stile, a white wall over which the sugar-plums looked, and a little farther off, the long low outbuildings of a complete Galloway farm.

The master stopped and pointed silently with the butt of his whip. V. V. got down, and after a quick grasp of Sandy's hand which was immensely reassuring, she found herself over the stile—a broad-stepped permanent affair—and lo! the little green gate was before her, making a splotch of cool colour on the glaring blankness of the long whitewashed wall.

Catching her breath and assembling her courage, V. V. pushed it open. She had never walked upon any stage with such a perturbed spirit. Yet to common view what she saw on the other side was not terrible. A little grey-haired woman was standing, wringing her hands in an agony of waiting. She had a roseleaf complexion hardly yet frosted with the years— bright, dark eyes which moved restlessly and seemed to take in V. V. from head to foot, weighing her with the anxiety of an only son's mother. Sandy was not by any means an only son, but he was the eye-apple, the cherished and set-apart, in short the elect child of this elect lady.

V. V. paused, a little uncertain, before the fragile

little figure with the commanding presence. The old lady's lips were still well-formed and fresh as ripe fruit, of an exquisite and kindly contour, as if so preserved by the effectual pleasant love of one man upon the earth.

Still V. V. stood still. She knew that with the Scots, affection must wait its moment. Also by nature she, too, was shy, undemonstrative and infinitely more Scottish in her reserve than, for instance, McComie.

The Scot has a fear of showing his heart 'afore folk'— his own songs warn him against it, rather needlessly. There is one well-known family, the unofficial motto of which (invented and deposited at the Heralds' College by the younger members of the connection) is, 'WE DO NOT KISS AT STATIONS.'

They were not three yards apart, the while they thus stood and took each other in—the old lady almost hungrily, and V. V. with a shy unconquerable drawing back of all her being. It was this flushing reserve that touched Mary Pryde, and, with a quick glance round to see that they were really alone in the orchard, caused her to open her arms suddenly.

'Oh, Sandy's yin— but ye're bonny!' she murmured, pressing her close.

Mary Pryde could speak as good English as the best, and in her leisure she read the Spectator (the modern one) from cover to cover every week. But in the times of storm and stress, as now, she fell back on the native Doric of the Irongray braes.

Softly V. V. wept, though such was not her habit. The little grey old woman patted her gently till the storm was passed. She had a vast understanding.

'I hae grat ower muckle in my life to greet noo,'

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she said, 'for ye are a feat lass and douce, and the heart within is sterling. Oh, I can read. It was gi'en to me for a gift, and glad am I that Sandy has found yin that will be a help to him and no hinderance!'

A little later V. V. was drying her eyes on a handkerchief provided by the little twinkling old lady with the rose-leaf complexion.

'Mind,' she continued, 'I'm no saying I was best pleased at the first go off. That auld fule Miss 'Glen' doon by there at The Lodge kepted dinnin' intil my lug that her brither-in-law, Maister Sykes, was an awesome rich man, and that his eldest dochter, Eelen, was fell fond o' my Sandy. There would be a grand business and heaps o' siller for the askin', and so when Sandy wrote that he had made it up wi' you—the auld woman cam' up wi' a letter frae that same Eelen. And me bein' a puir country body that only kenned about theayturs and sichlike by readin', and frae hearin' the minister gangin' on about them—him bein' daft about Shakespeare but never having had his nose within a theaytur in his life—it was a sore thocht—that I will not deny.

'But when Sandy's letter cam' tellin' about ye, and the stockings that ye had knitted and your ain letter—faith, I telled auld Miss 'Glen' to keep her advice to hersel'. Oh, I'm wee, but I'm no feared o' Giant Goliath, even wi' petticoats on!

'Come your ways then, my bairn, and dinna greet. Mary Pryde has made but few mistak's in her life as to folk's characters, and she will put her richt hand i' the fire that ye will mak' a good wife to Sandy. He has sore need, puir Sandy—him bein' aye sae desperate sure that he's richt and that he kens better than a' body. But I will not need to be tellin' you that at this hour o' the day. But there's ways to

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lead Sandy where he will never be driven. When he gets camsteery, bide a while and then ask his advice, maybe wi' your airms about his neck, and speakin' laigh and awesome close to his lug. Greet a wee, lay your cheek to his, and then bid him tell ye what ye are to do. That's the way wi' the Prydes. Then Sandy, for he's a good lad, will forget that he's sittin' in judgment on his ain case and sure as fate, he will give the verdict against himsel'. That has served me lang and lang wi' his faither, though my man was never as stiff-necked as Sandy. Nay, lass, I am not decevit. A crown to your husband shall ye be. His heart shall safely trust in ye, for under your tongue is the law of kindness.'

There was something rapt, sweet and motherly about this welcome which made it sound almost like a prophecy.

But V. V., being English, could not answer in words. She only took Mary Pryde's hand and held it tight.

The old lady abruptly changed the subject.

'Will your friend be shy all by her lane among so many lads?' asked Mary Pryde, as if waking suddenly from a dream. 'We must not forget her!'

V. V. could not help smiling, and the quick eyes of the mistress of the Hill noted and observed.

'She is not— lightsome?' she asked earnestly. V. V. shook her head.

They sat down, still holding hands, on a rustic seat on the edge of the orchard.

'McComie is as lightsome as a bird, indeed,' said V. V.; 'but as innocent as Eve before the fall. Yet sometimes, to those who do not know her, her very innocence seems studied and dangerous, but really she is as good as a little child and as happy as that

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mavis up there singing on the bough!

Mrs. Mary Pryde of Fernielands considered this for a moment.

'The lads will be daft aboot her, I daresay?'

V. V. nodded assent with a little smile playing contentedly about her lips.

'McComie does no one any harm. It is good for any young man to be in love with her. She treats them all alike—neither seeking nor rejecting. Sunshine, fresh air, and a fine May Day—that's McComie—I wanted you to see her.'

'But she is a U. P.?' said the defender of the faith as by law established, somewhat doubtfully.

'She was,' said V. V., 'but I don't think that it will show much on her!'

Then the old lady returned to certain long-studied counsels as to the best treatment of Sandy.

'Give him his own way,' she said, 'till he tires of it. Keep to your own way of thinking and tire him out. Meet him all the time with a smile and a welcome. That will tame him. But what does it mean that you are back at the play-acting like this? Sandy wrote us that you had given that up?'

V. V. flushed a little, but nerved herself to answer, for in his mother's question she recognized Sandy's directness. The words had not been spoken unkindly or in reproof. Far otherwise, indeed.

'You see,' she said, 'we owe for four new motor delivering-vans— at least, we shall owe for them when they are finished. Sandy had to give that order for them because he got a big connection, which doubled his business. He would not have let me go, if I had asked, so I did not say a word. But he found out where I had gone and what I was doing. If he was angry he never showed it, nor ever said a word

after the thing had been done.'

'That's my Sandy!' said the proud mother.

'Is it not?' said the equally proud V. V. 'But he sent Brother John to look after me and see me home from the theatre. We cleared two of the motor machines by the end of the tour in Edinburgh and there are only the new ones to pay for.'

'You mean that you are paying for them?' said Mistress Mary Pryde.

'No,' said V. V. sagely, 'we are paying for them—Sandy and I. It is true that we are not married, but he is doing more than his share—writing his books and establishing his business. Could I sit at home, eating up the little money I have? Could I marry Sandy to be a burden on him at such a time? What would you have thought of me? What should I think of myself? Sandy was hard to hold in check, but I have done it. Once he went and got the lines from the registrar. Again he told everybody that we were going to be married immediately—without saying a word to me.'

'My Sandy all over!' said the mother, moving her lips softly as if she were uttering a prayer.

'And yet ye faced him out and would not?' she queried.

'It would not have been for his good. I don't deny I was willing enough, but then I am not exactly a foolish young thing. And the four delivery-vans had got to be paid for first.'

The old woman rose up, turned away and stood long with her brow leaning against the rough bark of the apple tree which all her sons had climbed as children. V. V. could not see her face. She could not hear what the old lady said, yet somehow she understood.

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Oh, Lord,' said Mary Pryde, deep within herself, I thank Thee for giving my Sandy the wife he needed. In my folly I strive to cross Thy ways, but now I am as a bairn before Thee.'

So they two went quite silently through the orchard hand in hand, till they came to the garden gate, when they walked apart and began to talk about the weather.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

McCOMIE AT FERNIELANDS

They need not have troubled. It was the hour of taking the teams to the watering-trough and McComie was seated carefully blindfolded upon wise old Meg, playing blind man's buff on horseback, while Allen, Joseph, and (oh, shame, after being the object of so many high meditations in the orchard!), Sandy, all mounted, were keeping out of her way as best they might. The gate was shut and a sulky Freddie stood with his back against it. There was no horse for him, but on the great squared log by the doorway sat Mr. Pryde himself, actually smiling and for once with his book shut. Such a game had never been seen before in the sober enclosure of the court of Fernielands, and Mrs. Pryde glanced somewhat anxiously at her future daughter-in-law to see how she took it.

V. V. reassured her. All this was owing to McComie's unexpectedness. It might just as well have been Mr. Pryde himself. He would have played if McComie had asked him. Men were like that with McComie and were all the better for it.

Just then Sandy was caught in trying to ride around a wise and sharp-eared huntress, who lay in wait and nabbed him by the ankle. She tore the handkerchief from her eyes with joyousness, slipped from Meg and came forward flushed and breathless. She stood bareheaded. Dark liquid fires pulsed and gleamed in her eyes as she stood before Mrs. Pryde.

'Oh, I knew you would be a long time, and the

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boys were just wild to see V. V. So I invented something to pass the time. I am McComie!

McComie! Of course she was McComie. Among all the creatures male and female after their kind whom He had made, there could only be one McComie—so unconscious, so fresh, so easily victrix.

The young men saw her stoop to kiss their mother, and wonder of wonders, Mrs. Pryde did not seem to mind. She had stood back and observed carefully a silent and tremulous V. V. But McComie stooped and kissed the little bright-eyed woman without giving her the smallest time for consideration, and then, just as readily, she took upon herself the ceremony of introduction. V. V. must know them all. McComie was evidently a friend of the family of long standing. This was Allen. He had a good heart, but he laughed too much to play really well, and she would teach him to turn up his moustaches. He had the sort that needed that. Then, ('listen, darling V. V.') he here was Joseph, who had forgotten his coat of many colours (he was in his shirt-sleeves), and was the best horseman of the lot. He had kept out of her way like a charm—had really played fair and not tried to get caught like Sandy and Allen.

Freddie (it seemed) had not played at all, because he thought it silly. But of course, a Doctor would. However, he did very well for keeping the gate shut and to see that McComie did not knock against anything—though if she had, she would have been his first patient. And the Master had laughed, especially when Allen slipped over his horse's tail and had to vault on again as they do in a circus.

McComie broke off tangentially.

'Oh, I promised Allen and Joseph to go down with

them to the watering-place and help to water the horses. Meg will be quite disappointed if I don't. She played up like a regular polo-pony. Won't you come, Mrs. Pryde? I have ridden horses often, but I have never watered one before at a stream that crossed the road.'

Mrs. Pryde shook her head, but she smiled, well enough pleased. At least these were not U. P. manners.

'Go and enjoy yourself,' she said. 'V. V. and I will be getting the tea. Take care of her, Sandy. Goodman, you have sat long enough outside. Come your ways ben.'

But in spite of all this both Master and Mistress of Fernielands stood to watch the four brothers ride off with McComie happily guarded between them, looking with glad eyes at so many brisk young men, for 'the Doctor' had saddled the pony, considered too frisky for blind man's buff, and had caracoled ahead to prove to McComie that he, too, was no mean cavalier.

In their absence V. V. was introduced to Christina, the house-lass, a scion of the great Galloway clan of the McCrons; to the byre-lass—Leeb McNeish from Arran, called the 'Wee Heelanter.' This introduction was made through the open windows as the kye were coming sedately homeward all in due order and precedence. For cows have a regulated code of place as strict as that of the Duke of Norfolk on Coronation Day. She also shook the moist curds-and-cream-smelling hand of Nancy Malcolm, the parish beauty, who was dairy-lass at Fernielands. She, by some secret community of soul, was destined, in five minutes after the return of the horse-watering cavalcade, to become the confidant

and bosom friend of McComie, who was no respecter of persons, and liked a pretty girl whenever she saw one, being in no ways in doubt about her own claims.

Nancy promised to tell her all about 'them' when they had time the next forenoon. It was always nice and quiet in the big dairy in the mornings and McComie promised herself much instruction with amusement thereto.

V. V. would, of course, be with the 'Master' and 'Mistress.' They would want to know all about her, being, as it were, one of the family. And at odd times Sandy would be taking her walks. So McComie would be free to do as she pleased, which was exactly what McComie liked best in the world.

Nancy said she could tell her all about the people she would see at the kirk on Sabbath. Oh, yes, there was a great deal to tell, for as soon as it got wind in the country that the 'two lasses from London' (such was their name and style, which McComie did not correct) were really landed at Fernielands, the loaning would be 'just crawling' with visitors—mostly, of course, young men. And Nancy showed some little pardonable anxiety that so far McComie was entirely free as to her affections, and, indeed, had never even been engaged. But she comforted herself with the thought that McComie, though no doubt a dazzling attraction, would not stay long at Fernielands, whereas she, Nancy Malcolm, could stay as many terms as she liked, being a 'dairy-lass' whose cheeses year after year gained one of the big prizes at Cairn Edward, and even at Ayr show as often as they were exhibited. Nancy knew her value in a cheese and creamery country; though she might lose a swain or two owing to the 'newance' (which

means chic) of the visitors, the really ambitious, who saw dairies and creameries of their own on the horizon, would not forget the more substantial gifts of Nancy Malcolm.

In the meantime Nancy, feeling kindly disposed towards McComie, had promised to teach her the whole art and mystery of cheese-making—at least as far as ‘curds-and-cream,’ which McComie thought would most likely be useful in her future career. That very night; to the great joy of Fernielands, McComie volunteered to help drive the cows after the milking. But she turned and ran back behind Nancy every time that one turned and looked at her, blowing fragrant questions through her great sensitive nostrils as she did so—whereat Nancy laughed till the tears ran down, and McComie grew indignant.

‘Of course I don't know about cows,’ she said. ‘I never saw any in Leith, but I should like to see you managing a boat, a tiller with one hand and a lug-sail with the other. Can you sail one?’

‘I never saw a boat to sail in,’ said Nancy; ‘but once I was in one at a fair that swung round a pole! The price was a ha'penny a sail!’

The promised interview took place next morning in the dairy. Such a place McComie had never seen and she fell in love with it at once. Moist, clean, sweet-smelling—how she loved it. She resolved on the spot that she would leave the stage and settle down as a dairy-maid! She confided this ambition to Nancy Malcolm, who looked doubtful. This was her country, and there was not really room for two pretty dairy-maids in the parish—besides McComie would soon tire of it—Nancy felt sure of this.

‘Oh, I'll not meddle with your lads,’ McComie

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promised, 'but you must not blame me for what is not my fault. They are fanciful things, men— but the blessing is, it soon passes if you give them no encouragement.'

'Aye,' said Nancy Malcolm, 'but that is easier said than done, I'm thinking. There's Elphie Elphistone o' the Crae Cottage. Every time he comes here I encourage the dogs to show him the road hame doon the meadow. Oh, a fine hunt it is and pleases everybody except Elphie himself. Yet at the kirk on Sabbath it's 'Good-day to ye, Miss Malcolm,' as polite as honey on oat-cake, just as though the last sight I got o' him was not wi' a dog ruggin' and tearin' at each o' his coat-tails!'

'Well, but who do you really like best?' asked McComie, 'that is, if you made up your mind—which is more than I can do!'

Nancy Malcolm tried to blush, but she only succeeded after holding her face a long time over the milk in the simmering block-tin vats.

'I can hardly say,' she whispered, 'whiles I think it's Joseph— Jo, we call him.'

'So that's the reason he kept out of my way at blind man's buff yesterday—I thought as much,' said McComie, who knew only one reason why every man did not at once fall down and worship.

'And then again there's Charlie Barbour up at the Bennan— he has mair siller, and drives his own dog-cairt, like a laird. He would marry me at any moment for a word. He comes here to see the Maister— pretenin'-like, but he asks me to walk down as far as the loaning-end because he has a word to say to me. But, fegs, that's none so easy with Jo watching me like a cat at a mouse-hole. Yes, he's a good offer, Charlie, and my folk—especially

my mither, say that I'm little likely to get a better. Charlie would tak' a big dairy-farm in the spring if I would marry him, and I would have twa maids, at the least, under me. That wad be fine.'

'Nothing would be fine, Nancy,' said McComie, 'if you married one man while in your heart you were liking another better. For me, I never can tell from one day to another whom I like best, and that (with V. V.) has been the saving of me!'

'Were you never in love, McCom—Miss, I mean?'

'Call me McComie—everybody does,' said the free-hearted young person from Leith; 'ever in love? Let me see. That depends what you mean. In one way I have never been out of it ever since I was a paddling bairn, minding out for broken bottles on the Leith sands. The boys liked to play with me. I never played girls' plays nor cared for them. And as the boys grew up, they liked me better. Then some of them got to be men and they wanted to play with me more than ever. Last of all some older men, that had ordered me out of their road when I was barefoot and skimp about the skirts, came bothering to the house to see my father on business—and talked all the time to me.'

Nancy nodded—a fellow-feeling made her kinder than before. She understood these things, and in the interests of her private property, she knew that it would be good to stand well with McComie. Her beauty, her tempestuous eyes and hair that seemed to be wrapped about with the Milky Way and sown with the red leaves of autumn, might be a cultivated taste for Galloway, where they preferred strawberries and cream and plenty of both. But—but—there was something about McComie's manner, something in her way of talking, of standing, of riding and

jumping a fence, of taking things for granted, which Nancy instinctively knew would beat anything in the way of fascination that had ever been seen between Dee and Cree.

She tried to fathom this and asked assistance at first hand.

'Oh, Miss—McComie, I mean, since ye bid me—what is it that makes ye so wonderfu' takkin' to everybody, man and woman alike? Ye are no' half as bonny as Miss Jones.'

'I should think not, indeed!' cried McComie, indignantly, 'nobody is!'

Nancy tossed her head. She did not relish being so completely left out, but after all the main thing was to be informed. However, McComie's instinct made her add: 'Indeed, Nancy, I am not nearly so pretty as you yourself. As for the other thing—well, it's like this. There are folk who would positively rejoice to kill me, like my stepmother at Leith, and to make up for that there are heaps that will do just what I say—I suppose it is because I do not care whether they do or not. They feel I don't care and that makes them just the keener. It's men I'm meaning, of course—not V. V., nor Mrs. Pryde—nor you, Nancy!'

'Oh, I am understanding very well,' said Nancy, whisking deep with her stirring-rod and testing with her thermometer in the big, carefully-cleansed vat from which the cheese-curd was ultimately to emerge. 'It's men that we came here to talk about!'

To this subject we may leave them—experts both of them, each after their kind.

Not far away, but well out of hearing, V. V. was devoting her day to Mr. Pryde. The Master was lame, and took no great part in the manual work of

Fernielands, though each morning he called his sons and charged them with his commands, to be delivered to the workmen as to this or that hill, pasture, or ploughland, hay-meadow, or harvest-field. He had made a huge plan of the farm on a roll of paper, and he could explain everything as if he had been on the spot. Each evening he bade them deliver their reports.

As for Mrs. Pryde, she was busy among her maids. Only Nancy Malcolm, being highly paid, thoroughly competent and to be depended upon, escaped these domiciliary visits. But to make amends those about the house could hear the voice of the Mistress pass from shrill declaration of the vengeance which in future would fall upon the 'house-lass' for 'sluttishness,' to the caressing 'chook-chooks — choocky-chooky-chick,' with which she summoned the hens to their early meal. She had the dough in a great wooden basin, and she mixed as she went, clucking comfortably all the way. The hens came with a glad patter of feet, a hasty flutter of unserviceable wings, and innumerable answering clucks of anticipation.

But in the dusk of the little garden-seat overhung by the family cherry-tree, V. V. sat with Mr. Pryde, Senior, and listened to the unveiling of the inwardness of the minor prophets. Years ago Sandy had written out his notes, taken in shorthand when he was in Professor Davidson's classes at the College on the Mound. He had typewritten a copy for his father, and the Goodman of the Hill had lived upon these ever since. This was what he liked, first-hand information, such as not even Mr. Jeffray the minister possessed, and the old man liked nothing better than a tussle with that reverend man, to be

finished by a crushing reference to 'Davidson.'

V. V. was now listening, at first interested, then in the Kentham Kirk frame of mind, with roving spirit and roving thought, but when they got far down in the list the phrases went trotting up and down her head, peeping out but refusing to be chased away—words which she had read somewhere which accused Habakkuk of being 'capable of anything.'

For all that V. V. pleased the old man. She had the ready sympathy for his views which he found lacking — indeed, did not expect— in so individual and independent a family as had grown up about him. She put questions adroitly, questions which sometimes took quite ten minutes to answer, and it passed the morning finely till Sandy came round the corner and whipped V. V. away to walk in the orchard for half-an-hour before mid-day dinner.

The old man sighed, but he recognized that, on the whole, Sandy had been patient—quite as patient as he would have been at Sandy's age, and with a girl such as V. V., who seemed so well-instructed in the less celebrated of Israel's prophets. V. V. had given him the impression that her whole soul was concentrated on his favourite study. And now, after a long morning, could he grudge her to Sandy? He took a little stub of pencil from his pocket and began most carefully to note down the headings of a second lecture—one which he hoped would not be again interrupted.

'Well, what do you think of them?' said Sandy, once they were safe behind the barn.

'No,' V. V. grew suddenly grave, 'the question is, what do they think of me?'

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'You know very well,' said Sandy, 'my mother was consulting you this very morning as to her next setting of Shillinghill Dorkings. Such an honour has never been done to a stranger within the gate to my knowledge. And as for my father, I had to wait an hour, a full hour, before I dared put in my feeble claim. The minor prophets were ahead of me.'

But what Sandy said was full of glad pride. To see his Own respected among his own, his mother regarding V. V. with woman's looks of complicity, his father instructing her as to the meaning of the minor prophets—all returned upon him as an exceeding great reward. Certainly he would have defied everyone on earth or heaven for V. V.— yes, even his mother— but when he saw what he wished to see, by the signs he knew so well, by tenderness so rare that only to see it brought tears to his eyes, his pride in his choice knew no bounds.

As for his brothers— well, of course he was sure of them. He would just like to see one of them daring...

And here the original Sandy rose to the surface.

It will be remarked about Sandy and the other men of Fernielands, that their youths had never been softened by any sisterly influence— by any need of protection, or by gentle screening of their misdeeds. From the earliest age when a needle could be handled, their mother had taught them to dam their own stockings. For her, she had other things to attend to. Occasionally influence was made by Sandy the Determined or Freddie the Bairn with one or other of three 'lasses'— 'house,' 'dairy,' or 'byre,' kept in the service of Mistress Pryde of Fernielands—but this was quite personal and irregular.

SANDY'S LOVE

V. V. listened till Sandy had finished his rejoicings over her reception. She allowed him to conclude his self-congratulations as to his far-wisdom in bringing her, before uttering the word of finality.

'It strikes me,' she said, looking Sandy directly in the eyes, 'that the real problem has nothing to do with me, but with what we are to do with McComie!'

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

THE KIRKING OF V. V.

Yet there were other, more important and pressing problems before the pair than even McComie. If the Forest of Fernielands, its famous Hill pastures, its Master and Mistress, its three hundred year lineage of Prydes held it at the head of the farm-towns—there were still the great house of McGhie to be reckoned with, the Earl and Countess, the Lodge and Miss Glendinning of Glendonwyn, Eleanor and Lily Sykes, besides a certain Walkerburn, powerful, red-faced and unscrupulous, factor or agent on the McGhie estates. Also at Castle McGhie there was a visitor, one Mr. Hugh Scoville, a rich London banker, or stock-broker, powerful as Lady Balmaghie herself in the councils of the Ultra-Protestant Alliance.

Though neither Sandy nor his sweetheart gave such things any thought—though they lived unconscious of their presence, these persons had a good deal to do with the future happiness of all at Fernielands—including V. V. and Sandy.

It was not till after the Sabbath and the appearance of the girls at the kirk that, as Nancy Malcolm had foretold, the loaning of Fernielands became inconveniently crowded—as many as three strange horses being stabled in the stalls under Sandy's bedchamber at one time.

Such a Sabbath as that was—by no means a mere Sunday. There are no Sundays in Galloway in the places where people live under the old

dispensation.

The air was sweet and heather-scented—the silence so deep that the bell at Clachan Laurie rung at eight o'clock in the morning, could be heard at Fernielands more than four miles away. The barnyard cocks crowed, and were answered in a sort of crystalline echo, which died away across the Loch, and after a pause was returned from the herd's house at the Folds after having made the rounds of a hundred farmtowns. Curiously enough these sounds did not disturb the quiet of the Sabbath, any more than the distant crying of the lambs on the hill and the deeper recognition of their mothers. Rather they accentuated it.

There was a great silence at the time of the 'Taking of the Book.' The voice of the old man had grown marvellously reverent, while V. V. and McComie carried through 'Oh, God of Bethel' so that the tears stood in everybody's eyes and all the others stopped singing to listen.

Afterwards, while V. V. supervised McComie's toilet in the interests of extreme quietude, almost of Quakerishness, she also lectured her about singing in the kirk and upon her behaviour generally.

'It is not ourselves we have to think of,' she said, 'but they will have heard that we sing and act for a living. We must, therefore, be the more careful, lest our friends should suffer because of us.'

'Sandy does not care!' said McComie doughtily.

'Well, then, the more shame to him,' said V. V., with the dignity which insists, 'but Sandy will be off in a day or two to London. We shall be in Glasgow. It does not matter to us either, you might say. But think of the Master, standing with the glamour of the high communion about him— you heard him

pray just now—and the Mother getting out her Bible wrapped in a white cloth to carry to the kirk. Oh, Sandy told me—shall we offend one of the least of these little ones—so good and sweet and simple?’

A tremulousness came into V. V.'s voice.

‘I will be careful—I will indeed, V. V.’ said McComie. ‘But it is hard not to sing— when it is all one can do!’

‘It is not all you can do, McComie,’ V. V. insisted. ‘You must take care of your habit of looking about you and smiling!’

‘But,’ cried the astonished McComie, ‘I shall know so many people!’

‘How can you?’ exclaimed V. V., scandalized, ‘you have never been here before!’

‘No, but Nancy Malcolm—at the ‘dairy,’ you know— has told me all about them and how there are lots who are coming to see us. So I shall know them by description, you see, V. V.’

But V. V. would not see. McComie's words hardened a resolution which had already been forming within her, into something as unyielding as the native whinstone of the country.

‘McComie,’ she said, ‘you shall put on your plain black dress. It was cut by Mademoiselle Mars and nothing brings out your hair better. But that I must do up for you, and try to make it less like a thundercloud coming up against the wind. You and I must be as quiet as the day is’ —she pointed out at the trees in the orchard and at the misty hills with their under-sheen of purple where the bell-heaths was just beginning to show in the hollows— ‘you must be as Quakeress-like as possible!’

‘Me—Quakerish!’ exclaimed McComie, with something like terror in her eyes.

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'Yes, and you shall sit between the old folk, next to Sandy's mother—not with the lads—not even with Sandy—I shall sit beside Sandy.'

'Oh, V. V., I do think you are mean—and what are you going to wear?'

'I have not quite decided yet,' said V. V. 'I shall wait till I get you to my mind!'

So V. V., with nimbler fingers even than those of her French dresser Elise, arranged McComie for her new part. The black dress certainly fitted her like a glove and V. V. lent her a black hat, which as a treat was allowed a single mounting feather of palest blue. For V. V. had at the last moment insisted on a hat-box and dress-basket in addition to Sandy's modest provision of 'a bag a-piece for the girls.'

Then with McComie looking on, she arrayed herself in her spring dress of grey, a soft niching of lace at the neck, a belt of darker grey silk broad peaked about the waist, and at the wrist a fall of lace that reached almost to her knuckles. Then they both put on gloves which seemed wonderful when their sleeves fell back—black for McComie, and suede grey for V.V.

Thus arrayed they descended to the little parlour, where the family came in to look and approve.

They left the four-wheeled dog-cart in the already cumbered inn-yard, and the two seniors, with McComie and V. V. in the middle, started to walk to the kirk, tall-spired, plain-featured, weather-beaten, and innocent of architecture like most of the country parish kirks of Galloway.

The boys, led by Sandy, had walked across by the Balmaghie woods and then over the wide face of the moor, where the winds blew broad and equal. McComie almost cried with impotent anger because

she was not allowed to go with them. It would have made up for so much, for in spite of her black dress, McComie knew what could be done by taking off your hat and carrying it in your hand, because at each thinly-shaded place the sun would spray down drops and splashes of light on hair like hers. And yet, just because V. V. willed it, she had to get up beside Mrs. Pryde on the back-seat of that humdrum old four-wheeled waggonette, or dog-cart, or whatever they chose to call the silly old thing.

But needs must when V. V. drives. So they arrived calmly within the gate, through the ranks of silent white tombs, till they found themselves among gathered groups of living and gossip-loving parishioners. Mr. Pryde was ruling elder, but owing to his lameness, he came rather seldom to the kirk, so today his fellow-elders surrounded him with congratulations. V. V. could see without looking, the tall form and broad shoulders of Sandy receiving his honours with modesty. But most of her time was taken up with McComie. McComie had a shilling for the collection in her hand ready for the 'plate' at the door— which is the form taken by the alms of the faithful down in Leith links. But finding none, she deliberately picked out the best-looking of the men in the vestibule and, with the shilling held by the rim, raised her eyes to his to demand where and how she was to dispose of her 'collection.'

The man was too young to answer. The appeal in McComie's eyes shut the gates of speech and he could only mumble. For young men of the country are slow of conversation, at least to begin with. But an elder man, a confrere of Mr. Pryde's, that day chief in charge, bade her keep it till the 'boxes were pushed along the book-boards in front of her.'

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This had the result of reducing V. V. to a pink embarrassment. But McComie, delighted at the chance of seeing the face of a man and having speech with him, thanked Mr. McGeoch of Burberry in a way which made that good man lead off 'Praise God from whom all blessings flow' in a voice which at once astonished and edified the congregation.

The Fernielands young men, all four of them, were soon in the big square pew which by rights feudal was the possession of the family of the Prydes. As V. V. had foretold, the order was not changed. Mr. Pryde's place was reserved in the corner. Next to him came McComie, then Sandy's mother, then V. V., with Sandy beside her wedged into a corner too narrow for him, but infinitely preferable to sitting opposite, as the other brothers did in the order of their ages. Freddie, the Benjamin of the flock, had his place in the corner opposite his father, and with his face to the congregation occupied the best view-point in the kirk—one which would have been marked with three stars in any Presbyterian Baedeker.

Of course Mr. Jeffray preached against modern views of the Bible—a 'divided Isaiah,' and so on—one of his favourite discourses, which he was believed always to carry in the tails of his frock-coat lest Mr. Pryde, his adversary, should be in his place, in which case he would have him for half an hour at his mercy, without any chance of getting answered back or referred to chapter and verse in 'Davidson.' Mr. Pryde knew the sermon so well that he could look up the references to passages in the Scriptures before the preacher announced them—a thing annoying in itself, but rendered thrice more so by the slight but solemn shake of the head which

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accompanied the verification. Sometimes Mr. Jefifray could have thrown the Holy Book at his excellent elder's head— but, alas, time and place forbade!

Many eyes were bent on the ruling elder's pew. The breaking of the row of manly forms by one girl in black with her eyes on the book-board, and another in grey who seemed to see nothing save the face of the preacher, was a wonderful sight for the crowded congregation of 'Kirk-McGhie,' as the parish sanctuary was popularly called.

The congregation did not really wake up from its 'sermon drowse' till it was time for the solemn work of the 'collection.' Psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs followed in due order, but the girls sang so low that only Sandy heard them, and the family felt vaguely defrauded—all except the mother, who recognized therein one more proof of the wisdom of her future daughter-in-law.

'Ye see,' she said to her mate, who heard without moving his head, 'she thinks what they would be saying if baith o' them sang as they did this morning at God of Bethel.'

Mr. Pryde agreed, but with a subdued and sorrowful expression, as if he would have liked to hear the kirk electrified by the glorious strains of Scarborough or Kilmarnock, sung as these girls could have sung them. But then he was only a man and in his day had tramped down men and their oppositions quite as masterfully as Sandy.

Mary Lyon, afterwards Pryde, knew that V. V. was right, and admired her for impressing her will upon McComie. She did not know how difficult that work had been.

Yet even V. V. made one mistake.

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She thought that in thankfulness for all the mercies which, as the minister said, had been showered upon the congregation—including herself and Sandy—she ought to do something during her first visit to the home of his fathers to recognize this. She had thought first of putting a sovereign in the plate— then half-a-sovereign. Both she had discarded as being capable of misinterpretation.

Finally she had comprised on a half-a-crown for herself and a shilling for McComie, as striking fairly the medium between gratitude and vanity in a Scottish parish kirk.

At last with some bustle the boards were cleared of the Bibles and hymn-books which cumbered them. Grave, reverend men pushed little hard-wood boxes, worm-eaten with age, polished with the rattle of copper coins, and set at the end of ash handles, along each book-board, in front of every worshipper. This was the old, seemly fashion, and elders had been known to halt the little box long enough before a recalcitrant to call the attention of the whole congregation to him.

V. V. got ready her half-crown with a glow of shame that it was no more. Then she saw to it by a swift, sidelong glance, that McComie was in ready possession of her shilling.

But the effect of the sight upon the Mistress of Fernielands was remarkable. She made one dive into her side-pocket, while the whole pew was in consternation, staring at V. V.'s half-crown. The nearer neighbours craned their necks. But Mrs. Pryde was too quick for them. Under the pretence of passing a peppermint-lozenge to her two neighbours, she took possession of V. V.'s half-crown and McComie's shilling. She furnished each

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with the statutory penny in lieu thereof, and the peril, short and sharp as it was, was averted. In the Fernielands pew all drew a long breath.

In vain did McGeoch of Burberry search for the pretty girl's shilling among the rich deposit of copper half-pence.

'I would have been wiser to have ta'en the siller when she offered it,' he said to himself; 'they are awesome changeable things in their minds, the lasses.'

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

DECORATIVE POETRY

At Fernielands the days ran all too swiftly. Saturday must see the girls in Glasgow. Sandy was in daily communication with John and Rob Gilston. V. V. heard every day from Victor Berrick, who knew what was keeping her in the South, and did his best to see that everything was ready, like the good fellow he was. He reported the erratic McCallum 'in good order,' and all the 'props' forward in time. But it would be better to have a rehearsal on Saturday afternoon if they were to open on Monday. It was a pity, but he did not see how else to manage it in Scotland, where rehearsals on Sunday were barred owing to the customs of the country.

One blot fell upon the fair record of McComie, though indeed it was in no way her fault. How was she to know who lived in that whitewashed, rose-clambered house near the entrance gate of Castle McGhie, which its tenant so proudly referred to as 'The Dower House'?

McComie never so much as gave the matter a thought. There were girls there, for she had seen them. Also Nancy, of the dairy, had told her their names. They were the two rich daughters of Mr. Sykes of London. Nancy was astonished that McComie had never heard of them. She answered that perhaps Miss Jones knew—she would be better posted in people of that city. Now if it had only been Leith!

Nancy was now on the easiest terms of intimacy

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with McComie, so she explained, 'Eleanor is the oldest, a fine-looking lass, and they do say that she is terrible ta'en up about Maister Sandy!'

'Nonsense,' said McComie; 'he never cared for anybody but V. V., I know that!'

For she remembered the time when, even upon invitation, he had refused to kiss his 'ward' without the express sanction of V. V. From which day and date McComie had looked on him as a marvel among men— as indeed he was. The Garter has been given for less.

'Oh,' said Nancy, churning away vigorously, 'I fancy it had nothing much to do with Sandy. It was because Sandy slighted her and took up with Miss Jones that her aunt came up here wi' letters about Sandy disgracing himself and being deposed from the ministry.'

'He never was a minister!'

'Of course not,' said Nancy, 'not a proper one in blacks wi' a dog-collar and a flat hat— but he preached.'

Yes (McComie owned), she had heard of that. Sandy had told her himself, but at first she had thought he was pulling her leg.

'Oh, no,' said Nancy Malcolm, taken aback; 'I have kenned Maister Sandy all my life and he would never do the like—Maister Freddie, maybe, but never Maister Sandy.'

McComie explained, but Nancy was not wholly satisfied.

'Pulling legs' is no proper words in a young leddy's mouth—though ye do say it is only a metabore.'

'Sandy often uses the expression,' stoutly McComie defended her position.

'I put no limit to what a young gentleman and a writer might not say in his fervours,' said Nancy sagely, 'but wi' wise lasses it's different.'

McComie laughed at the churner.

'Your face will turn the butter,' she said. 'I declare you are nearly as bad as V. V.'

That very afternoon McComie took one of her favourite books, a 'Palgrave's Golden Treasury' which Sandy had given her, bound in limp morocco of palest blue, on condition that she did not read any penny weeklies for a whole year. He had shown her by figures that the book so bound, cost the subscription to a dozen such journals. Hence she would be the gainer. The blue colour was very dear to McComie. It was crushed morocco and bore the sacred name of Zaensdorff on the smooth inner leather.

McComie preferred to read 'The Golden Treasury' in some wood about Fernielands on a perfect summer day, her hair swirled, aureoled and splashed of sunlight—for somebody to come along and see. Then there was, in McComie's idea, some real use in giving a girl poetry to read.

With this in her mind she had studied the strategical possibilities of most of the woods about Femieland. Some were too near the loaning or main road. Carts from the mill passed that way, and also carried meaner burdens fieldward, there to fulfil important agricultural missions. These interfered with poetry, and the drivers were hardly of McComie's world—at least not seriously so.

But Forresthill Wood fulfilled all possible conditions. It looked on the windings of the Black Water. It was on the very verge of the farm. Beneath, in The Lodge, inhabited by Miss Glendinning, were

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the two enemies of V. V., Eleanor and Lily Sykes, who would bear watching.

V. V. was, of course, far too noble to look after her own interests, but McComie had no such scruples.

On the second day of her poetry-reading (it was the late afternoon of the Saturday before the great Kirk Sunday) two young men came through the wood.

They were talking seriously together. One was dark and slender, with a thoughtful and sad expression on his face— 'like Romeo out of a job,' diagnosed McComie. The other was 'like all the Jock's Lodge officers,' thought the same expert. So she felt that what Number Two thought about the picture she made reading poetry, with her hat tossed carelessly on the flowers beside her, did not quite so much matter.

That very afternoon, on rising to go home to tea, she forgot her hat— her best summer hat which had been placed along with those of V. V. in her hatbox. McComie had forgotten it altogether. Yet she had poised it conspicuously enough on the top of many fronds of bracken—the plant which had given the hill farm its name—but in spite of all, so occupied was she with Lycidas in his pale blue binding and the strand of copper and gold hair which fell upon the page, that she rose and passed away bare-headed down the glade. Ah, McComie, in her plain white blouse and skirt, looked the very genius of Spring—and, what is more, seemed wholly unconscious of it— waes me for appearances!

She had, of course, to go back for the lost hat, when at the hunch-backed stile, coming suddenly out into the sun, she put up her hand and discovered her loss. And she had not got very far

into the great Forrest-hill Wood when she met two young men, taking turns at carrying her hat. They had lifted it up carefully, without touching it, flowers, ferns and all, and McComie knew in a moment that such a thought could only have come from the dark thoughtful one.

They do not cultivate the finer graces and more delicate shades of feeling at Jock's Lodge, and McComie had no interest in cavalry officers of any grade. She was from Leith and had danced with too many. They always said the same things, and McComie, the eternal unexpected herself, demanded unexpectedness from her swains.

The young men took off their hats with one hand apiece and supported the hat on its platter of bracken and meadowsweet with the other. Neither should carry it alone. The progress seemed a kind of ritual and McComie laughed at the sights a laugh so merry that it set the emulous birds a-singing.

'My hat,' she exclaimed, running to meet it as if it had been a baby in need of caresses; 'how nice of you to bring it to me just as it was!'

(As if they would have pulled the hat to pieces and brought along the fragments!)

'I am so sorry to have given you all this trouble.'

It was no trouble— indeed, quite the contrary! Both young men agreed on that. McComie had relapsed into the depths of McComieism, and the teaching of V. V. was quite forgotten.

'How funny,' she said, 'we don't know who any of us are. I am Alice Armytage McComie of Leith links.'

Whereupon the two young men took off their hats again, and then the darker of the two (the Wistful One) introduced his friend as Captain Christopher Sykes, commonly called Kit Sykes, while his own

name was Armytage Glendonwyn McGhie.

'So you see we are both Armytages—they must have been wise people, those god-parents of ours,' he said, and smiled.

'Armytage was my mother's name,' said McComie, 'and I have no godmother. I am a U. P. That is, I suppose I am, though I don't know the difference.'

'No more do I,' said the dark young man with the good manners, promptly.

As for the soldier, he only looked handsome and flicked his leg with a riding-whip.

After that these two came and called at the farm of Fernielands, where McComie learned, without surprise, that the dark, gipsy-looking youth with gentle manner was the heir of the Balmaghie estates and peerage—a young man hated by Lady Balmaghie, who only possessed a daughter and could never understand why a man's own child should be passed over just because she happens to be a girl.

Which indeed is, in truth, a difficult thing to comprehend. 'An hard law, but the law!' Lord Balmaghie had said to his wife more than a thousand times, but up to the present wholly without effect. The lady's prejudice against the heir and supplanter was as strong as ever.

He was staying down at The Lodge with Miss Glendinning at present, and was popularly supposed to be destined for Miss Lily.

To McComie's expert eye, however, he did not look the kind of man to be handed over to anybody. And McComie saw no reason—no reason at all—why he should. She asked him to hold her book for her while she was pinning on her hat. And so well had he remarked the book and the binding that hardly

had she been established in Glasgow when a messenger-boy brought a parcel to her at the theatre door. It contained a second series of Palgrave, and was bound in exactly the same shade of morocco, with the stamp of Zaensdorff upon the delicate leather lining within.

But this is going very far ahead. Much had to happen before that. For the week introduced by so peaceful a Sabbath proved stormy. Indeed, such a week had not been known in the parish since St. Cuthbert baptized his first convert on the edge of the river, where now stands the Kirk Above Dee Water.

Monday is a great and high day in Cairn Edward. There are often ten thousand folk within the bounds of the little town that day, and up at market hill, I cannot tell how many thousands of lambs, sheep, bullocks and other quadrupeds are sold by public auction. Mallet and Sons are the great auctioneers, and they have four or five marts all in full swing at the same time. Irish drovers, Wigtownshire lairds, with Lords of Session, pig-dealers, herds and belted earls in one strange medley. The mass general is scented with an unforgettable odour of tar and sheep-dip. Rough spun cloth is common to all, generally of a light yellowish brown hue, dyed with corklit from the rocks dissolved in a yet simpler product.

There are many Apothecaries' Halls in Cairn Edward, each with its perfumery department, and all are fully patronized. And no wonder, for the odour of a Market-Monday throng in summer is something not to be forgotten.

Still the sight is a great one—the roads are black with all manner of vehicles, and as for the market hill, it is a packed wonderland through which flocks

of sheep meander, and frightened bullocks may charge at any minute. Down in the corner where two walls meet, there is the noise of an Irish row. Up near the ring is a proper set-to between a buyer from Preston on the West, and a man from Newcastle on the East—Newcastle winning—but, being charged with unfairness, is immediately ground to powder by at least five hundred amateur umpires.

Then there are the great market 'ordinaries'—from that of the 'McGhie Arms,' which is the height of good cheer and of the fashion, descending through the 'County' and the 'Imperial,' to the 'Widow's' and the 'Blue Bonnet,' where a filling dinner of broth and boiled beef can be had at the simple and easy rate of sixpence a head.

Sandy was resolved that this Market Monday, the greatest and most wonderful sight in the three counties—perhaps of all Scotland—should be seen by V. V. and McComie. The girls showed no wild enthusiasm. To them one sheep was just as good as ten thousand. And the crowd and the dust would be disagreeable.

But V. V. gave way as soon as she saw that Sandy had set his heart on the excursion. All at Fernielands were anxious that their visitors should see their chief local marvel. Mr. Pryde spun yarns of the famous bargains of his youth. Mary Pryde told of 'pillion' rides to market and fair at Cairn Edward with this gallant and that 'before the guidman's day.'

'It was,' she said, 'a long road from Shillinghill, and the lads made it longer.'

In short, the girls must go. They resigned themselves with no more than a look at one another, which told how much rather they would have

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remained quietly at home— V. V. in the orchard with Sandy, and McComie playing the chances of Palgrave's poetry in its gay hussar attire of blue and gold.

Still, for Sandy's sake there was no more to be said. The girls put on their quiet costumes of the day before with a bow or two added, and prepared to be shown off. For, of course, they understood well what was in Sandy's mind. They and he were to drive down in the morning, stable the pony at the 'McGhie Arms,' see the wonders of the Auctions and the Hill, and thereafter dine at the market ordinary, where old Burberry would be on the look-out for the lass that had done the church collection out of a shilling the day before. Mrs. Pryde was so sure of this that she entrusted Sandy with the half-crown and the shilling to keep in his pocket as being better fitted to withstand the wiles of Burberry. Sandy was a man, brought up in the parish, and therefore knew what a treasurer of 'life and Work' was capable of. In Mrs. Pryde's opinion her husband's friend Habakkuk was a mere babe to Burberry.

Thus, on the whole merry-hearted because Sandy was so proud and so happy, the girls came to the great Monday Mart of Cairn Edward.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

THE SPANGLED POSTER

They were good and obedient subjects. They marvelled and passed on. Rough farmers made way for them with silent respect. Young men in the height of rustic fashion kept them well in view. Sandy felt himself a man much envied, and all went well till at the busiest hour they entered to partake of the celebrated ordinary of the 'McGhie Arms.'

The great dining-hall of the 'McGhie Arms' could accommodate at its three parallel 'Ordinaries' something like two hundred and fifty people, while the smaller reserved tables near the open window or edged into corners could take fifty more. The frequenters were all bien and comfortable folk, lairds, farmers, and great dealers who did not mind one half-crown for the ordinary and (as like as not) another for drinks wherewith to wash it down.

Sandy had hurried off, during the first up-putting of the little four-wheeled dog-cart, and secured from the landlady one of the tables at the top end of the room. Of course, she would keep it for Mr. Pryde. It was not often that they had a chance of seeing Mr. Pryde among them. If he went upstairs he would see 'Greying Gold' lying on the top of the piano; that is, if it had not been lent out for the twentieth time—to people who could easily have afforded to buy a copy for themselves.

The girls had removed any traces of the dust and fatigue of the market hill. The dinner was just beginning. The long roaring table was one

tremendous play of knives and forks. The trim waiting-maids moved expeditiously in the good style of the 'McGhie Arms.'

But opposite to Sandy's table was a larger one, having six or eight men about it. The host was a red-faced and bull-necked man whose noisy mirth was answered by prompt and sycophantic laughter. Sandy shot one irritated glance towards this opposing table which commanded his own. He knew the red-faced man for one Walkerburn, the all-powerful factor of the Balmaghie estates, said to be high in the good-will of my lord, and still higher in that of my lady — which, as it happened, mattered ever so much more.

A corner place at the table was still vacant, and though the dinner proceeded, the chair seemed to be waiting for somebody. Sandy hoped that it might be my lord himself, who at least would teach them how to behave. For already he had noticed significant noddings of the head and winkings of the eye toward V. V. and McComie, which did not indicate the usual reserve of Galloway hospitality. Not that Walkerburn was a Galloway man. He came of weaving stock and had long ago been apprenticed to a writer in Galashiels. He had had charge of the smaller Tweedside property of the McGhie family before coming to rule men and farms in Galloway.

At last the expected guest arrived, a big, foolish-looking, blond giant, who began to hold his sides at Walkerburn's jests long before he came within hearing distance— Andro Banks, a great horse-breeder and the richest man in all the district, so far, that is, as farmers were concerned.

He had already achieved a roll in his gait, as if he had wetted many bargains that day— which indeed

was the fact. His cheek was flushed and his eyes wandered half dreamily from side to side.

But checking himself, he came to a stop before Sandy's table, and Sandy, expecting that he was on the point of speaking to one of his guests, wondered seriously if the man were sober enough to hit, and where would be the best place to begin upon him.

Suddenly, however, Andro Banks pointed at V. V. —then up at the wall above their heads, and burst into a rolling peal of laughter which aroused the whole great dining-room. Sandy was already on his feet, facing the man, but still gripping the back of the chair to steady his temper.

'I am coming, V. V.!' And the horse-dealer shouted with idiot mirth, his finger wagging back and forth from V. V. to the wall in a manner which seemed to amuse Factor Walkerburn and his cronies intensely. They shouted louder than ever— louder even than the tipsy man.

Sandy turned and faced them. He was pale with anger and the expression of his face was not good to meet. It was enough to have sent even Ben Meares down a side lane.

But as he turned upon them, his eyes fell on something stuck up between the windows above the unconscious head of V. V.

It was the famous Spangled Poster of The Boy and the Butterfly, formerly used at the old Kentham Vic, which he had first seen on the hoardings of Tenterden Road, nearly opposite to the Kentham Chapel. Beneath were the words, quoted by the tipsy horse-dealer, 'I am coming, V. V.' like the wash of waters after a sea-dive from a height, a kind of hissing silence surged and swished past Sandy's ears. The windows were wide open, to give air to the

great room so full of men. With one hand Sandy swept down the roughly pinned sheet, crushing it into a wad, and after rubbing the face of the great Andro with it, he took that suddenly sobered worthy by the collar and dropped him out upon the low sheck of the stable yard.

He was the least to blame. It remained to settle with those who had put the thing there as an insult to V. V. and himself.

The table opposite grew rather silent. Only Walkerburn continued to shout with laughter, and blatter on the table with his hand. Then Sandy had one of his dangerous intuitions, which often led him to the swiftest and most inconsiderate actions. He saw that one of Walkerburn's allies—perhaps that fellow Sykes, the soldier—no, on second thoughts a soldier would hardly have done such a thing—Eleanor or Lily Sykes more likely, somebody at The Lodge for a certainty, had thought this out and put it within the power of Walkerburn to execute it.

The factor must have made sure it would serve him with at least one of his employers—perhaps the one most powerful—even Lady Balmaghie herself.

As his manner was, Sandy did not stop to argue nor cast up pros and cons. He simply marched straight across to Walkerburn, lifted him bodily out of the chair on which he had been sitting, and with a heave sent him to join his companion on the stable roofing. Then he stood for a long, momentous second, defying the table with the two empty chairs. Menacing, terrible, he waited for a sign, one smile, a single grimace, but none was given him. Then he looked down the long ordinary, daring the whole innocent company with his eyes, his hands clenched and eager for work.

A white-haired, ruddy-faced man, a hale and hearty Lord of Session in a rough suit and burly, well-stockinged calves, came over and asked what it was all about.

Sandy, stammering in his white anger, indicated the poster and V. V.

‘She is my wife!’ he said hoarsely, no doubt anticipating things a little, but quite believing what he said and willing to back every word.

‘Ah,’ quoth my lord, ‘if, as I hope, their necks are broken, I shall sum up in your favour on the score of Intimate defence. I’ll be on this circuit. Ma name is Ardoch. Maybe ye ken me. From a judeecial point of view, it was no doubt a hasty action, but, Lord, it was graundly done and I’ll be pleased to see you any time at Ardoch!’

‘Thank you, my lord,’ said Sandy, recovering himself a little, ‘but they won’t have suffered much, except maybe in the shock to their nerves. There is a stable roof undemeath.’

His lordship went to the window and observed this fact for himself. Then he shook his abundant white locks and went away murmuring, ‘It’s a peety— aye, but it’s a sair peety. A clean heave like yon to be wasted on a roof o’ galvanized iron!’

There was no dinner that day for Sandy and the girls at the ‘McGhie Arms.’ V. V. was very pale and quiet and McComie frankly frightened. Sandy paid his bill and ordered out the dog-cart, feeling it a relief to swear in the stable yard.

He saw there neither of his enemies, but he came upon my Lord Ardoch, peering about hopefully among the empty stalls and looking into stable doors as if in search of something.

‘I was just taking a bit turn,’ he said, ‘to see if I

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could not get a lifter or two at their buttocks— if only to make up for the misfortune of that stable-roof! It's a peety they had not a clean drop. I could hae gotten ye off neatly— as sure as my name is Ardoch, and as for the stoving in o' their hurdies wi' my boot, it would have done me good. The Almichty would hae forgi'en me, that's a certainty, and I believe that the Fifteen would likewise have overlooked it. The Lords of Session are rather pleased than otherwise when one o' their number tak's the law intil his ain hands. I am weel kenned for the champion peacemaker amang them, but whiles I have to do it wi' my hands and feet. Guid day to ye, young man. If ye meet wi' the rascals again, dinna spare them, and —gie them my share too. Mind it will be a Gallawa' jury and I'll be on the bench!'

CHAPTER NINETEEN

THE PRIMITIVE INSTINCT

Sandy said nothing to the girls as they drove home. V. V. had not seen the poster which Sandy kept in his pocket, all crushed into a ball till he should have time to burn it. If he could help it, he would not tell her. He would rather take the too certain blame which she would deal out to him, for having been overhasty with a couple of drunken men. Were they the first he had ever seen? Had she not been accustomed to the like? And what right had Sandy to raise an uproar in the midst of his own people? Why did he not think of his father—of his mother?

Sandy was prepared for all this, and had words wherewith to answer, leaving the spangled poster out of the reckoning and attempting no justification—save that if anybody laughed at ladies under his care he would do the like ten times over, even if it were my Lord himself.

But the primitive instincts were stronger in McComie, who confided in V. V. that if Sandy had belonged to her she would fairly have worshipped him. As it was, she adored him. It was just a poem to see him pick up those two strong men for her sake—she meant for V. V.'s of course—and throw them out of the window. McComie would marry a coal-heaver who did the like for her, that she would—and if V. V. scolded Sandy, she might make up her mind that she, Alice Armytage McComie, would be on hand to do as much comforting as

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Sandy would let her. It had been 'just splendid'—she had never enjoyed a day so much!

'Hold your tongue, McComie, you know nothing about it,' snapped V. V., who thought that Sandy had unnecessarily humiliated himself and her, and was by no means disposed to let him off cheap. But McComie had got one glance at the poster as Sandy tore it down.

'I maybe know more than you, V. V.,' she said, 'and if you are hard on Sandy, I'll make you that sorry you will go on your knees to ask his pardon. If he had done a thing like that for me, I should have gone on my knees anyway. But I tell you plainly, V. V., it's being as beautiful as you are that has made your heart as little and as hard as a stone! There!'

The threats of the tumultuary McComie only caused V. V. to smile, but having smiled, there is no doubt that they made her deal more tenderly with Sandy. But after all it was his father and mother who lay heaviest on his spirits. There was only another half-year to run of the lease of nineteen years—a lease more than twenty times renewed, it is true, as generation after generation of Prydes moved across the parish to the kirkyard, where they occupied one of the largest and best populated corners under the lee of the great McGhie enclosure.

What might not Walkerburn do? He could turn his father out of the house in which he had been born and oust his mother from the steading to which she had come as a bride.

Well, the sooner told, the sooner done with. So as soon as he had stabled the pony and sent the girls to their rooms, Sandy sought his father and mother, and all three being seated on the big fallen tree in the orchard, he told them the tale of the day and its

various occurrences.

He kept back nothing, even showing them the defaced poster with the great rent across it, but bidding them say nothing about the matter to V. V., who had changed the costume provided for her by the Kentham management from the first time he had seen her.

John Pryde, Senior, and his wife Mary were a good deal taken aback. They looked for the immediate destruction of London when Sandy assured them that such things were considered necessary on the hoardings to advertise any great success. But they saw clearly enough that the insult to their guests at the 'McGhie Arms' Ordinary had been worked out with intention—provided for with the long hand, and they agreed that Walkerbum was the active culprit, if not the real instigator.

'The like of him cannot sleep unless he hath done mischief,' quoth his father gravely. 'The pity is, that a man like him, has it in his power to do so much!'

Sandy's mother was still more philosophic.

'Ye were hasty, Sandy,' she said, 'I blame ye for that— but then ye are a Pryde. Ye are hastier than ever my man was, and he nearly broke a man's neck once.'

'Haud your tongue, wife, I beseech you. Cause not a father to blush before his children!'

'Never ye fear, goodman. It's Sandy I am speakin' to, and ye were a man of peace and a son of conciliation to him even in your wildest days. But do ye mind Tam Gilchrist, that poo'ed the chair from underneath me when I was sitting doon.'

'I beg of ye, wife, to contain yourself. These are old, wicked, unsanctified deeds, far better forgotten!'

'Eh, but,' said Mary Pryde, who was of McComie's

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mind, 'I often think o' them, and indeed it was a grand sight to see Tam clattering head foremost down the stairs. I was 'carrying' John at the time, and I mind being proud o' ye my man, my man!'

She took him by the arm, and the guidman of Fernielands, long lamed by the kick of a horse, smiled in spite of himself, and patted his wife's withered hand.

'Ye see,' she persisted, 'it wasna' his way, and even in Tam's case there was no turning of the other cheek that ever I heard about. But after all, it is written 'unto the third and fourth generation.' Eh, Sandy, ye'll hae to be awesome careful about the upbringing of your lad bairns. The lasses may be like their mither or their grandmither, but the boys— Lord help them if they have his temper and yours to wrestle with. Paul's thorn in the flesh was a pinprick to the wrath of the Prydes.'

Old John looked about him at the fields already ripening to harvest, and he said sadly, 'I would have liked to end my days where I began them, but if it's the Lord's will— well, it's the Lord's will, and there is naught more to be said!'

'I hope,' said Sandy, 'that my hastiness will never bring the like upon you. But I give you my word, father, I don't see what else I could have done.'

'No,' said his father slowly, 'considering your age and the heritage I have given you, ye were wonderfully moderate.'

'Deed aye,' said his mother more cheerfully. Tam Gilchrist did not get off so easy. It was mony a month before he could put his hand to wark again.'

'He never was that very fond of work that ever I heard,' said Mr. Pryde dryly. 'At any rate there is little good greetin' when the milk is spilt. We will just

have to come and be a chairge on you, Sandy— not but what there's a trifle laid by in the bank, or here and there where your mither and me could lay hands on it without racking our alrms. But, Sandy, if I see right, ye are in for a dressin', like what Mary gied me in the bit maitter o' Tam Gilchrist, forty odd years syne. So be off and tak' your medicine like a man—awa' wi' ye, and the less you answer back the better!

Sandy took his 'dressing down' from V. V. with most Christian forbearance. He had put the crumpled poster under his bed till he should get an early morning chance at the kitchen fire. McComie was present at the interview. Indeed she had to run out to meet Sandy in the orchard to tell him what he might expect, also that V. V. was not really so very angry—only she thought it her duty. McComie, on the contrary, thought he had been just splendid, and if it were not for V. V. she would have married him whether he was willing or not!

Now McComie had a shrewd idea how the thing had come about, and being a primitive woman, of course she blamed another woman. She argued thus. The soldier who comes to Fernielands is from Jock's Lodge. He would therefore be in Edinburgh during the whole of the stay of The Boy and the Butterfly Company. It was likely, nay probable, that before V. V. arrived, the 'advance man,' or perhaps the Theatre Royal management, had 'awakened public interest' by plastering the hoardings with the 'Spangled Poster.' It was certainly effective in its way, and she had been told that there were people who even made collections of suchlike— well, they must have excessively little to do.

Now Captain Sykes (always according to

McComie) had obtained one of these posters—perhaps from a bill-sticker, perhaps from the theatre advertisement agency. He was supposed to be engaged to the elder Sykes girl, yet he had come up to Fernielands with Armytage McGhie, and he had kept looking at V. V. as if she were something good to eat. Oh, McComie did not need to be told what that meant. V. V. had looked through him several times, as if he did not exist. This was calculated to make him 'mad' with her, and he had gone down to The Lodge, where, of course, he had been plied with questions about the two Fernielands visitors. It was then that the spangled poster would be produced. The Factor happened to call in the nick of time, and being anxious to stand well with the people of The Lodge, from which he had his future mistress to expect, he had imagined and carried out the infamy of the 'McGhie Arms' Ordinary.

Of course, McComie did not argue out this, as it has to be put down coldly on paper. She saw it all at once, like a landscape lit by a flash of lightning. She divined and knew that she saw truly, as if she had been a long-haired aboriginal woman at the mouth of the Caves, who, with clear eyes, saw instinctively the treachery of woman and the weakness of man.

Still the two continued to mount the Hill, the thoughtful Armytage the more often and in his quest decidedly the more successful. For with a further unerring decision McComie had marked him as her plaything, just as she knew that Captain Kit Sykes of the 15th Heavies swaggered in to look upon V. V., without betraying any interest in her friend, Alice McComie.

McComie's studies in literature about this time became incessant. With every hour the time of their

departure grew nearer, so every day McComie was longer absent with the pale blue morocco book under her arm. She was beginning to know Palgrave by heart, and she stuck to him, though V. V. told her again and again that, if she really wanted to learn something worthwhile, she had quite a store of good parts with her, which she offered to lend and rehearse.

But McComie was wedded to pure poetry at that moment and refused the helping hand. If V. V. had not been so much taken up with Sandy's departure and how soon they could pay off the new vans, she would have suspected something from McComie's very demureness. A cat is never so quiet as when she is stealing the cream.

The general progress of events went somewhat thus:

A green glade. A beech down since last year, but still with sufficient root-grip to keep it full and leafy. On the top branches were fascinating twig-nests where you could swing without danger or dance the leafy branches up and down with a fascinating swish of airy movement. Sometimes McComie, seated on the trunk, sedately read Palgrave, and sometimes she did calisthenics among the greenery of the fallen beech. But as McComie particularly hated solitude, it was generally not long before a quiet young man came along and threw himself down at her feet. The uprooted beech could not be seen from The Lodge, but anyone coming from that direction could—a most useful tree. Her uncle had done very wrong to say bad words when he came upon it in his stocktaking after the storm of the 24th of September last.

He was a most serviceable young man, this Mr.

Armytage, and found for Miss McComie the most remarkable poems— that is, remarkable when he read them, but which, judging by their titles, McComie would never have thought of reading for herself. Then if she liked the verses of any particular author, the next day or the next again he would bring her some old-fashioned volume from which he would read more and ever more till she was tired, or till it was time for tea or dinner. Then he would ask her if she would not accept the old thing. In this way, without in the least suspecting their value, McComie became possessor of an original 'Hesperides,' of Lyrical Poems, of a rare Shakespeare quarto, of a first edition of Milton's 'Paradise Lost' (with the third title-page), clad in its original binding and looking like an eighteenth century schoolbook.

McComie had been warned against accepting a ring or anything like that, even from a nice man, but an old book, the like of which she had often seen on a George IV. Bridge bookstall for a penny—oh, that she did not mind at all. She put them on her table to read at nights; Armytage (she thought) had a clever knack of picking up just what she wanted, and as she read by the light of two tallow dips in the little room off that in which V. V. slept, new horizons opened out before her. She got by heart the young man's description of her, culled from a green-covered book in which were many little scraps of paper, but newly copied out in a small hand:

'Let her be as she was then— Let her have her proud dark eyes. And her petulant quick replies, Let her sweep her dazzling hand With its gesture of command And shake back her changeful hair With the old imperial air.'

McComie noted that the word 'raven' describing

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the hair of Iseult of Ireland had been deleted and 'changeful' written in. The small upright writing had never seemed to her more firm and pleasing than at that moment. And she gave a tug to a vagrant tress to look at under the candle-light.

'Pshaw!' she said discontentedly, 'it looks like tow!'

'McComie,' the voice of V. V. came sternly to her ear, 'do you mean to say that you are still awake? Put that candle out instantly. Do you hear me?'

McComie heard and executed. Candlelight was no good for her hair anyway. Sunshine filtering through beech-leaves was better—oh, much better. And thinking of the beech-shelter she shook back her changeful hair 'with the old imperial grace.

CHAPTER TWENTY

THE BEECH-TREE WOOD

I love it, the silence of a rather high-set, lonely farmhouse away up on the Galloway wilds. Such love is innate in me. I was brought up there from birth, and can read each sound more easily than any book. Even the silence has a thousand different tones.

Often it is as if yesterday, today and the eternal tomorrow were all one. The red cart which rumbles far afield, the hens snuggling fluffily under the hedges in dusty nests, with little wing-flirts and chuckles of satisfaction—the ducks on the pond sailing proudly each like some Kaiser's yacht, and on land the awkward geese with their heads burrowing under their wings, serve only to heighten the effect.

Oh, Land of Do-nothing—the best in the world—where all the people except oneself are doing everything! Only a few days and it will be over. Already the old folk are beginning to complain. V. V. had learned to bake scones. McComie's talk was good to listen to, if not invariably filled with wisdom of the wise.

What would they do without them? Fernielands would not be the same place. Nancy over-salted several cheeses with her tears at the thought of McComie's going, before there had been 'anything definite.' For of course McComie had told her of the young man who was so kind and helpful about the poetry.

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Nancy had no use for poetry herself, except of the 'conversation lozenge' sort—types which, she admitted, did sometimes help a tongue-tied swain over the first fence.

The rose is red, the violet's blue, sugar's sweet and so are you!

Nancy Malcolm saw some service in poetry like that, but strangely enough the lines were not to be found in Palgrave, which gave her a poor idea of that editor. Still, of course, among gentry, there would be different ways of doing things. But Nancy, after strict inquisition of McComie as to whether 'he had kissed her yet,' urged her to put her foot down on any more old books.

'As for kissing,' said McComie, 'of course he would do that if I would let him—I never yet saw the man who wouldn't!'

'Then why?' began Nancy, who divined less quickly and less instinctively than the aboriginal McComie.

'Because if you want a man to think a lot of a thing and to keep on thinking—you have got to—leave him without, sharpen his hunger—learn him to do without.'

'But a great man like that,' Nancy pleaded, 'and Miss Lily down yonder at The Lodge just goggling her eyes out o' her head for him!'

The greater the man—and the more made up to he is—the longer he had better be kept at arm's length. He is not used to it, ye see, Nancy. For instance, there's your Jo. I could make him do it in two minutes by the clock!'

'Oh, no,' cried Nancy fearfully, 'you let Jo alone!'
McComie laughed happily.

'Of course,' she said, 'what else? Honour among

us two thieves at the least. If Master Jo were to make 'googly' eyes at me, I should answer the fool according to his folly and send him back repentant. But be not feared. Jo is none of that kind. As for Allen, I would not like to say, and Freddie, he is for ever snuffling after me, like a young calf about the milk-pail.'

'Jo's bashful,' explained Nancy, who felt vaguely that her very own was being slighted.

'No fear,' said McComie, 'tak' a moonlight walk wi' him across the stackyard, and through the orchard on a fine, quiet night, and if Jo does not lose his bashfulness by the way, I have no more brains than a silly sheep.'

'But I'm no sure— that I wadna be feared!' said Nancy.

'Then you are a greater fool than he is,' said McComie, with just indignation, and proceeded to supply the shy Nancy some very appropriate and personal directions and limitations. These were chiefly couched in Biblical form of negation. 'Thou shalt not!' And McComie enjoyed herself vastly in the role of V. V. as she conveyed to Nancy Malcolm the concentrated wisdom of innumerable feminine ages.

So successful was she that Nancy felt sustained and strengthened, she even resolved on a moonlight walk to the orchard that very night. McComie had expected this, for she too was going to the Forresthill Wood to see how that wondrous green shelter looked by moonlight. Nancy and Jo would be two important factors removed from the case. V. V. was safe with Mr. Pryde, and they were busy with 'Davidson' on the Isaiah of the Exile— a most interesting subject, but one which made Sandy yawn. He had other

views for the disposal of V. V.'s time, but not being able to make anything of them, he took it into his head to walk down by the waterside, and there think out several problems which would face him on his return to London. Sandy had a theory that when with V. V., no moment was wasted, without her he had better make the best use of the time.

Sandy was never sure where he wandered to that night. It was moonlight, but light drifts of lawny clouds were scudding across the face of the moon. There were veering flaws, sudden swoopings and backsets of wind, which now tilted his hat to the back of his head and now blew the brim flat on his brow.

Willows shivered uncomfortably, but Sandy stuck to the question how soon he and V. V. could pay for those last two cars. He stood over a pearl-grey stretch of shallow water while it murmured the multiplication table in his anxious ear.

He moved further on and there was a pool, a real pool, its farther side a tablecloth of white lilies. Grannoch Water is famous for them. Nearer the pool was black jet with Casseopoeia at its verge, turned wrongside about as in a mirror.

Slowly Sandy awoke. The multiplication murmured itself out of existence. He called himself a 'hog.' Several other names as well— he who had been president of the Logomachic, and had worshipped the Ideally Beautiful — 'that within me by which I work towards a goal which I feel to be right and beautiful.'

For a long time now this had meant V. V. But that night Sandy, still in all fidelity, saw that there were other things besides V. V. in the realms of the Ideal. It was for instance good to see the moon shoulder

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her way through a wreath of clouds and drive fast across a little vacant canton of blue.

Others than Sandy had taken advantage of the beauty of the night. With a last glance into the little parlour, McComie glided casually out of the house. She cut her way through the heavy flower-scent of the lower garden, climbed the stile, and took her way towards Forresthill Wood, keeping carefully in the dusk of the hedges and sparse birches.

Sometimes the latter would thin out entirely and a flitting figure in a cloak of V. V.'s could be seen for a handful of moments. Then the shadows wrapped her about again. There seemed to be intention in the steady advance and in her workmanlike manner of avoiding the open moonlit spaces and overleaping obstacles.

McComie had her own way of eating the forbidden fruit. She went through with it proudly, with a smile on her lips which said 'It is good to eat, because I will it!'

So in this spirit she moved towards the big pine-wood of Forresthill, where amid a clump of tall beeches, green and brown, the largest had fallen.

Above the pines made no objections. They only sighed, but the dry leaves of the beeches clashed in perpetual gossip. The moonlight rained down fine and pin-shaped through the needles of the Scotch firs, but the spots of light were round and blobby where the beech-trees rose into the sky. Then came the open space, a splash of clean, colourless moonshine, with the long, fluffy tree on which she had so often sat, lying half hidden among the bracken with a curious effect of a Dutch garden topped with strange forms of beasts.

McComie could just make out in her Palgrave

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certain poems she knew best— Lycidas, The Flowers of the Forest, and several others. But she soon shut the book because the pale blue cover had grown colourless too.

Behind she saw like a needle point the brilliantly lighted and comfortable kitchen at Fernielands, and stooping she felt her boots to see if they were wet with dew. Not at all, the faint haze over the moon had prevented that. She heard a little noise and turned to flee. But she lingered long enough to see what it was that had frightened her.

Thank heavens! It was not a cow— but a young man. Of these McComie had no fear.

‘Miss Armytage,’ said the youth, apparently astonished, ‘what are you doing here?’

‘Armitage yourself!’ McComie responded cheerfully, ‘what are you doing?’

‘I came to see— where I had been so happy!’ said Mr. Armytage McGhie quietly.

‘Oh, yes, with Lily,’ said McComie, ‘but you needn’t read poetry to her! She would not care for it?’

‘What then would she care for?’ Armytage went on, seating himself on the trunk of the tree at what he considered a respectful distance and regarding the rushing moon alternately paling and clearing among the cloud wisps.

Suddenly McComie felt unaccountably vicious. She hated Lily Sykes, her sister Eleanor and all the Sykes’ of Sykesdom.

‘I will tell you,’ she said; in the crystal air her words fell keen and clear as the tinkling of a shaken lustre. ‘She or her sister—or both of them, made that bad man, the red-faced factor—I can’t remember his nasty name, insulted us at the

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Monday dinner at Cairn Edward—in the big hotel, you know!

'The McGhie Arms?' asked Armytage.

'Yes, of course,' said McComie, rising and stamping her silver heel till it glittered in the moonlight, 'they put a poster of V. V., which an old manager had printed for London, where nobody knows anybody, and it does not matter. There it was, right over our heads, where we were sitting down to dinner. And the beasts lauded—at least they laughed till Sandy got after them. And it was a picture that V. V. just loathed, and cried quarts about when she first saw it. Yes, it was your friends at The Lodge who got it and made old Red-Neck stick it up there to insult us!'

'I do not think so,' said Armytage; 'how could they get hold of such a thing?'

'Then it was your other friend, Captain Sykes—I feel sure. Oh, I could,' and Alice McComie's silver heel flashed in the moonlight and fell (as it were) on the prostrate neck of Captain Sykes of His Majesty's Heavies.

Then suddenly a little scene in the smoking-room at Castle McGhie appeared to Armytage with the absurd minute clarity of something seen in a camera obscura. Captain Sykes had unrolled a picture at which he, not being interested by the vagaries of Kit Sykes and his kind, just glanced and no more. He had been busy tending his cigarette-making the while, and through them he had only seen something blue and spangled, and had caught young Terry Hamilton's remark that that 'was a dashed smart girl to have in a fellow's neighbourhood in this deuced dull country.'

Beyond this he had not paid any attention. For

Kit Sykes's set were welcome to do as they liked for him. Besides in the absence of his uncle, he was in a way the host. Now all this took on a new signification. Of the part played by the girls he was less sure. Sykes and Walkerburn might have engineered the business themselves. At any rate it was dastardly enough. Besides, he knew that Walkerburn had a nephew for whom he was eager to obtain the farm of Fernielands when the lease fell in.

Armytage, though not given that way, swore softly under his breath and vowed that if it turned out to be as McComie asserted, he would break off all relations with the people down at The Lodge. He did not, however, believe that old Miss Glendinning, with all her hot temper, had anything to do with it.

Then a sharp gust of anxiety came over him. He was wasting the good and precious moments the gods had given him.

'Miss McComie,' he burst out, 'never mind about all this at present. See here, McComie, I can't stand up to it any longer. I suppose I am a fool— indeed I know I am. But I can't help myself. I love you, McComie—as I never thought to love anybody and I don't care a button what anybody thinks.'

'Except me, perhaps,' put in McComie, who felt herself coming to her own again.

'Of course, except you!' said Armytage, rather staggered.

'But why should you care—I don't—' (here Armytage breathed deeply, thinking that all was over)

'I don't even know yet whether I like you or not. I have often liked men quite as well and then after a while—thought them horrid. Of course your teaching me to care about poetry makes a

difference—and all our good times.'

'They have been good?' said Armytage, touched by the adjective and coming nearer to McComie with a kind of moonstruck hope in his eye.

'Keep well away,' said McComie. 'I kiss people. They don't kiss me. Besides, have you seen my guardian and guardianess?'

'I didn't even know that you had any?' said Armytage, believing it a joke.

'Oh, one is Mr. Alexander Pryde, Master of Arts, Bachelor of Science (otherwise called Sandy), and Miss V. V. Jones of Llanfaes, North Wales. But besides them, I have a father in Leith who deeded me to these two, all regular and correct. He is a builder, and having married a wife, finds one young woman in the house enough for him. I don't blame him. I was just as horrid as I could be. So was she. But I can be abominable if I like. My real, real own mother is dead, but she was an Armytage of Kenmore.'

'So was my own mother,' cried the dark young man, apparently much agitated, 'that will help immensely.'

'Will it?' said McComie, 'not as far as I am concerned. I don't care if you are as rich as old McBung the brewer (but he had a son, such a nice boy), or so poor that you have to scratch the hedges to make a fire for your breakfast, and poach fish to roast on it—I have got to like you enough to marry you in either case—and just as much in one as in the other.'

'Yes,' said the dark young man, 'I quite understand that. But I am not going to let you off without giving me as fair a chance as any other man.'

'Mind, there are a good many others,' said McComie, with patient warning— 'twenty at least, without counting the twelve at Leith my father wanted me to marry so as to get me off his hands. Now I don't want to be on anybody's hands, though I don't mind V. V. and Sandy—I have enough of my mother's money to be a first-class old maid on, and I believe that father could not really bear to leave his money away from me. You see, the old Cat has no kittens. I'm his only kit!'

Armytage, having been well brought up, was vaguely shocked, and McComie felt it in a moment.

'Oh, so would you be, if your father had married a woman who slapped your face just because you would not tell her who sent you some flowers when you didn't know within five or six who had done it yourself!'

Armytage, with a sad smile, declared the case unthinkable. Nobody ever sent him flowers.

'Oh, you poor boy,' exclaimed McComie, 'the first time I have loads I'll save you some. Though I never get anything like so many as V. V. But in the meantime don't look so disappointed—' (she made a sudden grasp with her hands, and examined the result)— 'hyacinths—no, that will spoil your pocket-book— they always said so, all gluey and sticky. Bluebells, that's better— there, you can keep that next your heart if you like, and next year if the beating has knocked it to bits, I'll find you another. There's nothing really so good as a harebell— not even a bit of white heather. That you can buy in shops and sell at bazaars.'

'I should rather have the bluebell,' said Armytage meekly, though he was a little disappointed that McComie had received his proposal so cavalierly. He

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was not accustomed to be so treated, and he did not yet know how much her carelessness as to whether he was prince or pauper had the power to attract him. McComie was acting out her own precepts to Nancy.

He resolved to take the matter in as light a spirit as possible, so he quoted the lines of an Irish song: *Sure if it's little Mary Cassidy's the cause of all my misery, and the reason that I'm not all the boy I used to be!*

'Eh, what's that!' exclaimed McComie, who was getting up, 'say that again.' And when Armytage obeyed, she said: 'That's not in Palgrave, is it?'

'No,' said the young man, 'but I can find it for you in a day or two.'

And he chanted in a low voice meant for her ear alone:

*'Take all I own today — kith, kin and care away,
Skip them all acrost the ocean, or to the frozen gone,
Lave me an orphan bare — but lave me Mary
Cassidy, I never could feel lonesome with the two of
us alone!'*

McComie listened with her head on the side like a bird. This was indeed the hand of one who flatters skilfully, and McComie was grateful.

She stood ready for flight, poised like a bird, her skirts in one hand so that she could run the faster.

'I said that I did not let anyone kiss me, but it is good-bye and you are a nice boy. I will kiss you—just once, if you promise not to think any more about it nor try to follow me. Now put your hands behind your back. Grasp the wrist of the left hand with the fingers of the right and think of Mary Cassidy. There.'

Something warm and fragrant just touched the

young man's lips and made him jump.

'Hold tight there,' said McComie, 'keep your bargain, or that is the last you will ever see of me. Watch me across the field and think that it is this nice silly moonlight that has gone to my head.'

From the stile she blew him a kiss daintily from the tips of the fingers which were not occupied in upholding the skirt. Then the world grew suddenly exceedingly empty for Armytage McGhie. He turned slowly down the hill towards the water side, sure that the damp of the meadow lands would cool his brow.

And there as he emerged from the wood, he saw Eleanor Sykes with her hands on the arm of Sandy Pryde. She was apparently pleading earnestly, but as Armytage felt that it was none of his business, he turned on his heel, regained the road and made his way back to The Lodge.

The situation was decidedly more complex than he had thought. He must be wary, and, for the moment, confine himself to keeping track of the elusive McComie and preventing the nephew of that rascal Walkerburn from putting the Prydes out of their ancient holding of Fernielands.

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

A WOMAN SCORNE

It was a night of unexpected encounters. And certainly Sandy, when he strolled away down to the bridge to look at the water, gliding silently under, and to think out the problem of the delivery cars, had no thought of McComie up in the wood above—still less of tall Eleanor Sykes who, bareheaded and with a shawl about her evening dress, had come out to look at the distant lights of the House on the Hill and to hate the people who were within— all, that is, except Sandy.

When Sandy saw her first she was bending over the Witch's Pool and trying to break off a white Lily from its stem— a difficult task enough in daylight, but from a sloping bank a dangerous one at night.

He was just on the point of calling out, but remembering that he might precipitate an accident, walked softly on tiptoe till he got behind her, and then catching her by the waist, he lifted her clean out of dangerous territory.

'I beg your pardon. Miss Sykes,' he said, 'but evidently you don't know the dangers of the Black Water yet. I helped to look for a girl who drowned herself just here five or six years ago!'

'But she meant to drown herself—I have heard about that. Besides, how do you know that I did not?'

'All the more reason if you did,' said Sandy, who having done his work was not inclined to mercy, 'you have a father and a mother, a great house

and—so they say—someone who is going to marry you!’

‘Ah, they say that, do they?’ laughed Eleanor Sykes mockingly, keeping Sandy fixed at arms’ length, but still looking at and holding him, ‘Well then, Mr. Alexander Pryde, they lie! If you say so, you lie! They all lie! If I cannot marry the man I want to marry I shall have no second best. I prefer the Black Water. Do you think I should make a pretty Ophelia all among the water-lilies tomorrow morning? See’ —(she threw off her shawl and showed her white evening dress beneath devoid of ornament, except a triple row of pearls about her neck)— ‘would you come and pull me out— help, I mean, for I suppose there would be many to see a sight like that. Was there a good house for the other girl—the one you saw taken out? And would they say the same things about me that they said about her?’

Eleanor Sykes laughed unpleasantly and rocked Sandy to and fro, gripping him by the shoulders with more than a girl’s strength.

‘How did your damsel like her picture on Monday?’ she said, ‘I heard that you all ran for it like whipped curs!’

Sandy disengaged himself roughly.

‘So,’ he said gravely and a little heavily, ‘it is as I thought.’

Rather it was as McComie had thought, but Sandy was too busy at the moment for fine distinctions.

‘No, it is not as you thought— I did it—I and that old fool Scoville at Castle McGhie. You had no thought of him. Well, he wants me to marry him, the mouldy rascal, because he says he helped father

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when father was young. Oh, yes, I have lovers as well as you. And it happened that he knew the manager of the theatre where they placarded your pretty lady's picture! But I will wager that it looked better in the dining-room of the 'McGhie Arms' than ever on the hoardings of London.'

Sandy's anger grew chilled and settled. But little could be done to a jealous girl—at least with one who might at any moment break from him and plunge into the Witch's Pool. For Scoville, however, whom he had once spared already, and for red-faced Walkerburn whom he had partially punished, a sore betiding was being laid up.

Clearly, however, Eleanor Sykes was for the moment beyond argument. She was only a furious woman rejoicing in having pulled her own house about her ears. She had been willing to tell everything, to betray her accomplices, if by so doing she might hurt Sandy. And yet he did not seem to be angry with her, whatever he might be with the others. She wanted to have him cringe and recognize her power. She, Eleanor Sykes, was the stronger. She wished him to realise this.

'You think that I sent you away from the house. No—it nearly broke my heart the twice you called. They had me locked in a room, and I saw you go. It was mother who sent me there, and gave the orders to the people in the hall. I cried—I who never cry. And when father came home he was angry, and said that he would go the next day to return your call, but neither he nor any of us knew how to see you or where you were. Lily kept on taunting me about the 'milk-boy,' because when you were little, you used to bring the milk to the back door of The Lodge.'

'I would yet, if mother had nobody else to send,'

said Sandy, smiling. He was telling himself that it was better to humour the girl and especially to let her talk out the bitterness which saturated her.

'Of course you would,' said Eleanor Sykes, rocking herself to and fro in an agony of contrition, 'you are different—you are a genius!'

'Not at all,' said Sandy, 'I went because it was my job, and on the mornings when I called at your house I had been delivering parcels on a little tricycle for my living on the streets of South London. I deliver parcels still, or rather my vans do for me, and as for the books, nobody where I live, except the Doctor across the way, knows anything about them.'

'Not Miss... (what is her name?) the singing girl?'

'Oh, yes, of course she knows. She is a partner in my business. She has put all her money in to help me!'

'And you took it!—Did you know how it had been earned? Do you know what they call men like you?'

'No, I don't,' said Sandy, 'unless they call us honest men who work hard for a living!'

'You live on the earnings of a woman who gets her money by being friends with the worst of the managers!—Oh, I know all about Mr. Adney of the South London Popular Combination and how kind he was to your precious Miss Jones. She called her dog after him! You did not know that.'

'Why, of course,' said Sandy, nothing daunted, 'he gave it to her—I picked up the little beast and patched him up once when he had an accident.'

'And so began your spiritual loves!' sneered Eleanor bitterly.

'They did,' said the ever candid Sandy, 'and I can't for the life of me see what you have to do with it. I never made love to you!'

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He said this hoping to sting the girl into pride.

He was mistaken. She was amazingly and distressingly humble—to Sandy quite painfully so.

'No, you never did—Lily said I was a fool,' she went on, 'and I suppose I am.' She laid her head down on Sandy's shoulder, 'But you were so good and . . . girls think things. Besides I was so angry with Lily for saying what she did about Kit—that he would leave the army and go into father's business when he married me. She only did that to provoke!'

'Even I saw that, but I never dreamed for a moment.'

'No, I know you didn't— now. But, you see I wasn't sure then. And I counted upon you, and felt so mean when Lily went on calling you the 'milk-boy' and not daring to speak out before mother, after all you had done. She kept on at this till father stopped her sharply by telling what he had done when he began life.'

Sandy never tried to get Eleanor Sykes to lift her head or look up. He had the woman's belief in the efficacy of a good cry—an inheritance from his mother. V. V. never cried, or rarely, though McComie cried quite enough for two— when she did not get her own way.

'Miss Sykes,' he began gently,— 'well, then, Eleanor— won't they be wondering at The Lodge what has become of you?'

'What does it matter?' said the girl, shrugging her shoulders, 'perhaps I shall never have the chance again to be with you. I don't know why I should love you. Except that you are big and have square shoulders. You are not handsome. Kit is ten times handsomer than you.'

'Heaven send that the girl keep of that mind,'

thought Sandy, who was not proud— not, at least, of his good looks.

'You have a head like a haystack and' . . . (she published to the night the full tale of Sandy's imperfections, to all of which Sandy agreed and even added others she had passed over).

'But it is all of no use,' she said, suddenly pushing him from her and with the strength of madness tilting his chin so that she could see his face and eyes clear in the soft shining of the moon. 'No use. I can praise you—I can say I hate you, I can say you are ugly—you care as much for one as for the other. All you care about is that spangled hussy up there where the light is shining. She is sitting up waiting for you — to say good-night. Ah, sweet leave-taking of lovers! If I had my father's double-barrel, I would gladly make her say 'good-bye for ever more'—Yes, both of you. For I am not fool enough to think that I could make you love me, just by putting a charge out of a Number twelve into her. Oh, what a fool I am!'

The girl paused for a moment, panting, her hands on her breast, shaken with her emotions. Then she looked up and smiled at Sandy strangely and passionately.

'That is the way she does after she has danced, isn't it, and you think she is lovely— l-o-o-v-v-ly' (she stretched out the word, putting all her possible store of contempt into it). 'And she does it to make all the horrid old men in the stalls think what fine ankles she has. They watch her with their eyes goggling and their tongues hanging out. Oh, I have seen them. But I— my heart only beats like that because you are breaking it. Exactly—I am unwomanly, silly. I should have more pride—oh, all

the litany. Only you see, I haven't, and you stand there like a leaden image. Oh, my God!

She cried out suddenly, as a girl's figure came through the trees with a lantern in her hand, making a little brilliant point in the moonlight.

'There she is,' she shrilled fiercely, 'go to her, go—keep her as long as she is young. She will bring you in money to live on. For me, I can bear my own disgrace—but not yours!'

And springing sideways, Eleanor Sykes, a tall, white figure, running swiftly in the splendours of the moonlight, took one leap from the high bank above the Witch's Pool. The inky water rose in a slow splash, and sank heavy as oil. The ripples circled and widened, moving the reeds and rushes with a slight whispering sound, and all was still.

The next moment Sandy had slipped his boots and coat to be the readier to grapple among the twining Lily-stems. The pool was not broad, but it was deep and black. The tangle of Lily roots and water plants made it dangerous. Sandy had to dive three times before he found the girl. She was clinging desperately to some long, twisted stems about which her fingers had been gripped in her first desperate resolve to keep from coming to the surface. By this time V. V. had come down to the edge of the Witch's Pool. She stood there with the stable lantern which she had taken from Allen at the gate to guide her through the thickets, for, far less than to any of the others, the surroundings of Fernielands were unfamiliar to V. V.

At last Sandy reappeared with the girl in evening dress limp in his arms. With V. V.'s help he managed to get Eleanor on the bank, where she lay as if dead.

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'I will tell you all about it afterwards,' he said without the slightest doubt as to how his explanations would be received. 'I think you should not be here when she comes to herself. Send McComie!'

And V. V. (though God knows what her thoughts were) trusted Sandy even then, and moving swiftly back to the road, called 'McComie— here, McComie!' till the empty woods rang with the fulness of her voice.

But it was Mr. Armytage Sykes who arrived in answer to the summons. V. V. motioned him down to the water-side.

'There has been an accident,' she said. 'Mr. Pryde and you will know what it is best to arrange.'

Then these two, with a complete delicacy of technical skill on Sandy's part and a bitter suspicion on that of Mr. Armytage McGhie, finally brought Eleanor round. On the road, not a hundred yards away, was McComie with the light cart which Allen had harnessed, the brisk pony and the body of the vehicle filled with abundance of hay.

'Shall you drive or shall I?' said Sandy.

'I will,' said Armytage, frankly hostile; 'but I think you had better come tomorrow and explain yourself to the girl's father.'

'I think so too,' said Sandy, and busied himself with the last preparations for their departure.

But, when he went the next day to The Lodge to ask for Eleanor Sykes, it was Lord Balmaghie who met him. He was pacing rapidly up and down the gravel sweep, and when Sandy came up he nodded very briefly without taking his hands from behind his back.

'The less we see of you, Mr. Pryde, the better will

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our family be pleased! That is all I have to say.'

'But,' began Sandy, 'it is wholly a mistake.'

'Thank you,' said Lord Balmaghie dryly, turning on his heel, 'we have heard quite enough about the mistake from the young lady herself!'

Sandy strode away with bitterness in his heart against the unfairness of women. He could have broken all the men in The Lodge, all the males of the family of McGhie-Sykes-Glendingning between one hand and the other. But he could not make a disturbance at a house where a girl, irresponsible for her words and acts, was lying exhausted.

He had a slight hope that the young Armytage would do him some justice, though he admitted that the *prima facie* evidence was much against him, and as he gathered from my lord—Eleanor's own words condemned him.

Still, he had saved her from drowning herself in the Black Water. They might put one thing against another.

Sandy did not reflect that the family theory would naturally be that he was the man who had driven her to the attempt.

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

GREEN ERIN

V. V. once more proved the metal of which she was made by asking no questions. But she expected an explanation all the same Sandy furnished it.

I had seen Eleanor Sykes once or twice before I came up to London, but thought nothing of it. I looked after her and her sister on the journey, as I should have done to any other girls travelling alone. The little one, Lily, laughed at me—'the young man from the country.' But after I had talked awhile she, Eleanor, looked and kept looking. I thought no more about it. They asked me to call. I called twice and the footman at the door told me they were not at home. Now she says she was locked in her room upstairs by order of her mother, but that now I could call when I liked. Just then I met you, V. V., and from that moment thought no more about anything except you and our work!

'But that girl had watched and spied. The old ruffian Scoville (whose neck I shall wring), and the factor man Walkerburn, were in it, but it was she who engineered the plot at the market ordinary. Tonight she had been watching the house. She had on an evening-dress and nothing on her head when I met her. She told me—lots of things—things I never thought a girl would say—not, at least, a proud girl like that.'

'Ah,' said V. V. very tenderly and pityingly, 'in love there are no proud girls!'

'And then when she saw you, she ran to drown

herself, and it was all I could do to tear her fingers from their grip of the bottom. Another minute and it would all have been over.' Sandy did not add, 'Perhaps for myself also!'

V. V.'s eyes were full of tears.

Sandy added a word, preaching (as it were) for his own parish, and to make sure.

'You will remember, V. V., that never before tonight have I spoken to the girl alone and that in no way is this my fault.'

V. V. turned upon him very quickly—almost angrily.

'When I cannot trust you, Sandy, I shall go away and you shall never see me again. Till then, there need be neither misunderstandings nor explanations between you and me!'

The great tour was finished. It had been successful, as McComie said, 'Beyond the dreams of avarice'—McComie's 'dreams of avarice' were to have just as much money as would serve her to buy presents for the other people she liked—all the cash to be spent in one day.

But McComie demanded a holiday now that the horses were disposed of, the motors paid for, the contract with Tomling & Hard made ironclad for five years, and John and Rob Gilston settled safe in the direction of Tenterden Road Garage.

'V. V. needs a change if ever a girl did,' declared McComie. She herself had drawn her salary, of course, though where it had gone and what had become of the things she had spent it on, McComie, for the life of her, could not tell. It was ever thus with Mistress Alicia.

McComie also missed something out of her life—something connected with the fallen beech-tree in

the Forresthill Wood and the blue Zaensdorff Palgraves.

She found out that in certain banks you could hire little safe deposit steel boxes, and into one of these McComie put all that the dark young man who appeared no more on her horizon had given her. The manager, who was of the lettered, admired the Shakespeare quarto and the 'Hesperides.' He looked at McComie, found adorable her manifest reluctance to part with her treasures, and thought she was really much too young and pretty for a collector.

But McComie wanted to forget, and still more she wanted Sandy to forget. Old Scoville would be back again sunning his white waistcoat in the sunshine of the vestibule of Kentham Road Kirk, thereby driving V. V. from the public worship of the Creator. Because McComie and V. V. had taken counsel together and had agreed that if these two came together, Sandy would certainly fulfil his threat, Sunday or Saturday. And at the thought of what might happen, V. V. felt her heart fail. She was not afraid of Sandy herself, but of what in his haste and repressed anger he might do to Scoville—of that she lived in continual dread.

So anything that might put a distance between Sandy and his enemy Scoville, would certainly be for her Sandy's good. So she lent her influence to help McComie. The expedition was to be conducted on the half-shares plan—that is, Sandy and V. V. were to pay a half each, but—for reasons which need not be insisted upon—McComie was to pay nothing.

Only in plain fact she would certainly contribute far more than her share in the steadfast happiness of the party. Who would be bright when it rained, or when the rest were silent and cross? McComie! Who

would fall into all manner of humorous difficulties and from them have to be rescued hilariously? McComie! Who would kiss everybody for their mothers, and never think about herself? McComie! Who would be a lazy, greedy, barefacedly charming little pig—and glory in it? Who would chaperon the party, and need all Sandy's and V. V.'s time to keep her out of mischief? Why the aforesaid, innocent, wileful, aboriginal, prehistoric, commonplace, dimpling and smiling McComie, without whom life would be a very Bog of Allan, but with whom Sandy and V. V. would never find a moment of time hang heavy on their hands.

'We can't get married yet awhile,' said Sandy; 'not by what you tell me—though I am willing enough. Lord knows! But McComie will chaperon us.'

'First pay John, pay Shieldhill, and after that establish a reserve of a thousand pounds, and then we will think about marriage,' said V. V. 'I have too big an interest in this concern to throw it away for sentimental reasons!'

She knew that he hated the phrase, so she added, 'But a trip to Ireland, with McComie to look after, will set us all up. Satan won't be able to find a single mischief for our hands to do, with her upon them!'

Ireland had been chosen for a variety of reasons, more or less personal to the travellers. First, thought V. V., the kindly sea was put between Sandy and Scoville's white waistcoat. Then if the good folk were compelled to leave Fernielands, there were cheap farms to be had in the soundly Protestant North of Ireland. Sandy was designated to look into this.

Then McComie seemed somehow more in her place, safer, better in tone and keeping with the people of Ireland as these were known to Sandy on a

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former 'bear-leading visit,' which is to say, in charge of a pupil placed under his care by the High Court of Chancery.

Ireland be it, then. Once out of Loch Ryan they would leave Grey Galloway and restless England to take care of themselves for a period of weeks. The party consisted of three, to wit (they tossed up for the surname), Mr. 'Sandy' Jones, Miss 'V. V.' Jones and Miss 'McComie' Jones. Thus armed with united brotherly and sisterly authority over the eccentricities of McComie, the party felt more compact and sure of itself.

It was one of McComie's pet witcheries that when she used to be afraid of telling the 'evil deeds she had evil committed' to V. V., she would make her confessions, to get the enormity off her mind, to Sandy.

For instance, there was a young man with flaxen curls and a scented handkerchief who followed her on the cars and who had sent her flowers. Of course, he was a great silly and she should never, never speak to him, but he seemed rather a dear. She wondered who he could be and got Sandy to make a trip or two on the cars for the purpose of finding out. But at the first glimpse of Sandy's broad shoulders and the singular triangular frown between his brows, the curly-haired youth melted away most mysteriously, and the mourning McComie never saw him again.

'Well,' she said in her best Leith accent, 'it's rather a pity. He was so simple, and if he could have spoken he might have been a duck. He never could take his eyes off me, and it rather livened up the old car-ride.'

McComie took Sandy's rebukes against this mode

of 'livening up' car-journeys with utter carelessness. On such occasions she did not mind what Sandy said, considering him as only a faint echo of V. V. But what he did and could do, the pleasant safety she experienced in his company, the knowledge that she was entirely protected even when playing her most dangerous pranks, made the companionship of Sandy very precious to her. She was sorry the law was so hard upon men who married two wives. She didn't believe that V. V. would really mind.

McComie did not make any objection to being the younger Miss Jones; when the turn of the shilling so arranged their surnames. She would still be 'McComie.' That was a distinction which nothing could snatch from her. She was well aware that the others would be calling up stairs and down dale the word 'McComie' every hour of every day.

She retained a few peculiarities left over from childhood which were known only to Sandy. These had to be carefully concealed from V. V., who would have put her foot on them and obscured a full half of the horizon of McComie's pleasure. Some of these mysteries had to do with the things she liked to eat, which were remarkable and singularly unwholesome — that is, to any other than McComie.

But it was not till the day came for packing their bags that McComie stood revealed in her stark naked depravity— pleasant words when applied to McComie, the daughter of the man who, as the Dispatch and the News so frequently affirmed (without the least knowledge), was 'so well known in Leith philanthropic circles,' whatever these might be.

She came sidling round the door to Sandy, entered without knocking, and, producing a battered

but clothed lump of wood from behind her back, she said, 'This is Nelly—I have slept with Nelly ever since I can remember. She comforted me when people were bad or when the dark was very dark. V. V. would take her and throw her behind the fire. Will you find room for Nelly in your bag and give her to me quietly when—I have a room to myself? Oh, I know I am eighteen and all that, but it doesn't seem to make any difference. I suppose I must fall in love first.'

Sandy made inarticulate noises.

'You see,' continued McComie, 'it is like this. V. V. would think nothing of looking through all my dress-cases and bags if I forgot the least thing—or if I said I did not know where it was. Often I really don't, but V. V. has no sympathy with any sort of ignorance.

'Well, you ought to know!' says she. And in a minute she is turning out every mortal thing from a toothbrush-case to a night-dress bag. But V. V. would never look through your things!'

'Well, not yet,' said Sandy, who saw more clearly than ever what was before him. 'I only wish she would!'

It was the first time that a doll—a disreputable but unmistakable doll—had found refuge in the severely masculine bags of Sandy Pryde. But he had within him a real instinct of sympathy with natures the most different—a sympathy which, with Sandy, was infinitely more active in the case of women than of men. He could not endure masculine women nor feminine men. Such he relegated to perdition—or the plain Biblical equivalent permitted to him by his Puritan education.

Accordingly Sandy understood McComie at once, and took the greatest care of Nelly, the ugly doll of

battered wood the possession of which explained so much of McComie's character, excused so many of her vagaries and elfishnesses, and put a key into his hand which V. V. with all her knowledge of McComie, had not been permitted to turn.

He saw now why this heart of a child rejoiced in any JOY; was eager to avert any trouble from any one — why she loved to have 'a nice boy' for a companion, and why she saw no harm where, indeed, there was none. He remembered when V. V. had been indignant, specially, justly indignant with him, how McComie had risked running out to warn him. He knew why she pressed his foot under the table during the trouble, and why, when she had the chance, she caressed him after— just to make it up to him. McComie was the eternal child who, being healthily constituted, has sympathy only with the naughties, pets them, and rubs all possible oil of gladness into the smarts of the smarting.

But he saw also that V. V.'s treatment and guidance were the best for McComie; and worth all the stately drum-majordom inculcated by 'How to bring up Girls' and 'How to be Well-bred,' by a Woman of Fashion (87th edition). With that doll in his trunk and the key to the character of McComie in his heart, he resolved to cooperate with V. V.'s sense of immutable justice to the exceedingly rampant and unshorn lamb McComie.

Hours before, McComie was already itching to be off. She could hardly keep her rough silver heels from dancing jigs, an accomplishment which she expected to bring her much popularity in Ireland. She had learned the art from Bidly McNamara, who, after an eventful life, had settled down to the teaching of dancing and a little business in potheen

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'honestly come by' in a 'main door' house (with a back entrance) near Drummond Street. For all manner of dancing McComie had great gifts and soon became star pupil—as indeed she could be in anything which did not include regular application to business, the care of money, and the laws of social good behaviour.

In spite of all, however, as said Disraeli, McComie was a delightful person to live with, 'although she never knew which came first, the Greeks or the Romans.'

CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

PEETHER OF THE SLOE-TREE

They scudded through Galloway, looking greyer and wilder than ever, under a Solway sky of dim agate, streaked with white and flecked with windblown sea-gulls. McComie was jubilant as the engine, a little dark-blue one, bored an indigo nose through the turbulence of roaring torrent and rain-battered heather, for, as usual, in the hills it had been raining.

'I have never seen the real Atlantic—think of it,' she said, 'only the Forth at Aberdour, which is hardly the same thing.'

'Not the same thing at all,' said Sandy, who had seen the solid fifty-foot waves of the North Channel burst up two million pounds' worth of concreted pier and solid lighthouse like a child's spade-built castle on the sands.

'You are a little fool, McComie,' said V. V.; 'you will have all the Atlantic you are wanting in three minutes after the boat turns out of Loch Ryan.'

So it proved. McComie tried curveting along the deck, stumbling into the arms of at least three well-looking men, asking pardon, and finally hanging on to a rope in a woebegone fashion. Then she grew slowly green and without turning round called for Sandy, as she was wont to do in any emergency involving physical pain.

'Sandy went to lie down, at once, as soon as he got on board,' said V. V. severely.

'Well,' persisted McComie, 'I want to lie down too.'

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Where is Sandy? Oh, I don't want to go in there' (the ladies' cabin), 'not with all those horrid women. Let's find Sandy!'

'Sandy does not want us,' said V. V. emphatically, 'but I daresay I can find you a shelter on a seat behind the funnels.'

'Oh, not where one can smell the oil,' wailed McComie. 'I love the open sea. Let us go to the top-end of the train—I mean the boat—and have the Atlantic all about us—I wish I had never set eyes on the abominable thing. Why can't they make it keep still or tunnel under it or something?'

At last V. V., an excellent sailor, got McComie arranged on a coil of ropes, with the smart purser and a youthful second officer deeply interested in her case—which they could not help nor V. V. hinder—for the imploring eyes of McComie would have tamed a kraken or subdued the sea serpent.

Sandy was in eclipse, as he always was during such transits. It was before the day of deck cabins on North Channel boats, but of this he had warned V. V. He reappeared, however, to look after the luggage, a chastened, rather pallid Sandy. But McComie was so interesting-looking and her eyes expressed such marvellous things (which she did not in the least feel), that it was with difficulty that Sandy could prevent the entire ship's crew from carrying her ashore. Indeed, as it was, the Chief Secretary for Ireland, who was on a mission to Belfast, in order to be insulted, had to stand aside and bide his time till Miss McComie Jones, on the arm of her brother, staggered ashore followed by the sympathy of all beholders.

Then she turned and waved her hand to the crew.

'Good-bye, you nice men,' she said, 'I hope never

to see any of you again. I am going to live in Ireland all the rest of my life.'

'That,' said Sandy sententiously, 'comes of joking with the North Atlantic!'

'Be gosh,' the familiar red-headed waiter at Lame Hotel confided to Sandy, 'we have foine-lukkin' gurrils in County Antrim and a dail more av thim in County Donegal, but if thim two sisters of yours, sor, wants to be stoppin' in Ireland—they'll get chances by the ton never to lave it anny more! Sure that they will!'

The junior waiter, called 'the-young-bhoy-sir, -and-I-hope-you'll-excuse him—' came to the breakfast-table with an egg in each hand, and another under his left armpit, in order to fill the three egg-cups already on the table. He gazed a moment at V. V. and McComie, his mouth opened, but no word was given unto him to speak. Only he let the three eggs fall one after the other— splash — on the carpet, and thereupon was promptly kicked out of the room by his red-headed principal.

'Please excuse Imm,' said he of the red head, 'he is not quite by way of being like me and you. He has heard the CeolSidhe, the music of the little people, and his mother's first man was my second cousin on the Isle of Rathlin, the fairest that ever God made. So I put up with Peether of the Sloe-tree, which is Black Peter, and if I do the service for two and bring you a couple of iggs more— there's wan that will do very well for the gintleman wid a little sweepin' up—but ladies are ladies wherever you go! And while Rory O'Moore McCabe houlds his place here, they shall have the best our hens can do for them!'

The girls murmured their opinion that a family arrangement so suitable ought by no means to be

altered. Peter of the Sloe-tree, the little black-headed boy from Rathlin, should wait upon them, he and no other. McComie would teach him.

So thereafter Peether appeared at every meal, and under the fierce eye of his distant cousin (but quite-within-reach superior officer), he succeeded in managing the plate with sufficient dexterity, except when he tried to be too clever and let fall the soup tureen in the attempt to hold it up on a level with his nose like a real maître de hotel.

Then once Fate fell upon him and he retired downstairs in a hurry, fighting a rear-guard action with the palms of his hands till out of sight.

Every morning Miss McComie Jones found a pretty bouquet of roses beside her napkin— while a little tuft of violets or a sprig of Lily-of-the-valley, the gift of Sandy, was all that V. V. could boast. Peether stood behind with a blank countenance as if he were a thousand miles from knowing anything about it.

The head-waiter explained to Mr. Alexander Pryde Jones, in charge of the party:

“Tis the divil’s own silf that’s in the bhoy,” he said, ‘and a kindly gossoon as ever was— wan o’ the McCabes of Ballymore in the Isle of Rathlin, a well-respected family, and the father of him, barrin’ one, was me own first cousin. He is the son of Mary McCabe’s second, and it was the first that was me cousin — but why should that change the blood? Now, if ye wanted anny bhoy to be drivin’ your ‘cyar’ all along by the Anthrim Road, Peether’s the man, and would drive ye within an inch of destruction widout turning a hair. Oh, the brave bhoy is Peether as was his father all-but-wan, my cousin Barny McCabe.’

Sandy thought over this proposition. He meant to

SANDY'S LOVE

do most of the driving himself, but had no objections to take along Peether to see to the 'horse-beast,' to clean the 'cyar,' and generally to keep guard when they wanted to go on excursions.

'If ye will go over to Rathlin,' said the red-headed Chief of the Larne Hotel, 'sure never such a welcome will the island have seen since they cried 'Shlainte' to Robert the Bruce, for fair gladness to be shut of him.'

Thus it was arranged, and Peether, when he heard of it, could not contain himself for joy. Two bouquete of equal size adorned the table next morning and there was even one for Sandy, which he had no idea what to do with.

'Where does the boy get all these flowers?' said Sandy to the head waiter.

'Hist,' said the man behind his hand, with a great air of secrecy; 'no, 'tis not from the hotel garden. Peether takes an early morning turn with a bit av a ladder and a pair of scissors. He kapes to the gravel walks, and the rich folk from Belfast never so much as misses them. Besides cutting and trimming is good for rose-trees, as I have always heard.'

It was not till long afterwards that Sandy divulged the secret of the bouquets which the girls had received as a pretty compliment from the management of the hotel.

'Divil a bit,' said the gallant man with the red head. 'Tis our Peether who knows what do be owing by true Irishmen to the two prettiest girls betwixt here and the Heads of Kerry!'

'But is it not thieving?' said Sandy.

'Thieving— is ut? No, sorr, ye can't stale annything from a Belfast man— not in law ye can't—nor yet in justice—because all he has is stole! Ivery

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Donegal lad knows that, and it was in the holy sea of Killybegs that they dipped the first dirt off me. They called me after Rory O'Moore McCabe, of the blood royal av Ulster, so what can a man do but take his own again from the black blood av Belfast?—though I will own they have wan daicent hotel there and that is the 'Impairal.'

CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

HOW McCOMIE KEPT THE BRIDGE

Rugged sea edges of Antrim, mighty cliffs falling sheer down into white foam, waves for ever mouthing and tonguing about sullen black rifts and the toothless maws of caverns. Shameless, well-dressed hordes of children—not at all suggesting the poverty of the West and South—who yet followed the jaunting-car vociferously, hanging on the steps, and escaping only from the ready curl of Peether's short-handled Donegal whip.

'T'raw a penny—for a scramble, Then you'll see a bit of fun!'

This was in the main what they shouted. The wise Peether, incited by an indignant Sandy, caused the spectacle of a scramble to be witnessed without payment.

'Go and work,' Sandy called out bitterly, 'what are your folks thinking about not to give you something to do on the farms? I thought they were of Scots blood about here!'

'This pays better,' retorted a smart boy turning handsprings.

'I'll bet a sovereign I'll 'pay' your skin better—hand me your whip, Peether!'

'If yer honour will take my advice,' said Peether, hesitating about handing over the whip, 'ye will let them alone. If ye lashes them, it's stones they would be t'rowin'. Not that that would matter for you and me. The constabulary get actually to miss it whin they pass through a quiet district like Donegal. But

we will be taking ladies along, and 'tis not at us they would be t'rowin' their stones and gobs o' mud—'tis the mud at the ladies and the stones at the horses' legs!'

Sandy settled himself again, grumbling curses on fathers and mothers who did not bring up their children better, but he refused to allow a single copper to be thrown from the 'cyar,' though McComie felt several pennies of V. V.'s burning holes in her pocket. V. V. entirely supported Sandy and thought the fathers and mothers of the 'scrammlers' should be prosecuted, till Peether informed her authoritatively as to the destination of the doles.

'Sure not wan o' thim, mothers nor fathers, will be a cint the better, save an' except the keepin' them out of the house wid their noise. The money goes to Flaming Russell, the gombeen man that keeps the corner sweet shop. And the schoolboard— why, that's mostly their own fathers, or else men that the gombeen man has lent money to. The Flamer do be compulsory officer, but is a man going to interfere wid his own till, to pamper up a lot av School inspectors let loose from Dublin Castle?'

Peether, though by his uncle's telling, from law-abiding Donegal, instinctively sided with the lawbreakers in what did not concern his own car-load of travellers, for whom the head-waiter of the Lame Hotel had made him responsible.

The pony was put to its pace and they soon left the crowd behind. Like the Rhine bandits of old, these only plundered on their own territories. When they got to the wilder places there was no following at all— besides, the scouts of one detachment told those of another that it was no use pursuing that 'cyar.' It was loaded with 'mane spalpeens' who had

no money, but were prodigal of lashes on bare legs and talked of schools and the compulsory officers. 'A greedy, ignorant lot' was the report general, which would have pleased Sandy if he had heard it. No leg-strength need be wasted upon the likes of them. Even McComie wondered why so many little groups seated by the roadside, at whom she smiled, only scowled back at her. McComie was not accustomed to have her smiles so treated.

By and by they came to the wondrous bridge of Carrick-a-Rede hung spider-fine over a chasm of emptiness with the sea beneath so distant, so blue and so treacherous. It joins the mainland with a little rocky island, whose only purpose appears to be so connected and strung to the mainland as in a game of cat's cradle.

The bridge accommodation was bounded to that of a rope walk, just wide enough for one person, the rope being about the height of the knees, leaving all the vast heavens and the distant sea to fall into at will.

The elder Miss Jones and her brother decided at once that there was not enough on that perilous island to tempt them across, not if it were sown with gold, while Peether of the Sloe-tree shook his head and said that he had promised his mother to risk his life in no such places. Besides he had forgotten to see Father Donnan last Easter for reasons which the good father could not accept. He was therefore 'in morthial sin' and in no condition to affront unnecessary risks. If only he could have half-an-hour with Father Donnan he would 'run acrost and acrost that bridge like a rabbit.'

All these things stirred the soul of McComie.

The day was peaceful, full of the fine lusty

sunshine that goes with ripe corn and the clatter of the reaping-machine. Sandy and V. V. were busy with the making of tea. The ocean made no complaint. It was very many hundred feet below, anyway, well out of the way in its rift of cloven rock, and the Island of Rathlin lay out on the face of it as if enamelled in silver, gold, precious stones, mother-of-pearl and butterflies' wings.

Flat on his stomach lay Peether, with Sandy's field-glasses at his eye, and named the fields in a kind of rapture. He was not particular as to any listener. The fact that he saw James Dickson's cabbage garden 'wid James's own britches himg out to dry' was enough for him. He turned and demanded the price of a like instrument. As soon as he had earned enough money he would buy a better pair, and then be able to see not only Jamie Dickson's other britches but the patch on the seat thereof which was never wanting, being indispensable as a trademark.

Sandy's answer discouraged him. Peether had thought 'about five shillings,' but stood aghast at ten pounds, even when it was explained to him that they were Aitchison's Centilux and the very latest product of that admirable inventor of long-distance field-glasses.

But Sandy's slight movement when answering had brought something within the range of his vision. McComie was striding out manfully along the swaying bridge. Sandy paused in his labour of collecting sticks to make the kettle boil in order to watch her. He dared not call out, for she was walking with an easy alertness which impressed him.

'I did not think she had it in her,' he said to

himself.

And in truth no more she had. She had started out to astonish the others. Presently (she said to herself) she would be seen calmly sitting and smoking one of Sandy's cigarettes (stolen for the purpose), right on the point of the isle. Think how they would gape and what V. V. would say.

So they might have gaped and certainly would have said. Only in midbridge, McComie happened to look down at the sea. Fear seized her in its grip.

Courage, such as she had, took lighter wings even than riches, and flew away.

Down plumped McComie, her legs and shining silver heels swinging in empty space, her hands grasping the rope, and she herself in imminent danger of sliding off altogether.

'Oh, help, help, Sandy!' she wailed, 'come and fetch me back—quick! Or I shall fall five hundred and sixty-one feet—I saw it in the guide book!'

Sandy started immediately, calling upon Peether. But that worthy did not move. His relations with the Keeper of the Keys, per Father Donnan, were not en regle and though willing enough to risk his body, he dared not venture his 'immortal soul.'

'Come on then, V. V.,' Sandy ordered impatiently, 'you will have to step over McComie. If I do that, it will make the bridge swing dangerously. Oh, the little pestiferous wretch!'

'I could...' But in the presence of persons male V. V. did not state what she would have gladly done to McComie. However, it was a word that took rhyme with 'bank,' also 'tank,' and had an American flavour about it.

Meanwhile McComie was screaming like a parrar keet and the bridge was swaying with her efforts

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before ever Sandy and V. V. set foot upon it.

'Keep still, McComie,' said the voice of Sandy, 'we are coming.'

'Oh, keep the bridge still,' she wailed, the silver heels twinkling, as over the verge of the abyss her black-stockinged legs seemed to be running a race upon nothing. 'Do keep it still. If I had known it would wobble so, I should never have come!'

With one hand on the guide-rope and the other behind him to hold V. V.'s hand Sandy progressed towards McComie while the bridge of Carrick-a-Rede swung desperately.

'Oh, Sandy, I thought you could do everything,' cried McComie, 'and you can't stop a little bridge like this from swinging.'

'Lean back and take hold of the other side,' commanded Sandy. And McComie was so surprised that she obeyed. Then V. V. grasped the same rope, guided herself by it, and the movement immediately grew easier.

'You see you could when you wanted to,' said McComie reproachfully, 'and yet you left me all this time to suffer.'

'You wretched little,' began V. V., but Sandy immediately said, 'Hush, V. V.!' And V. V. hushed.

'Now step over her as lightly as you can. Keep hold of my hand. Now!'

Together they raised McComie to her feet, green and white with terror. She clung desperately to Sandy and came near to overturning all three into the depths. V. V. bit her lip to keep from boxing McComie's ears.

'Now march, McComie,' said Sandy, 'keep hold of my coat.'

'But suppose your coat should come off?' that

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bold adventuress fretted. 'It might, you know.'

'Nonsense,' said Sandy, 'well, there's my hand and arm—they won't come off, and V. V. will keep you steady behind.'

'But the sea—the sea—it's so far down, and nothing but a rope to hinder us from falling, and I feel all full of warm water—my heart and things all wobbling about in it. I never felt like this on Leith Pier!'

They sidled slowly off after binding up McComie's eyes, with the movement of a crab that has lost most of its limbs. But they got safely to land, where McComie, warned by the rasp in V. V.'s voice, conceived that the best thing she could do was promptly to faint away in somebody's embrace,

'Oh, give her to me,' said Peether, running up, 'I'll hold her in me arrums. I don't mind that sort of deadly sin—Father Donnan can say what he likes.'

'Get away!' cried Sandy roughly.

And V. V., with difficulty restraining her anger at McComie's exploit, set about the recovering of the voluntarily unconscious and overbold adventuress.

After several attempts at restoration, McComie opened eyes that brimmed with tears and said, 'Oh, Sandy, don't let V. V. be angry with me! She always does just what she ought and is right always, but when I saw that bridge hanging there and none of you going across, I just could not help it. It seemed so easy and so splendid, and I stole one of your cigarettes to smoke—but I suppose I can't now—where none of you could have got near enough to stop me!'

The apology was so slight and betokened so little real sorrow for all the anxiety she had caused, that Sandy had perforce to laugh. But being sure that he

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was already gained, McComie's eyes sought those of V. V. In them she saw nothing which betokened forgiveness. So promptly McComie retreated to her second line of defence, and burst into floods of tears—tears falling dark and heavy—which, when she looked up, made her eyes big and glorious like a stormy sunset.

But V. V. simply said, 'Go away, Sandy— take Peter with you—right out of sight over the ridge yonder!'

'Oh, no, no!' said McComie, apprehensively, 'stay, Sandy, I might feel it all come over me again!'

'No, you won't,' said V. V. firmly; 'be off, Sandy, and take that Caliban with you!'

Sandy marched Peether off, and beyond the ridge, on the horizon line of the great plain on which they looked down, they waited, Sandy marvelling what were the arguments which V. V. was using to bring McComie to a sense of her sinful condition.

It was a wet-eyed, somewhat panting, but altogether radiant McComie who came to summon them.

'I am better now,' she said, 'V. V. has forgiven me!'

But somehow Sandy was aware that McComie had only stated the result, without having dilated upon the details of the process by which that result had been attained.

On the way down McComie confided to Sandy, 'I am always going to be good now, Sandy— always—always—always!'

But Sandy had his doubts

CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE

'THE WEARIN' O' THE GREEN'

Above the Giant's Causeway they came upon a fine hotel in the style of a Georgian mansion. And in fact it belonged to a certain Mr. Marcus Sanderson, one of the county magnates. It was an afternoon of rain when they got there, but Sandy had seen to it that their rooms were reserved. So after the girls had 'changed' and all of them had gone down to the drawing-room, they learned a little about the delightful freedom of Irish manners.

Mr. Sanderson, the owner, and his house party had driven over for lunch at his own hotel, and were now spending the afternoon in dance and song, including any well-seeming guests with the cordiality of old acquaintances.

'Come and have some tea,' was the invitation which came from half-a-dozen ladies all speaking at once. 'What a long and wet drive you must have had from Cushendall.'

From the first there was no doubt about the popularity of McComie, and the elder ladies thought no worse of V. V. for her little spice of reserve. She was English and therefore it was to be expected of her. Soon all knew that the party consisted of these three, V. V., McComie and Sandy, with the marvellous Peether of the Black-Sloe as supermunerary driver. McComie wove romances out of the least thing which had happened to them, and with her tempest-tossed hair and thunder-cloudy eyes, she soon drew a circle about her.

Of V. V., with her little air of seeing through all men-things, and her charming attention to whatever the women of the party said to her, they said, 'She has the air of a married woman. She reminds me a little of Lady Lithgow—no, I think she is liker Mrs. Willie Applethwaite. I am sure I have seen a picture of her in one of the papers.'

And this, indeed, was likely enough.

Presently Mrs. Sanderson, a rosy, comfortable lady in unrustling black with the most contagious laugh in the world, came and asked the girls to sing. Many had sung before them, but had either been shy or had pronounced their words without any 'carry.' V. V. accepted modestly and sat down to the piano with her usual air of pleasant languor. She motioned to an extremely disgusted McComie, who was keeping about her a delighted and emulous circle of boys, making them feel summer-like all over with the ease and noble warmth of the Gulf Stream itself.

Nevertheless McComie came, conferred a moment, and then the great song of 'Magali' from Mireille began to ring through the long drawing-room. Everywhere conversation hushed. Wonder, admiration, marvel followed. Few had ever heard of Mireille. None at all of Mistral— but the atmosphere of 'dance and Provencal song' proved of more than Keatsian passion and intensity.

The song ended. There was no applause, no thanks, a tense waiting only which broke into a muttered rumbling of 'Oh, please, go on!' when V. V. half turned from the piano. Then it was Calve's song in the third act of the *Cavalleria Rusticana*. McComie sang this alone and V. V. brought out every note of her full throbbing contralto.

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Then all suddenly the two girls darted into 'The Wearin' o' the Green.'

It was an Orange gathering, the elite of Antrim—Sandersons, Hills, Hamiltons, Butlers, McNaughtons, and Craigs without counting. There was a kind of gasp. Then all knew—the women knew first—that the girls had no idea that they were not paying the company the greatest compliment in the world. Also, because at the bottom of every Irish heart there is a love for that melody—sneaking often but deep-seated—sympathy grew upward like a flower. After all, the most patriotic Orangeman does not really love the English.

The ringing appeal of V. V.'s wonderful soprano and the sense of tears in McComie's voice, to which the open southern Scottish accent lent flavour, caused furtive handkerchiefs to be passed round. The men watched the singers and cursed themselves for being touched. But the glamour of their own Ireland was upon them. They heard the tramp of armed men drilling on wind-swept headlands, the shamrock in every hat. They heard the keening wail of women across wide valleys—women mourning for the dead that were theirs. The winds blew soft and wet in their faces from the western 'rainy airt.' After all it was Ireland—Ireland. And Grand Masters of Orange lodges and stalwart Presbyterians of the Banner of Blue, to whom the words of the song were anathema, tingled rejoicefully as they felt themselves Irish and not English, and thanked God therefor.

The wailing rose into a chaimt of victory, and with one voice that 'No Surrender' company, whose forefathers had stood unbroken at Enniskillen and behind the walls of Derry, proclaimed its desire and full intent:

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'To ask a Mother's blessing from a strange and distant land, Where the cruel cross of England shall never more be seen, And where, please God, we'll live and die still wearin' o' the Green.

It was a great moment, when McComie, smiling irresistibly through her tears, turned to that company of Last Ditchers with an invitation to repeat the first verse as a chorus.

So while the tears ran down her cheeks and she sang —like distant thunder dominating April showers, the men of Antrim rent their throats with the affirmation that their motherland was in their opinion:

'The most distressful country that ever yet was seen, They're hanging men and women there, for wearin' o' the Green!'

There was no more singing after that. The women were a little awed. Such music they had never heard before. What had made their heart-strings thrill? The men, less sensitive to sound, wondered that they might not next be asked if they 'Feared to speak of Ninety-Eight,' or to give their opinion of the 'Shan van Vogt,' to rejoice with Rory O'More, that:

'On the green hills of Ulster the white cross waves high,' or to designate themselves or their friends as:

'The Meciless Scots, with their creeds and their sword, With war in their bosoms and peace in their words'

All which, though of little matter to the women, might be awkward for them at election time, in the next Grand Lodge, or in the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland—that is, if the news got about. So they talked to each other in the spirit of the national anthem, 'confounding politics,' while V. V. and McComie, the latter still tear-stained (and

both innocent), were received back into the company of the women.

'Oh, I hope,' said McComie, 'I do hope you don't mind. That song always does make me make a fool of myself— but when I sing 'The Floo'ers o' the Forest,' I simply cry quarts.'

They forgave her promptly— nay, took her to their hearts for the very deliciousness of her mistake in thinking that as 'The Floo'ers' was the lament of all Scotland after Flodden, so 'The Wearing o' the Green' is that of a downtrodden and undivided Ireland.'

After a while, the rain ceasing, they went out on the terrace which looks on the great plain of Antrim, and marked the farms, and farm-towns, and villages sending up the blue reek of the afternoon 'drop of tea.' From which, cinctured with youth and with a respectable following of men old enough to know better, McComie descended to the now deserted Causeway. The rain had stopped the tourists, and they had the place to themselves.

Also there McComie tormented the 'boys,' and that to such an extent that quiet Mr. Sanderson climbing up out of a sphere where he had been made to feel he was not wanted, into the pleasant click of V. V.'s knitting-needles, bent over and whispered to her so low that nobody could hear:

'If you have any influence over your sister, Miss Jones, I wish you would use it to keep her from getting engaged to more than three of my nephews at one time.'

CHAPTER TWENTY SIX

McCOMIE'S KNIGHT PALADIN

The next day some of their new acquaintances called to take them to play golf at Portrush and to lunch at the Golf Hotel. Sandy, being inland born, had more length of drive and good-will than strict science, but he went to look after McComie. Now McComie fallaciously stated that she could play a little— for on Leith Links and within reach of half a dozen of the best greens in the country, she had practically been born with a golf-club in her hand.

She took one glance at the lady players and then said: 'I will play with some of you men. Clubs?— Oh, a cleek and a driver— that's all I need. Where is the shop?'

She did the first hole in a good medium four and then settled down. She was three up at the turn, to the delight of 'the boys,' who carefully concealed from her the fact that she was beating the club champion on his own ground.

'Is that what you call playing a little?' said Laurence Perkins, when McComie, with a long slow sweep of her cleek, holed a sixteen-foot putt on roughish ground.

'Oh,' said McComie, 'you have only got to think out beforehand how it is going to roll. See, I will show you.'

And she repeated the dose.

'I say, Miss Jones, why are you not lady champion?' said Laurence Perkins, after the lady was dormy six and he was hoping for a half at the

next hole to ease matters a little.

'Oh,' said McComie lightly, 'I do not care to play with ladies—a good caddy if I can get one is best, and a man if he is young enough to be up to his game and sensible enough not to make love to me through the greens!'

'I should think you will get very few to satisfy you on both points,' said the injured Perkins, who had just lost his seventh hole after a bold struggle. 'At least you cannot find any fault with me on the last count.'

'No,' said McComie, flashing her victorious mid-oceanic eyes on him. 'But it's never too late to mend!'

'McComie!' Sandy threw the warning over his shoulder. He was talking with three of McComie's hosts as they walked in. They were kind boys, too, and left McComie to her defeated enemy as a sort of consolation prize.

'All right, Sandy,' said his adopted sister. 'I forgot you were there!'

'We were both a bit off our games today,' McComie went on soothingly. 'Have you been round this course before?—I haven't, and indeed I have not had a game worth playing for months and months. There are some quite small boys at Musselburgh and St. Andrews who are miracles for keeping a fellow's game up!'

'And what would have been the difference if you had been at the top of your game?' Larry Perkins asked impatiently.

'Oh,' she answered lightly, 'I hardly know. For your course I must really buy a mashie if I am to play again, but V. V. will object to the expense. And I hate lots of clubs. A good caddy is for playing with,

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not for carrying ironmongery! But I daresay I shall make it five or six strokes less if I get staying on awhile!

'Then you will come precious near beating the record,' said the defeated medallist. 'Braid made that two years ago.'

'Jamie Braid—oh, yes,' said McComie. 'I used to play with him when I was a small girl.'

The local champion whistled in a mellow fashion, and recognized that he had caught a tartar.

'Of course if I could only play in my gym-dress I could make a decenter show. But skirts are such a bother!'

'Must be!' growled Larry Perkins, the weight of 'seven up' heavy on his mind, and thinking also of the chaff he would have to endure from loving comrades.

Sandy and McComie were entertained at the Golf Club Hotel, and, having so many men all to herself, there is little doubt that McComie would have abused the situation. Only she knew that the eye of Sandy was upon her. She recked nothing of Sandy personally, but she had heard V. V. make him swear to tell her all. Such a mean trick! For she knew that, solemnized by that oath, Sandy would execute to the letter without fear or favour.

So there was nothing left for the unfortunate girl but to behave. The which, betwixt the more and the less (or, nautically, 'Less-or-more-by-less') she did.

V. V. was meantime earning quite another sort of golden opinions, and thinking whether Sandy would really be able to cope with McComie, or if she ought to have gone herself. She had, however, sworn Sandy by the most sacred oath known to her: 'If I don't tell you the whole truth and nothing but the

truth, may we never be married!

This was really putting Sandy on the rack, and V. V. was well aware of it. Because she knew that it would hurt him grievously to 'tell on' McComie even to herself. But—she comforted herself with the thought—she knew no other way to make that yomig person stand in reasonable awe of her warnings when removed from her eye.

It was a treat to V. V. to be perfectly quiet in the comer of the verandah between a book, a half-worked pair of wristlets for Sandy's mother and the company's field-glasses. Nice women came, sat down beside her and cooed in low Irish voices. They asked no questions as, across the channel, most people in hotels would have done.

But that was part of the beautiful Irish manners which cannot offend— unless you differ about religion, and then it is a shillaleh in the back of your head.

One lady from Derry lifted V. V.'s left hand in a moment of page-turning, glanced at her sympathetically, and laid it down without a question. Sandy's ring was upon it.

Presently V. V. set out upon a little walk which led along the cliffs, where she found suddenly that the necks of broken bottles and other natural products of tripperdom made difficult the path. This was not like the Scotland she had left. She remembered the beautiful cleanliness of the North Berwick to Tantallon walk by the cliffs—the old path through the Aberdour woods before the railway came, that across the Pentlands by the Compensation Ponds—all kept like a nobleman's pleasaunce.

But finally, knowing that she could not have

everything, she abandoned what in her mind she dubbed (A la Sandy) 'the Avenue de la Grande Feech-Feech,' and found her way to the shore and into the famous caves called the Wet and the Dry.

Down there, right in V. V.'s route if she had gone on her way, a tall young man, dark and studious-looking, was rescuing a stout old gentleman with prominent eyes from deadly peril. The old man in the ventripotent shooting-coat and spindling knickerbockers was Mr. Scoville of London. The young man discreet of wisdom and coimsel was Mr. Armytage McGhie.

V. V. was still on the heights, picking her way with disgusted care among the post-quaternary relics of tripperdom, when the interview reached its climax.

'But they all call themselves by the same name,' said the elder; 'it should be allowed in no decent country. I will write to Lady Balmaghie. It is a case for the police!'

The tall young man looked long at the famous Mr. Scoville, a name much to the fore in subscriptions for public charities, but who in his inner man was copiously devoid of all private charity.

'I happen to know,' he said, with a certain impressive firmness, 'that they have their own reasons for doing so—aright and proper reasons. Besides, I never heard them call each other anything but 'V. V.,' 'McComie,' and 'Sandy.' And speaking of Sandy, do you know, if I were you, Mr. Scoville, I should say nothing about this either to Lady Balmaghie or to any one else. For my own part (and I do not speak without knowledge), there is no breach of correction.'

'But Walkerburn told me,' began Scoville, trying

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to get away from the eyes of the young man which weired upon him.

'Never mind about Walkerburn—I shall take care of Walkerburn,' he said. 'Most likely he lied!'

'But they are no more...'

'Never mind about what they are, Mr. Scoville. Say nothing over at Sanderson's. First of all, it would not look well to start a quarrel—and, moreover, a hotel is not a private house. Say to yourself, 'Is it any business of mine?' This young man Pryde, besides being a fine scholar, as I told you, is not to be trifled with. I have known him throw two men, each bigger than you, through a first-floor window. And the cliffs hereabouts are much higher than that. I should advise you to go home by the beach—and on the way forget all about it!'

Mr. Scoville took the beach road, but on his way he could not help, as he was setting out immediately for Holyhead, revealing the secret of the lack of immediate blood relationship among the Jones family at present staying at the hotel. He chose as confidants Steve Hill and his regimental comrade, H. F. (known as 'Hellfire') de Tracy. The first being a Hill, merely said a bad word and inquired what the devil it mattered to them—or (he added when the traitor had vanished) to Old Paunchy. As for the girls, they had sung at a hotel sing-song and sung dashed well too, and for the rest—the only sound conclusion was to come and have a drink.

But H. F.— not to repeat his warmer cognomen more often than is necessary— would listen to no advice.

'Come on, Hill,' he said, 'we will go and have a lark with those girls—I know their sort!'

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'I bet you don't!' said Hill; 'but any way I'm going for a drink and I'll come and look after you so far.'

That a De Tracy (even H. F.) should not behave as a gentleman was altogether out of Steve's conception.

It was hardly their fault and in no way hers, that they met the said victorious McComie, marching along the beach hotelwards, whistling 'Garryowen' and carrying her clubs over her shoulder with the assurance of a perfect St. Andrews caddie.

She had dismissed her attendant swains in order to sharpen their ardours, and had sent Sandy on ahead to take a swim before going in to find V. V. and dinner.

'I beg your pardon,' said Steve Hill, 'Miss Jones, I think. I had the pleasure of hearing you sing at my uncle's party up in the hotel!'

'Oh, I did,' said McComie, who as to introductions never stood much on form and ceremony when she was satisfied as to the 'niceness' of the introducees. And of course Mr. Sanderson's friends were bound to be 'nice of the nicest.'

'Come and have supper with me at the 'Imperial,' said Henry Farmond de Tracy. 'I have seen you act in London, you know, and I'll wager that Jones was not your name then!'

Slow to take offence, McComie only smiled with the exact toss of her heavy hair which Sandy, apt at words descriptive, called her 'tree-top in the wind' smile.

'Most of us in our profession have two names—one for the public and the other for those who know and like us!'

'Tell me that one!' said young Farmond, taking a step towards McComie. The girl saw a couple of

figures in the distance and recognized—someone she had been thinking of a good deal. The other was V. V. Without a moment's hesitation she took to her heels and ran towards them. They were half-way up the cliff and their backs were turned. But when McComie arrived, hot and panting, she could hardly find breath to cry, 'Oh, Armytage! Oh, V. V.!'

And then, between laughing and crying, she told them the tale. She was a fool to be so easily frightened. Of course they did not mean any harm, and one of them was as nice as could be. He was Steve Hill, she knew, and a friend of Kit Sykes's—belonged to the same regiment; and the other—very likely he did not mean any harm either. And through her tears she repeated the insolent invitation to supper at the 'Imperial,' and the words used about having more names than one when off the stage.

She did not notice that the brow of the dark young man became very dark indeed, nor did she hear (what V. V. caught) a malediction upon 'that infernal old scoundrel Scoville,' which was worthy even of Sandy.

Then the two young men came up—Steve Hill a little shamefaced, but Farmond de Tracy facing the matter with a kind of impish sang-froid.

Then when V. V. was on the point of telling them in bitterest tones what she thought of their conduct, suddenly and without warning, the quiet dark young man by her side took the command.

'I think you had better see Miss McComie home,' he said to V. V. 'She is a little fatigued. I will stay with these gentlemen.'

And V. V., thankful for once that she had not been walking the cliffs with Sandy, obeyed. Sandy was a Viking and immensely dependable, but he was

the most violent peacemaker in the world. Sandy knew nothing of half-measures, and she might not have got enough time to quiet him before 'These gentlemen' were over the White Cliffs.

She led McComie away and that young woman went, not too willing, and with many a backward glance—one of which in the long run really did lead to her seeing something.

Left alone with McComie's two 'followers' (after the French phrase), Armytage, who knew them both, invited them courteously to return upon their footsteps. The young ladies, he explained, were under his charge. He had known them in Scotland. Steve Hill lifted his hat and apologized.

'Sorry,' he said, 'it was all that old beast Scoville. I think I shall go and look up Kit Sykes. He is a, decent sort.'

But not of this breed was Farmond de Tracy of the warm pseudonym. Bitter, restless, ever tugging at his little Kaiser moustache and fondling his corseted wasp's waist, he stuck to the path of the evil-tongued.

'I saw you eyeing the one with the golfing tackle,' he sneered. 'I suppose you want her for yourself. That cat won't jump with me.'

There was only one reply to that, and the left arm of the dark young man suddenly extended itself with remarkable velocity till it came into violent contact with the orbit of the speaker's eye, bruising the eyebrow, and in a less degree the knuckles, where these encountered each other.

H. F. went down like a log and did not come to till Armytage had pulled his head about a good deal in a convenient rock pool, to the great astonishment of the little green crabs. The sting of the healing salt

finally brought him round, and he departed, threatening that all was not over between them.

'Don't be a cad, old man,' said Armytage easily, 'and when you are, don't get sulky when the fact is pointed out to you. All right— whenever you like and how you like. Only I should advise you to keep your mouth shut in this neighbourhood.'

While Armytage was kneeling on the edge of the pool, wrapping up his hand in a wet handkerchief and wondering how long it would take him to get round to the chemist's in Portrush for some sticking plaster — behold, Kit Sykes and his comrade Steve Hill were standing over him.

CHAPTER TWENTY SEVEN

‘TO ALL WHOM IT MAY CONCERN’

‘Ho, I say, what's this?’ Kit Sykes inquired of his kinsman. ‘We met that young snorter Farmond, and not a word could we get out of him. He swore at us. He was holding one wet handkerchief to his eye. You have got another on your knuckles. I suppose we may put two and two together—the eye and the knuckles, I mean!’

‘If you like,’ said Armyage calmly. ‘I'm off to get some sticking-plaster at the chemist's in Portrush. If you are going that way, I'm with you!’

‘No need,’ said Eat Sykes, pulling from the pocket of his Norfolk jacket one of those useful rolls of temporary skin which all golfers ought to carry.

‘Good for you. Kit,’ cried Armytage; ‘then, after all, I shall be in time for dinner up at the hotel.’

‘At the hotel? And what the mischief are you going to do up at the hotel?’

Armytage, still plastering himself with Kit's provision of temporary skin, looked one long black look at his cousin.

‘Oh, yes.—‘What—the— hem —is that to me?’ and all that,’ continued Kit Sykes. ‘But after all, my dear chap, people are good enough to say that you are engaged to Lily, my cousin, you know. So don't get in a wax.’

‘Oh, I thought we had settled that long ago! I never was and never will be!’

‘And then there are the things that old Scoville swears to I suppose.’

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'Suppose nothing,' said Armytage, holding him with an eye almost as dangerous as Sandy's own; 'to suppose nothing makes for peace in families!'

Kit Sykes whistled softly.

'Two champions!' he said. 'One apiece. I never knew that you were a bruiser, Armie. I should like to put on the gloves with you some day. The other brute is too big for me!'

There was a laden silence for a space and then Kit Sykes resumed. 'But what's all this about their travelling round together? Scoville says they all have taken the name of Jones.'

'Now listen,' said Armytage, straightening himself up, 'this is no condemned business of yours or mine. But as you're not a bad sort, Kit' ('Thank 'ee,' said Kit), 'nor you, Steve—and as you can help a bit, I'll tell you what I know. Neither of you have got to think and say the worst just to get square on his own age and ugliness like that old swine Scoville.'

'The fact is, Miss V. V. has just completed a long and anxious tour with her own company. She was a bit off colour, and though Sandy and she were engaged to be married when they were still quite poor, V. V. wouldn't let him burden himself with a wife till he had paid off everything.'

'Queer girl—queerer chap!' said Kit, thinking of his creditors, of whom he did not think except when they kept themselves in the foreground by their own unaided efforts.

'And V. V. put all the money she had and all she made into the business. She is a proper partner, you understand, deeds signed, lawyers and all that sort of thing. And as soon as the firm stands clear the partners are to marry!'

'Kings' elephants, if I were the chap, I'd falsify the

balance sheets!’

‘So should I,’ admitted Armytage. ‘I think there would be justification.’

‘Ample!’ said Kit. ‘Jove, what eyes!’

‘And what about the other— your spot-stroke-barred girl, I mean?’

Armytage flushed slightly.

‘Miss McComie is a girl of good people, a sort of cousin of mine and more distantly of yours. Her mother was an Armytage of Kenmore. But her father got married again, so Sandy and V. V. adopted her, or she adopted them. I don't know which. If you want details, apply to headquarters.’

‘Armie, I say,’ cried Kit, holding his hands above his head, ‘please kick me— kick me hard—oh, hard! You help, Steve. I'll stand it and never wince. It would do me good. That infernal old Scoville. To think that I have been such a . . . cad. Oh, kick me!—an Armytage of Kenmore and your cousin! I'm suffering to be kicked. I sha'n't be happy till I get it— no use breaking your other set of knuckles on such a cur. Take your boot, Armie— it will do my soul good!’

This was the conversion of Kit Sykes in so far as the girls were concerned. To reconcile himself to Sandy was more difficult. Sandy was militant and aggressive. He did not invite tenderness from others, indeed, contrariwise.

‘I'm glad about that black eye,’ Kit meditated. ‘I wonder what H. F. will do about it. He can't call you out, I suppose, even if we are in Ireland. But it will be a beauty tomorrow. I shall call, for the clean joy of it, and present my sympathies! But I say, what about the big fellow Pryde, the all-round author chap? What was all the fuss about Eleanor Sykes?’

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Did he not behave rather infernally? Balmaghie, I know, thought so.'

'No,' said Armytage, slowly but with an impressive gravity. 'I'm not an 'Enquire Within upon Everything,' but I was mixed up in that and the fact is that 'Nore met Sandy Pryde quite young— before he was a celebrated author. Then when she saw him again, I expect she had a bit of fever, or the girls' variety of 'touch of the sun' upon her. And she talked a lot of rot—same as I have heard you do, Kit.'

'Yes, last time I thought I was the boxing kangaroo at the old Aquarium and I wanted to take on Bumpsher, my revered C. O.!'

'Exactly,' continued Armytage, 'well, after working herself into a state and coming upon young Pryde who was out for a cool, she went and flung herself in the river—the Lily Beds—deuced dangerous at any time, but on a moonlight night— well, at any rate, Sandy Pryde fished her out. But it was a deuced near thing for them both. And then, of course when we got her home, she babbled, till Balmaghie and my lady misunderstood— and for that matter so did I. Oh, I am not setting up a claim to any special farsightedness. I behaved just as much like a fool as even you could have done.'

'Only I set myself to find out. And what I discovered was that Sandy (he's my friend, so I have a right to call him that) had never spoken a dozen words to Eleanor, except when he saw the two girls up to town once from their aunt's house, and made the journey as pleasant for them as any decent man can.'

'Yes, I daresay 'Nore was a little taken with him— especially after, but nothing to hurt. Fellows can't go

chucking men out of French windows two at a time without girls getting down on their knees to pray to them. I never was in the business myself— (no, H. F. doesn't count)— but I know that much. Anyway, Kit, I am sure that the Sykes admiration won't interfere with any little game of yours.'

'Lily would not have done it,' said Kit Sykes thoughtfully.

'Perhaps not, but of the two I prefer 'Nore,' said Armytage.

'You prefer 'Nore?' gasped Kit. 'Why, I thought — everybody thought.'

'Don't think, Kit, it isn't in your line—especially don't think what other people think. Families can't arrange everything for a fellow unto the third and fourth generations. You are going to be abominably rich. I am going to be a peer. Neither one nor the other of us can help that. Our people can't help it either or they would— at least, in my case. That's why Balmaghie is saving up every penny for little Augusta. I don't blame him, but the fact that he does it allows me to choose my friends for myself, and Sandy Pryde, author and general parcel deliverer, is the most amusing man I know. Lady B? Oh, well, she hates me, anyway—is bound to— as if it were my fault that that poor little girlie was not born a boy.'

Armytage was silent a while, and then changing the subject, added: 'I say, Kit, I think it will be better for you to tell that old brute Scoville that his club window at the corner of St. James' Street will be the best place for him for some months.'

'But what about their calling themselves 'Jones'?' Kit was pursuing his fixed idea. He had always been Kit Sykes all his life and did not understand the

needs of other people, who might want to call themselves 'Jones' for perfectly legitimate reasons. It was in Armytage's mind to adduce the example of royalty, which always travels under a pseudonym. Instead he told the plain truth.

'Well,' he said, 'they simply tossed up for the choice of name. It had to be one of three. V. V. won.'

'Oh, sporting!' cried Kit Sykes with admiration. And then he squinted knowingly across at his cousin.

'I say,' he queried sharply, 'how do you come to know that? Who told you?'

Armytage McGhie coloured and answered slowly: 'Well, if it is any business of yours, Miss McComie told me!'

Kit Sykes whistled softly, 'There was a Lover and his Lass!'

'Sits the wind in that quarter?' he went on. 'But who am I to blame you? Well, I suppose I may take it for granted that any decent fellow may now come between little Lily Sykes and the wind of your nobility, without your blacking their eyes, as you did just now for Master Farmond of the Hellfire?'

Armytage nodded assent with his usual gravity.

'But,' he said, 'if you will permit me to express an advice—you have already given or implied a good many to me—if I were you, I should stick to 'Nore. She is emotional, certainly, but the first baby would cure that, and she would not keep bossing you all the time like Lily! Nor yet be everlastingly pestering you with what her mother, or Miss Glendinning, or Lady B., all thought of your behaviour as a spouse! 'Nore would have one grand flare-up per year or thereby, and be done with it for three hundred and sixty-four days. But, of course, you will do as you

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like, same as I should.'

'You can bet your boots I will!' said Kit Sykes explosively.

CHAPTER TWENTY EIGHT

MARRIAGE AFTER HONEYMOON

Sandy,' said V. V., the day after they had got home, 'we have had our honeymoon trip, and it is strict business for us now for ever so long. There is not much to clear now, and we could look after and bully McComie better if we were married. Can you be ready for tomorrow?'

'Present!' the bridegroom in prospective reported himself, standing up and saluting as they had taught him to do in the Black University Volunteers where he made a short sojourn under the colours in the city of Edinburgh.

'You don't mind, Sandy?' said V. V.

'Well, hardly a bit!' said Sandy cheerfully.

'It is a step we ought to take,' said V. V., 'in the interests of McComie.'

'Oh, bother McComie!' quoth Sandy; 'it is a step as you say. But nobody can say that we did not look long enough before we leaped.'

'Whom shall we have?' said V. V., as if it were an afternoon tea-party.

'Well, that's pretty clear,' said Sandy, to whom all things were instantly clear. 'For you there's McComie, of course, and, if you like, the landlady, Mrs. Larkins. She's a gossip of a kindly sort, and we must have some means of telling the neighbourhood. Then as you are to be married in an Episcopal Church, we had better have Armytage McGhie as master of ceremonies. Then there is Brother John, for the sake of the home folk, and Mr.

Shieldhill. I'll call and ask him this morning. We owe him as much as that. Rob Gilston?— No, works can't go on with both heads away, but we can ask him to supper. But, I say, V. V., what made you change your mind about that home of your own, and waiting no end of a time?'

'Oh, I don't know,' said V. V. thoughtfully, 'all that bother about names when we were in Ireland and having to explain. Besides, I kept thinking all the time how much nicer it would have been— if— if...'

'I know,' said Sandy the Wise, 'I thought that part of it would come over you some day.'

He knelt beside her.

'Now, V. V.,' he said, 'kiss me as you did before we got to thinking of paying off motors, and buying and selling horses, and being business partners and all that—shall we go into the old summer-house out there where you watched me clean the delivery-tricycle—oh, immense ages ago, when you really loved me?'

V. V. opened out her arms, and there came a kind of imequal sobbing laugh into her throat. 'No, you silly Sandy—I shall kiss you here.'

And during the celebration McComie came in, gazed a moment in speechless wonder, till she found words: 'Well, after all you have said to me, you two are— yes, you are!'

And McComie vanished, to be seen no more till supper-time.

They were married the next day in their best Sunday things, only Armytage distinguishing hhnself by the magnificence of his attire, and escorting McComie as if she were made of biscuit de Sevres and might be expected to break at any moment. Yet he knew better, for he had seen her

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play golf and turn unexpected hand-springs merely because she felt glad.

And in the evening they carried off all the men at Tenterden Road for supper to Lyons's newly-opened branch, where V. V. had arranged for the largest room. Sandy introduced his bride and the men cheered. All the married men had a sovereign for their wives (V. V. said laughingly that she would call and see that it had been duly delivered and by no means forgotten), and each of the unmarried carried away ten shillings.

McComie was there and sat with Armytage, creating desperation in the eyes of apprentice mechanics each time that her stormy eyes perused their ranks. The girls sang. They played on an imported piano, and regretted that there was not room for a dance. But Sandy suggested a yearly 'Wives' and Sweethearts' Ball,' which would be far better. And to this V. V. made him pledge his word. They sang 'Poor Tom Bowling,' 'The British Grenadiers,' 'Scots Wha Hae,' and the 'Flowers o' the Forest,' together with 'Boyne Water' and 'The Wearing o' the Green' with great pith and impartiality.

When all was over, it took Armytage and McComie so long to find their way to 151, Kandahar Road, that Sandy and V. V. had to sit up for them. And on any other night, McComie would have been called upon to justify the use of her time. Afterwards McComie sighed as she thought how easily she had got off.

'It's being married that makes the difference,' she thought. 'Other nights V. V. would have stopped and lectured me for half an hour, but tonight it's only 'Is that you, dear?' And as it was me, 'Well then, good-

night! And here I am all ready for bed in five minutes after the key rattled in the Chubb lock.'

Again McComie sighed and regarded a misspent past with disapproval.

'I suppose it does sweeten the temper,' she meditated. 'If I had been married, I should never have slapped my stepmother's face. Oh, what a little wretch I was in those days. I sha'n't ever tell— whoever it may be. He was very nice tonight, but maybe he did not mean half he said. We shall see tomorrow. He said he had been a loafer and was not worthy of me—I wonder what he will do. At any rate, he did not talk silly like all the little boys. Oh, I shall never put up with a boy again— who could, after . . . And,'

But under no other name did McComie refer to the marvel who had induced this quite recent disgust for boys and their ways. McComie and her 'fighting tail' had been a frequent sight in Ireland, right down to the last view they had had of that dearest of islands as they passed out of Dublin Bay.

She had brought back with her quite a stock of verses, each addressed to her as some new incarnation of beauty.

'Ankle-deep in sand elastic, Alice aroon, All a-wander under a slow, soft moon.

Sucking sticks of candy mastic, Gille machree, Life's partner, heart's heartener, Think of me—only of me, Alice MaComie—Alice ma Chree!'

McComie thought such things original and beautiful at the time. There must be wonderful people in Ireland who could write poetry like that. Of course Sandy could, but he only made fun of it, and these 'boys' never did. Besides, Sandy could do everything. It was no use thinking of anything that

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Sandy could not do— he did not even mind making a fool of himself upon occasion.

The first morning of his married life, Sandy, in a smarter suit than he had allowed himself as a bachelor, found a rather unexpected offer of service awaiting him at the garage in Tenterden Road.

Armytage McGhie was there, diligently employed in an engine-room rig-out, turning out upon the floor the entrails of a motor which needed overhauling.

'Hello, Benedict,' he said, rising from his knees, 'oh, I forgot, I must not talk to the Chief like that— bad for discipline. Can I have a word or two with you in your office?'

'Of course,' said Sandy, wondering what was to come of all this.

They entered the plain, pine-boarded and roughly shelved room which had served Mr. Shieldhill to chmb to fortune. Armytage thrust his hands into his pockets and looked straight at Sandy.

'I want a job,' he said. 'I hate doing nothing, and I do know a lot about motors. I had six months of it in the Avenue de la Grande Arme—De Dion first and then Daimler. I think I can earn a wage after I get into your line of things- anyway, I can make myself useful.'

'But I thought you had plenty of money—estates in Yorkshire, and that sort of thing?'

'Well, I have—they came to me from my people— mother's side chiefly. And I can't help being an earl some day. But what is there for a fellow to do? I've tried most sports, from curate's croquet to airmanship. But there is more solid satisfaction in work— work that you have got to do.'

'Of course, I shall be glad to have you,' said Sandy

as Armytage hesitated— ‘a smart mechanician is not an easy thing to pick up in the motor business. But you will weary of the monotony of it. It is much the same every day—though I can give you a turn into the City if you ever care to drive, or at the distant deliveries— would you care for that? We are taking in all South London with the new cars.’

‘Just wouldn't I? It would suit me down to the ground!’

‘Well, come in to tea tonight, and we can talk it over with V. V. She was my partner before, you know, but now is so to the nth power!’

‘Speaking of partners,’ hazarded Armytage, ‘if you care to have another, I should be glad to put a few thousands in your business—I really don't know what to do with them!’

‘Thank you,’ said Sandy, holding out his hand, ‘that day may come. But in the meantime we are doing about as much as we can hope for till the business develops. When it does we may want to pull down our barns and build greater—and then...’

‘Well, it's there for you, at any rate,’ said Armytage, flushing a little at the difficulty of getting out what he had next to say. Really Sandy and V. V., having paid off everybody, were inclined to stand sole masters within their own house for at least a period— a period which depended upon how the new book succeeded. In it Sandy was going to strike out a new line in literature.

‘I think as one square man talking to another, that I should tell you my motives were a little mixed in coming to you with the proposition I have made.’

‘Oh yes, I know,’ said Sandy the Instinctive, ‘of course they are complicated by McComie—she complicates everything and everybody. If it had not

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been for her, V. V. would not have married me for months. She told me herself that it was only in order that we might the better look after McComie!

Armytage was a good deal taken aback at Sandy's foresight.

'I see I have got among sorcerers and diviners,' he said, 'I hope it is all white magic. But in any case I thought it would not be fair to you if I concealed that I hope to—to—(oh, confound it!)—I hope that Miss McComie will be willing to marry me some day when she sees I am not a loafer and an idle dog!'

'Oh, as for that,' said Sandy, grinning, 'of course you must take your chance. It is not so much getting McComie to promise to marry you, or even leading her to the altar as I showed you how yesterday. But she will need— well, what V. V. and I called a day or two ago, 'bullying'— good, plain, simple bullying.'

'But why— she is the simplest, the best and...'

'Oh, all the adjectives, and all the qualities! But— if you had been with her for as long periods and as constantly as V. V. and I have been, you would know that there never was, and never will be again, such a girl as McComie for getting into scrapes. Her faculty for that amounts to positive genius. And always we have to get her out of them.'

'But,' said Armytage, 'she is all that any sister of yours or mine could be—supposing that we had any?'

'Of course,' said Sandy, 'and more too. She draws love after her like a comet's tail. She attracts like a magnet, and then she clasps her hands and laughs. It is the best of good jokes. Now, tell me honestly, did you ever know McComie—(that is, unless previously drilled by V.V. and imder her eye) do

anything like, say, a girl in your own world?’

Armytage was about to say, ‘But she is of my world’ when he thought of the fallen beech in the moonlight glade before he answered aloud— ‘No, I never did. But that is just why I love her.’

‘Exactly,’ said Sandy emphatically; ‘but do you remember where you are going to place her if you marry her—that is, if she will marry you?’

‘I have thought of that,’ said Armytage, ‘but it will be all right— if she only loves me.’

‘Ah,’ said Sandy, his eyes far off. ‘I wonder?’

‘Well, I can only take my chance,’ cried Armytage, ‘and I’ve taken up enough of your time. Besides, the ‘inwards’ of that car are all over the place. Good-bye till tonight!’

‘Till tonight,’ said Sandy, nodding to his new employee.

CHAPTER TWENTY NINE

THE IMPORTUNATE WIFE

It might be thought that the marriage of Sandy and V. V. made an end of all things. But except in books, marriages seldom do. They start history afresh on a clean page, with a freshly-filled Waterman Ideal handy to write down 'what comes of it.' But what that is to be, you can never foretell.

So Sandy and V. V., McComie and Armytage being in attendance, and Brother John hidden in a backseat, went through with the reception ceremonial at the Kentham Road Presbyterian Kirk. They were welcomed by Mr. Shieldhill, who shook hands with them and wished them both much happiness and success, 'which, as none knows better than I, you amply deserve.'

The white waistcoat (nothing really criminal in a white waistcoat) of Mr. Scoville did not appear. He had forsaken the tabernacle of recent weeks for rear sons which, no doubt, seemed sufficient to himself. He had gone to reside on the other side of the river. But for all that, he knew very well what was going on in Kentham, as the following letter will prove:

'508, Cromwell Road, S. W. 'October 1st, 19—.

'My Dear Lady Balmaghie,

I have been busy, since leaving your comfortable and hospitable mansion, owing to my installation in Cromwell Road. Previous to that I made a short tour in Ireland with the Honourable Farmond de Tracy of the 15th Heavies, but I was there witness to so many things which saddened and disturbed me that

I cut short my holiday and returned here before I had intended.

I should reproach myself if Lord Balmaghie did not know how his heir, Mr. Armytage Glendonwyn McGhie, is supporting with all his power the disgraceful actions of the younger Prydes, whose father is still, I believe, one of your husband's tenants, and a vigorous opponent of the stricter views as to Papal Aggression which we are combating. He is a great stumbling-block in the parish, both politically and ecclesiastically. His son made a disgraceful pilgrimage through Ireland with the two girls of whom we have spoken, all of them passing under the name of Jones! This seems to show what that family is capable of!

It will hardly be believed that under this name they received the hospitality of one of the best-known men in Ireland, Mr. Sanderson of Rathmore. When I intervened, as it was my duty to do, the bandit Pryde threatened to murder me, and I regret to say that your husband's nephew and so-called heir, Mr. Armytage McGhie, inflicted a severe wound on the face of my companion, the Hon. Farmond de Tracy, and caused injuries which, except for Lord Balmaghie's sake, and yielding to my entreaty, would certainly have led to criminal proceedings.

Since then I am informed that Pryde and the singing girl have gone through a sort of marriage ceremony—public opinion being too strong for them, I suppose. But what is infinitely worse, and gives me the utmost pain to communicate to you, is that, for the sake of the other young woman (who also falsely designated herself Jones during the Irish trip), Mr. Armytage has followed them to England, where he was present at the form of marriage above referred

to, and has since then taken service as a common labourer with Pryde in his Parcel Delivering business on the Tenterden Road. He can be seen there any day— he, the heir to a title and unfortunately to an estate which ought not to be his, in the guise of a mechanic, black with all manner of dirt and grease.

It is my humble opinion that such conduct as this can only proceed from mental alienation, and that there would be a good case for confining him in some good private asylum. Afterwards, control of his property, in the interests of his relatives, might be obtained from the Court of Chancery.

I do not venture to suggest anything, but it is clearly for the good of the community and of the cause we have at heart, that such people as the Prydes should not be allowed to influence, as they do, a whole coimtryside. I hear from our good and loyal Mr. Walkerbum that he can do nothing against them. They possess a sort of plausible cleverness, and, having been long in the district, they imagine that the place belongs to them.

'What, after all, is intellect? Generally, as in this case, it is put to wrong uses. Invariably it leads to the sin of spiritual pride. I leave this subject with regret. I have so many things to tell you, which, however, I must hold back till I have the honour and pleasure of seeing you' in London.

'With respectful greetings to My Lord, and to you, dear Lady Balmaghie, with my most humble, devoted duty and service,

I am, your very faithful servant,

Hugh Brodick Scoville.'

Ten days later Mr. John Pryde, Senior, received a legal notice that he was to quit the farm of Femiellands at the following Whitsunday term. So

that it had taken a good week for my lady to convince my lord. Generally the Importunate Wife takes even a shorter time to poison the founts of justice than the Importunate Widow. The current of her influence is most regular like the arrosive implements mentioned so frequently in French journals, her eloquence acts by the continuity of its flow— le jet continu.'

Lord Balmaghie slept but ill during that entire week and all things being taken into account, he must be written down as a man of remarkable strength of character.

But though Mr. Hugh Brodick Scoville's kind advice as to the fate of the Prydes of Fernielands had been acted on, his other suggestions as to the mental condition of Armytage McGhie were only laughed to scorn by my lord. If Armytage were as mad as a March hare, the title and estates would not go any the more to little Augusta, but only to some other cousin more distant still—probably to a waster who would ruin himself and them.

'We owe it to the county to have no scandal of that kind,' said my lord firmly.

'But could not his estates in Yorkshire be taken away from him? A man with eight thousand a year working with black hands and a face like a stoker on an engine! And the money would do so much good to Augusta.'

'I daresay,' said his lordship, 'only, you see, she can't have it. Lots of our young fellows go in for all sorts of engineering now— aeronautics and electric launch building. Why, Armytage himself passed a long time in Paris learning all about expert motoring. He is quite a good mechanic. They say he could build a real car. But you can't take away his

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property from him on account of that!

'Oh, the French are so much wiser,' mourned Lady Balmaghie. 'If a young man takes to low company and behaves like your nephew, the law takes away all his property and gives it to a family council—of which, of course, you would be the head.'

'Just so,' said my lord, turning away, 'and of course, you expect that I should come home as merry as Robin Hood, with my pockets full of Armytage's gold, every time the family council met!'

But irony, even of this extreme sort, was lost upon Lady Balmaghie. She only knew that her sole daughter had been brought into the world to be robbed, and that the guilty person was now roistering with quite impossible associates, and with hands so dirty that they were not fit to be seen.

CHAPTER THIRTY

BROTHER JOHN

Brother John has been left too long out of this chronicle. He has, indeed, always been an important personage and worthy beyond worth. True, he let our light-hearted McComie play ducks and drakes with him. But then, where that young person is concerned, who, except Sandy, can afford to get home at honest John with the first stone? Even as to Sandy himself, who can say—that is, if he had not already been iron-plated by his love for V. V.?

At any rate, after his Edinburgh experience, John took great shame to himself, and went back to the business with right Galloway determination, which contains about ninety per cent, of sheer dourness.

He rose, worked, surveyed the work of others, planned, carried out, opened new departments, and in fact lived, ate, and slept 'business' as that was carried on in the Tenterden Road.

The visits of the great carriers were becoming rare and more rare in all that quarter of London. There had even been a tentative offer on the part of a world-famous firm to buy Sandy up. But Sandy was firmly rooted, because from the first he had set himself to learn and supply local needs. He had not considered all London, but only his own district. So his customers could not be detached by wide-spread concerns which catered for the needs of seven-and-a-half millions of people.

As for Brother John, McComie was kind to him —

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too kind. He could not stand it. He was not in love with her now— at least so he told himself. But she had been a wondrous Open Sesame to him, and perhaps he had carried away more precious things from that cave than he dreamed of.

Still he did not willingly frequent places where he would be likely to see McComie. He avoided 151, Kandahar Road, and so saw little of Sandy out of business hours, and nothing of V. V. at all. Which last was a grave mistake, for she would have understood at once—also helped.

At first he used to stroll down of an evening to see Dr. Freddie, now installed assistant to a busy practitioner in Kentham Road East, where that young gentleman was finding that the medical profession was one which demanded physical endurance even more than anything else— at least in the S.E. district of London.

After a while Brother John shied from going to find Freddie too often. Freddie talked a lot, and though John could be silent an infinitely greater lot, Freddie would complain of what Sandy and V. V. had not done, and might have done for him! This, John felt, was traitorous talk, for no one knew better than he that Sandy had done far too much for his younger brother. He knew also, and frankly agreed, that the work Freddie had been put to, though hard, was the very best thing in the world for him.

He told Freddie this. He told it twice and three times, and then stopped, feeling that unless he 'knocked the head off him' (which might interfere with the practice), there was no more argument to be used on Freddie. So he began to avoid him also, deviating away down towards the open air-spaces along the South Bank, and especially watching the

traffic along the bridges, which he always found most interesting and mysterious.

Where were all these people going—on what errands? Why did they all carry packages? And the tram-cars and the motor-buses, why were they always going so fast? Why did people sit on the top in the wet, packed two by two under imibrellas, when there was room inside?

One night John found himself on Westminster Bridge. It was almost deserted, and as he recrossed with his face towards the long slope South-Westwards which would bring him eventually to his room above the garage, he saw before him a girl's figure, which somehow seemed vaguely familiar. As a rule he did not look at such, being occupied, since the days of McComie, with the greater problems of life—and with his pipe.

But there was no doubt about it. The girl halted and looked round as if frightened of interruption. He caught a glimpse of her white face in the moonlight. He had heard so much about girls throwing themselves from the bridges, and had never seen anything of the kind, that he set down the usual announcement to reporters during the dull season doing their best for their papers.

But there was that on the girl's face which made John Pryde change his mind. This, however, was the real thing. Assuredly in another moment, if not prevented, this girl would make a hole in the water.

He could see her nerve herself for the spring. He crossed the roadway hasty, and, just in time, had her by the arm. The girl screamed faintly, but did not struggle. It is likely that, for the moment, John's burly figure in the dark-blue double-breasted overcoat which hid his reffer jacket caused her to

mistake him for a policeman.

'Miss Lees,' he said, 'what are you doing here at this hour?'

He had first noticed her as one of the best workers in the parcel-sorting department. Thence he had recently changed her into his own division to check the mileages and deliveries of petrol—which, as usual, were becoming excessive as the season grew busier and the heads of departments were more pressed with work.

'Mr. John!' said the girl, hiding her face, and immediately burst into tears. John led her off the bridge, and down some steps, where, finding a vacant bench, he made her sit down. He took hold of her arm with one big brown hand, and kept so firm a grip of his subordinate that, had Mr. Scoville passed that way, the matter would inevitably have ended in another letter to Lady Balmaghie, setting forth the innate and irreclaimable wickedness of all the Prydes that ever were.

Yet the word held true, that whoever sees or imagines evil in things that are merely beautiful and good, is himself evil. In which case Mr. Scoville, in spite of his loud professions, would have been self-condemned.

'Now,' said John quietly, 'you tell me! You must!'

'You saw?' she queried, glancing up at him. John nodded an affirmative which, indeed, was hardly needed. The grasp on her arm answered well enough.

'Oh, I am ashamed,' said the girl. 'I did not know what to do. My husband has left me—without saying a word, or sending me an address. I have only my wages—and—now'(she said the words very low) — 'there is something coming!'

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John felt his ears burn and was glad of the semi-darkness so that he could steady his face before answering.

'Bessie Lees, I never knew that you were married,' he got it out at last; 'but what is your husband?'

'He is a gentleman and he goes into the City every day to buy and sell things. He was older than I, but then my father was dead—he was a National schoolmaster, and left nothing—so I went to copy letters for Mr. Scoville.'

'Scoville—Scoville,' said John. 'I have heard that name before.'

'I don't doubt it, Mr. John; he was always anxious to find out all about you and the business, but especially about Mr. Alexander. He used to ask me questions. And, indeed, I believe it was for that he first sent me to work with you.'

'After a while mother married again and—he was always asking me. So as there did not seem anything else for it, and my mother said I was a fool for refusing, it ended by my marrying him at a registry office. My mother told me to be sure of that. It is in the Balham Road somewhere, quite close to Tillings's big place. I could find it easily. Besides, I have the certificate.'

The girl sat silent a while, and then said, 'You need not hold my arm so hard, Mr. John. I shall not do it now. It was just having no one to speak to or advise me that made me think of it.'

John loosed his grasp, which he had been unconsciously tightening, but did not take away his hand. Sandy would have known in a moment whether to trust the girl or not. But John dared run no risks.

'Well, what happened?' he demanded in his

rough, kind voice.

'At first, nothing much,' she said. 'In a way I was happy, because I was provided for. He used to give me money each month, and he bought me fine clothes — far too fine for our little house. I dared hardly put them on before the servant— far less go out in them. Then suddenly, after he had been out all one weekend, he came back and seemed not to care about me any more.

'He said that he had lost money and that I had better find something to do. I was just as glad, for at first he would not hear of my going out alone, and he never took me anywhere. He told me about our Mr. Alexander needing parcel-sorting girls, and when I went to see him, I was taken on at once, because I was educated and quick. I did my best, but my husband was for ever at me, trying to find out things about the business and especially about the young lady Mr. Alexander has married— he had had something to do with the theatre where she used to play, and knew all about her.

'Of course the girls used to talk, but we never really knew anything. All the same I told him what I found out, as there was nothing to be ashamed of.

'Then, one day he took all his things away out of the house while I was at the works, and when I came back there was no servant nor anything—only a note on the table telling me that the house rent was paid up to the end of the month, and enclosing four five-pound notes.'

John meditated a while and then said: 'There is three weeks of the house rent still to run—so with your wages, you should do very well. And could you not get another girl to join you— it would be company?'

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The girl started and drew herself away.

'No,' she said sharply; 'if I could have spoken to one of the other girls about that, do you think—I would have been sitting here and telling you?'

'I shall find your husband for you,' said John, with a kind of threat in his voice, which the girl caught at once.

'Oh, I don't want anything done to him . . .' (she hesitated) 'nor ... I am not sure that I want him found. At any rate I shall never go back to him.'

'Oh,' said John, remembering the teaching of his mother, 'but if it is your duty!'

'I have got beyond that,' said the girl wearily; 'he shut the door upon himself!'

'Well,' said John, 'come home tonight quietly. Promise me to stay, and tomorrow I will see about finding you good lodgings where you will have someone to talk to.'

'I don't want anyone to talk to,' said the girl, turning away her head.

'No matter,' said John gravely; 'it's what you need.'

He walked back with Bessie of the Brown Eyes, and watched her let herself into a dark little house in one of the side-streets north-east of the Common. He stood till he saw a lamp lighted and the yellow glow pass upstairs to the upper bedroom. And then, in spite of the policeman's suspicious glances at him as he passed, he continued to patrol the street all night till the morning light appeared tardily over the grey housetops. Then he went straight to the garage and began to prepare the place for the coming of the men and the business of the morning.

Bessie Lees said nothing when she entered, which she did at the usual time, but her brown eyes, pale

cheeks and full red mouth were turned for one unforgettable grateful moment upon John. Something warm and almost maternal rushed all over the big man. He would protect that girl. He would see her righted. He would—there were quite a number of things he felt himself ready to do for her, none of which fortunately was practicable at the moment.

But at least he had one good idea. He would go and see V. V. Sandy was giving one whole day to the distributing departments of the business, and had long been closeted with Rob Gilston. He had early finished with John, and so, when the vans were all out and nothing was likely to happen till five or six which would require his attention, John put on his hat and a few minutes later found himself at 151, Kandahar Road. Here he found a good many changes, which he had not seen. Sandy and V. V. had taken the whole second and third floors unfurnished, had transformed one room into a kitchen, installed a range, engaged a servant under the faithful Elise, and; as the landlady put it, had 'put in their own things.'

'And a great deal off my hands, I can tell you,' Mrs. Larkins confided to John, her success making her loquacious, that is, more so than usual; 'the first bit of luck I have had for years!'

V. V. was sitting sewing in a little back parlour which Sandy called his study. One of the handy men from the garage had put up shelves, which V. V. had enamelled in white. On these Sandy's books now stood arrayed, many of the shelves being two and three deep with volumes. Sandy had put little tags over them, pinned to the edge of the shelf above with drawing-board pins, to tell him where to find each

one.

V. V. did not seem surprised to see John, after he had assured her that nothing was the matter with Sandy.

He told her in his habitual plain brief way the story of his adventure. V. V. gazed at him curiously, but John's face was so quiet and serene that she could hardly think... that which a woman always does think.

'She does not want her husband found,' V. V. murmured thoughtfully, threading her needle. 'She can make her own living. It would not do for her to come here. She would not like it.'

'I am sure she would not.'

'Well,' said V. V., 'she can't be left alone in that house with all the bad memories—or we shall have her starting off again. Let me see. Our landlady, Mrs. Larkins, has a sister, Mrs. Hobbs, who is anxious to find a companion. Your friend could get a room cheap there if she would not mind taking her meals in the kitchen.'

'But,' John put in, 'that would not do. I mean she would not like it if there were a family—not when she has to give up work.'

He was troubled, for he had not managed to explain as he would have done in the case of a man. But with V. V. there was no need of dotting the i's.

'I understand,' she said softly. 'I shall go tonight and get her away from there. If there is any furniture, we will store it. No, there will be no need, in the meantime, to say anything to Sandy.'

'Thank you, V. V.' said John gruffly.

V. V.'s glance pierced him as with a sudden electric shock.

'All the same,' she continued, 'I think I should

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avoid any more midnight strolls. McComie and I— with Mrs. Hobbs— are quite able to look after Mrs. Scoville.'

'She says her name is Bessie Lees,' said John a little irritably; 'you had better call her that.'

'Well,' said V.V., patting his arm compassionately, 'your business is to look after the husband and make him do his duty.'

CHAPTER THIRTY ONE

JOHN PRYDE ACTS AFTER HIS BREED

And so they parted, John to the works in the Tenterden Road and V. V. to arrange matters with Mrs. Hobbs. She took McComie with her, and having sworn her to secrecy, bade her help all she could. McComie did help. It was difficult for anyone to refuse McComie anything, even those of her own sex. Mrs. Hobbs proved an easy subject and consented at once. Her house was small, and since she lost her daughter had been very quiet. But the little round apple-faced woman had found it hard to be cheerful alone. For the gaiety of Mrs. Scoville, V. V. could not vouch, but certainly that of McComie filled the house and poured out into the little garden at the back, setting all the sparrows chirping.

During the dinner hour John went along to interview the registrar, and for certain moneys ('search and transcription of copy') he obtained a properly attested marriage certificate, setting forth that on the 1st of March, Hugh Scoville, aged 53, stockbroker, had been married to Bessie Lees, aged 21, of no occupation.

John was not an expert detective, and it was the 'handyman' of all investigations. Chance, which led him to confide in Ben Meares. John knew that Ben had formerly been for long years at the Kentham 'Vic' and knew the whole neighbourhood. He therefore retailed to him the description of her husband which Bessie had given him—not forgetting the inevitable white waistcoat.

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'Why,' said Ben, after much wrinkling of the brows, 'there never was nobody like that about the 'Vic,' except the oldish chap who used to come in to look after the receipts of the show and the bar. Twice a week we used to have him— Wednesdays and Saturdays, as regular as the clock. But only into the office—never in front— by the side door, and sneaked out again, too, like a rat hunting for a new hole. But his name was— let me see, I bet my life I can remember it, if you give me half a mo. He always had to be passed in very respectful. His name was . . . Scoville, that was his name, but now he's gone to live in the West End since his wife died.'

'Since his wife died,' exclaimed John sharply; 'but his wife isn't dead.'

'Well, maybe not. Anyway, she was buried, dead or alive, and we went to the funeral, and I've the card somewhere that was printed about her.'

John's agitation became painful to himself, but his gravity preserved him from the observation of Ben Meares.

'I wish you could find that for me, Ben,' he got the words out uncertainly.

'You see,' said Ben, 'this here wife had been ill a long time, nurses and all that, and as these sort never dies, it came as a kind of surprise to us. If I can't find my own card—I'll get one from some of my mates.'

But Ben did find his own, and from it John gained the information that Mrs. H. B. Scoville of Craigdene had died on the 23rd March of that year and was to be buried at Woking on the 25th. A verse of Scripture was quoted underneath which almost made John sick. He wished he had Sandy's vocabulary.

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But now he was almost sure of his man. Indeed he felt that he had him in the hollow of his hand. As Ben Meares had conjectured, it was no hard thing to run Mr. H. B. Scoville to earth at 508, Cromwell Road, where he occupied the ground floor of one of the houses in the recent southerly extension.

John found him in evening dress, ready to go out.

‘My name is John Pryde,’ said John, who knew no refinements of presentation, ‘I have come to tell you that I know you to be a bigamist, and that I can prove it.’

He showed the registered certificate, and the funeral invitation, indicating the difference of date.

‘It is usually seven years!’ said John casually, ‘but I believe that depends a good deal upon the judge.’

‘It is blackmail,’ cried the stout man in evening dress, growing pale with indignation, or perhaps with the knowledge of being trapped. ‘How much money do you want?’

‘I do not want a penny— neither does the girl you have deceived and whom you sent to spy upon my brother. But I will have a written acknowledgment, which I promise to keep entirely for private purposes, unless compelled to make it public by your own actions. In the meantime write what I dictate.’

And by sheer force of will he made the man in evening dress sit down, and, putting a pen into his hand, he dictated word by word:

‘I, Hugh Brodick Scoville, admit that I married Bessie Lees at the Balham Road Registry on the 1st of March, 19—, also I admit that my wife Edith Scoville of Forbes was then alive and did not die till the 23rd of the same month and year.

‘H. B. SCOVILLE.’

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'I think that will do,' said John, 'but I do not think it will be wise for you to remain longer in this country. The trail is easily followed, and, as I said, if you are caught, it means seven years. There is a Stock Exchange in New York. I hear you are rich, there will be no great hardship in taking a trip across.'

The next minute John found himself outside and in company with Ben Meares.

'Did he cut up rough?' demanded Ben; 'there are servants and all sorts of people in that big house. I was thinking I done wrong in letting you go in there by yourself.'

'Not a bit of it, thank you, Ben. He took it like a lamb, and wrote quite enough to get him seven years if I like to show it.'

'He ought to get a lifer,' said Ben; 'I would not spare him—nor would the Master.'

'The Master—oh, yes, Sandy, you mean—why, what has Sandy to do with him?'

'Well, he nearly shook the life out of the rascal for trying to make up to Miss V. V.— I mean Mrs. Alexander Pryde, that is!'

'Oh,' said John, 'well, I am for doing things quietly, for the sake of the girl.'

'Ah, yes—the girl, Bessie Lees, wasn't it?' said Ben hypocritically, with his eyes on the ground.

In his heart he was thinking, 'I never would have thought it of Mr. John—but, after all, the best and quietest man is only a man!'

Somehow John divined the suspicion and cleared the ground by one of his trenchant speeches.

'Hold your tongue about it, Ben,' he said; 'but I'm going to marry her.'

It was a characteristic of the Pryde family to make

such declarations without having previously asked the permission of the lady. John knew that it would be some time before things would straighten themselves out, and that very night he again sought the advice of V. V. Sandy was locked in his little study busy with his new book.

'Well,' said V. V., smiling, 'I have seen her and she was so very happy to leave all that behind. Mrs. Hobbs will chirp about her and look after her.'

'Look at this, V. V.,' interrupted John, thrusting out the paper in Mr. Scoville's holograph with a strong swift gesture.

V. V. took it quietly, as she did everything. She read it twice, and then, looking up at John, she said: 'Then she is not married and never has been— what do you propose to do?'

'I will marry her if she will have me, and as soon as possible.'

'But the child?'

'I will acknowledge the child. It shall be as my own. Without that we should not have been brought together.'

'But what will your people think?'

'At least my mother will approve. And in any case I know I am doing the square thing.'

'You are a good man, John!' V. V. murmured.

'Oh, I go to the kirk,' said John, 'but I have learned a good deal more than that.'

'You will have some things to bear which are hard,' V. V. said; 'for who will believe?'

'You will believe and Sandy. I care for no others. And so will the old folk when it is put rightly before them.'

'Would you like me to go up and tell them, John?'

John pondered this for a while, and then said: 'As

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I cannot be spared here, it would be a great service— especially to my mother.'

'But mind you,' he added, 'nothing will change my mind about the rightness of what I am doing.'

'Bessie,' said John the next evening, 'first of all I will say now what I did not say sooner. I love you and I have the right to tell you so. You are a free woman. I ask you to marry me, and I mean to marry you.'

Bessie became very pale, but remained tearless. He extended the papers towards her and moved behind her to keep them under his hand, lest in some girlish cross-current she should be tempted to destroy them.

But Bessie read them through carefully and studied the confession with particular care.

'I always knew there was something,' she murmured softly. 'Oh, John, if it were not that I should disgrace you forever.'

A huge hand clasped both of hers and the forefinger of the other compelled her to turn her brown eyes into the steadfast grey ones of John Pryde.

'That is all right,' he said. 'That which is coming to us shall be as much mine as yours. I saved him, too.'

John was right about the sex, though as they had been married for many months and were living in distant Ealing, nobody minded about it or them.

'My son,' said John triumphantly, holding the mite. So much feeling from him meant that the fountains of the deep within him were broken up.

'Yes, yours—you saved him— and me!' murmured Bessie. 'We are both yours, John!'

Then V. V. and his mother— 'come to see Sandy

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settled'—ordered him out.

And this is, written very much in brief, the story of the marriage of the strong silent man, John Pryde.

Well might they say in the countryside that a Pryde of Fernielands never could do anything like any other body.

CHAPTER THIRTY TWO

THE BLACK CAP

The Prydes of Fernielands were now divided into two clans, but by no means divided against themselves. The mother hive was threatened by the factor's notice of quittance and removal at the next Whitsunday. But the strong Pryde colony established on the south of the Thames felt themselves able for these things. There was but one Fernielands, it was true. But they would lease from Armytage a little place of his in Wigtownshire, as close to the Cree as Fernielands was to the Dee. There they would install the old people, because it would kill them to be brought altogether away from their home country and shut up, at their age, in a city. Allen and Jo were good sturdy fellows and would do their duty. Of that there was no fear. All that troubled Sandy was the inevitable wrench when it came to leaving that Fernielands which had been the pride of the Prydes for so many generations.

Still, Sandy promised himself that he would run up and soften the blow, as he alone could. Armytage was for giving them a much larger farm at a considerable loss of rent to himself. But of this Sandy would not hear. It would not be just to the young man. He could not accept it for his people. And besides, it was on the Yorkshire property, where his father and mother, Gallovidian to the backbone, would find themselves far, indeed, from their ain countrie, and among people of another speech, race and religion.

'The Cruives' was a little farmlet on Creeside, but it would be sufficiently large to permit his mother to keep a few cows. There was also a cot-house to which if it pleased him (as it was the habit of the Prydes to marry early), one of the lads could settle with his bride, after making all snug for the old people. Then the other— Allen or Jo as the case might be—could come up and learn to drive a car and deliver parcels and heavy goods of all weights and denominations throughout the wide and ever-extending territory of South London which 'Pryde & Company' was controlling.

Thus Sandy had worked the matter out in his own mind, and on the whole it seemed a good scheme. The Prydes' father and mother were too old to begin to tame a new farm of the size of Fernielands. There, the slow custom of the years made all things move silently and easily as the progress of the seasons or the rise and fall of the daily sun.

But if they had to flit, Sandy decided that it should be to a place which would just give them enough to do to keep them from wearying— that—and no more.

Meantime the Tenterden Road business was seriously extending, as Mr. Shieldhill had foretold it would. The removal of Mr. Scoville had cleared their only local enemy off the face of things. Even Mrs. Shieldhill had come round in two senses, and had called on V. V., to whom she was pleased to approve of the simplicity of her dress and her good sense in remaining in lodgings.

V. V. wondered at the woman's insolence, but, remembering Sandy's liking for Mr. Shieldhill, she only smiled and explained that they had taken the

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second floor on account of the quiet, and that Mr. Pryde might have a separate study to work in.

About this time Sandy took advantage of an unprecedented run upon an Imperial Exhibition at the Crystal Palace to place motor-buses on that line. He bought, for a song, old types which had been discarded as too dangerous for the crowded and narrow streets of the City. These Armytage and a couple of mechanics put in good order and sent out.

This proved the beginning of a new department. Mr. Shieldhill and Sandy went into partnership for this branch and presently they had started new cross lines which ran from Chatham and Greenwich right to Kew, and from outlying suburbs like Denmark Hill and Woking to the termini of the regular tram-lines and car-routes.

In the midst of all this Sandy was busy writing that third book which was to be his masterpiece. It had already been syndicated for more than twenty newspapers. It was billed to begin the first week of the New Year, and Sandy, harassed by a thousand things in the working the new 'cross-London' lines, and by anxieties as to the folk at Fernielands, tried to drown everything by working at 'Sword Bayonets' with a concentrated fury which V. V. had never before seen him display. He had hardly come in before he was at work. His supper was no more than a pretence, and he worked far into the night— V. V. listening maternally for a moment when she might rise and silently push a tumbler of hot milk before him. Hot milk had the effect, generally, of making Sandy sleepy. But sometimes he would push even that impatiently aside, and continue doggedly at his task.

Then again, often by four o'clock of the morning,

V. V., opening her eyes, would see the green-shaded lamp shining from under the door of Sandy's room, and sending flashing emerald rapier-thrusts through the chinks. She would rise again, see that he had not forgotten to light his gas-fire, and take him in a cup of café au lait with a slice of bread and butter.

He thanked her only by saying, 'Get to bed, V. V.'

Whereupon, V. V. would lie long awake with an aching, anxious heart, even till the tardy dawn began to steal through the blinds, dirty and murky, and still Sandy's pen continued to run, his sheets to rustle, and the green light was not extinguished till long after broad day had come.

Finally, a few hours before he had to go to the office he would throw himself exhausted on a little camp-bed in the dressing-room, only taking off his coat, when V. V. would cover him up tenderly, almost reverently, with rugs, and put a hot-water bottle to his feet.

Far back in her mind persisted the knowledge that this could not go on. Her Sandy was killing himself. Yet what could she do? He awoke fresh and disposed for his breakfast. He talked gaily, and, swinging an overcoat over his arm, set out for the new extensions which Shieldhill and he were building in the garden of an ancient vicarage, now demolished so that the vicar might live nearer his chm'ch and people.

These were wondrous days. Sandy lived through them at such high tension that even in the midst of business, ideas for 'Sword Bayonets' leaped into his mind. And when busy with his book he would find something connected with his day's work—some idea which it would certainly be worth while consulting Shieldhill upon. Sandy jotted down both

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with equal readiness.

'They were certainly going to make a great deal of money,' he confided to V. V.

'But was it worth it?' V. V. would ask.

And right in the midst of all, the question answered itself.

Sandy dropped as if a stone had fallen on his head.

'Brain fever!' said the doctor. And there was a specialist at his pillow within the first twenty-four hours. McComie wept ceaselessly, but V. V. moved about silent, grey and pale, till they gave her two nurses to help and only allowed her to come upon duty at certain hours. As to keeping her out of the room, the doctors saw that was impossible from the first. She must have her way as to that, or they would have two patients on their hands instead of one. As to McComie, she developed an unexpected talent for cookery, and aided Elise in the confection of soups and slops for a man who cared for neither.

Soon there were paragraphs in the papers— how they got there no one could tell, though Armytage went to the offices to try and find out. But after the first day, there were always half a dozen pressmen waiting below for the doctor's opinion. Armytage saw them. He had become general utility man at 151, Kandahar Road, and McComie and he gripped hands hard when they met in dusky passages, but they made no other sign of friendship, not to say of love. It was no time for that or anything like it, when Sandy was upstairs battling for his life, and when they did not dare to think too much about V. V. But these days bound them together far more than the sunlit glade or even the meeting by moonlight in the Forresthill Wood.

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Sandy's eternal outcry was all about his book. He was only at the thirtieth chapter, he said, and there was a full third to do. He must get up— why did they not let him up? They were jealous of him. They did not want him to succeed. He would have to break his contract— he had never broken one before. Let him get to work. He must get to work. 'Oh, V. V., help me!' he burst out sobbing. 'They will not let me work.'

This was the wail day after day, night after night, his temperature still mounting higher, and the doctors giving daring doses of quinine to keep it down.

On the fourth morning the doctor glanced at the specialist, and he, unseen, shook his head. It was a fair equivalent to the judge's black cap.

They bethought themselves of V. V.

'Could you not tell him that the book is finished?' they asked V. V. 'Then perhaps...'

'He would not believe unless he saw the proofs with his own eyes. Besides, I could not tell Sandy lies. He would never trust me again.'

'If you did, it might . . . give him a chance.'

But V. V. declined, so the doctors perforce tried themselves. His book was all finished and delivered, they said.

Sandy paused in his complaints and stared at the specialist.

'Get out— you!' he exclaimed; 'you lie—I am only at chapter thirty! And don't come here any more, liar!'

After that the specialist had to send his partner, and be content to receive his daily report.

After a heartbreaking night V. V. was lying down, weary with thinking and watching, when McComie,

slipping into the room, took her head within her arms and whispered: 'There's a lady downstairs who has come to see you. Elise says that it is about a matter of life or death— or Sandy. The lady told her so. Dear, I think you should see her. She does not want to see me. I am so sorry for disturbing you— but the chance Oh, if there were a chance!'

'I will go,' said V. V., rising and putting on her blue nurse's dress with the collar and cuffs ready fixed in their places. 'Is she old or young?'

'I can't tell,' said McComie; 'I couldn't see. The key was in the lock. But from what Elise said, probably rather young.'

V. V. dismissed Lady Balmaghie from her mind and hesitated about Mrs. Shieldhill. She did not see what either of them could want with her.

She entered the abandoned drawing-room of the first floor— for Armytage had taken the entire house of Mrs. Larkins, and had 'paid out' the few lodgers who remained with the utmost liberality.

A tall girl was standing by the fireplace with her elbow on the sham marble of the mantelshelf, which showed its native Bethesda slate where it had been scratched. She held a newspaper in her hands, folded to show a paragraph which V. V. recognized in a moment.

'Mrs. Pryde,' said the girl, 'you will perhaps pardon me for coming, but your husband saved my life. I am Eleanor Sykes.'

They did not fall into each other's arms. Neither did hatred dart from their eyes. In their hearts there was neither love nor hatred, only the thought of Sandy—and a great, common Fear.

'I—saw—this!' said Eleanor Sykes, and with a rigid ungloved hand she pointed to the paragraph:

‘SAVED IF HIS BOOK ONLY WERE FINISHED.

‘Pathetic Scenes in the Life of a Young Author.

The house at 151, Kandahar Road, S.W., at present occupied by the well-known novelist, Mr. Alexander Pryde, is rendered tragic by the fact that this young genius is lying there, probably dying of brain-fever. His constant cry is that his book, recently begun with so much that éclat in so many journals, the already well-known ‘Sword Bayonets,’ remains unfinished.

The specialists in attendance are persuaded that unless this preoccupation be removed from his mind, the patient must die. The loss will be great. His young wife, formerly Miss V. V. Jones, so well known to concert-goers, is unweariedly at his pillow.’

It was meant well enough, but every phrase cut the women like a knife. Mechanically V. V. returned the paper to Eleanor Sykes, and stood white, swaying, and trembling as if with extreme cold.

Eleanor Sykes caught her and laid her down on the sofa. Then brought a glass of water from the dining-room sideboard. Presently V. V. pulled herself together and sat up.

‘Now, look here,’ said Eleanor Sykes, ‘of course you do not like me. There is no reason that you should. I loved your husband. He would have nothing to do with me—and—you came in the way. Well, I tried to drown myself, and he saved me.’

V. V. moved her hands as if to indicate how little all that mattered now.

‘No,’ said the girl, interpreting readily, ‘it does not matter, but it gives me a right—or rather, if you don't like the phrase—a chance of getting more equal.’

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'Well, tell me what you want— what you would like,' said V. V. hopelessly, not seeing whither all this led, and privately thinking that there were elements of madness still about her visitor.

But 'Nore Sykes soon showed the method underlying her brusqueness.

'His book must be finished,' she said; 'there is only one man in the world who can do it as well as Sandy, and in his style. That is Dean Forfar. He is generally thought cold and inaccessible, but I know him a little. He is not a bit really like that. I believe if you and I went to him with what is done, and any notes Sandy might have— well, he is a busy man, but he might—I believe he would. He might be able to say 'no' to you— the wife of a fellow author and that author a younger rival. But when I told him my story— why I am coming to him, and how I clung to the Lily-roots in the Witch's Pool of the Black Water — he could not resist that. I know him. He would see a story in it in a moment, or even a play.'

'And you would let the man know all that?' quavered V. V.

'Of course I should,' said 'Nore almost savagely. What we have got to do is to show Sandy the next chapter, the one after thirty, isn't it? Then you will tell him that all the rest is being typed from his notes and ... he will believe you. That's your part.

'Come, put on a hat and a coat. Steady yourself, you are still trembling. I have a motor at the end of the street. We shall go and see Dean Forfar at once.'

CHAPTER THIRTY THREE

‘NORE’

Dean Forfar was a man of infinitely greater fame than a newcomer in letters like Sandy. But he had recognized the talent of the coming man and had said so publicly, even so far back as the days of ‘Greying Gold.’

Forfar lived in a pleasant flat overlooking the Park and was busy, as a good author should be, every forenoon with his ‘Nulla Dies’ task. When he heard from his infinitely correct manservant, Auguste (formerly of the Hotel Meyerbeer, Paris), that two ladies were waiting to see him, he said hasty and painful words which ought never to be applied to any of the sex, even when they break windows on politics intent.

‘Search them for birthday-books!’ he cried. ‘Throw them out of the window, Auguste!’

‘One of them has been crying, monsieur,’ said the sympathetic Parisian; ‘and the other says that she knows you and must see you. Here are the cards of these ladies.’

‘Confound your stupid head— why didn't you say so at once?’

He glanced at the cards and read on one, ‘Miss Eleanor Glendonwyn Sykes’—(‘dashed fine girl!’) and on the other (he whistled) ‘Mrs. Alexander Pryde.’

‘What the mischief does she want?’ Then with experienced hand he revised his costume hurriedly and rising from his seat, gave the order, ‘Show them in!’

It was Eleanor Sykes who came . . . alone.

'I had better shake hands with you now, Mr. Forfar,' she said, 'because when I am finished, I am not sure whether you will do it again or order your man to show me the door.'

'How is your father?' began the author, who knew Mr. Sykes from meeting him at shooting-parties. He thought Miss Sykes was merely jesting.

'Never mind the Pater,' said 'Nore, growing excited. 'I am going to take away every bit of character I ever had. I am going to disgrace myself for ever in your eyes, and then I am going to ask one of the greatest services a woman can ask of a man.'

'Won't you sit down?' he said gently, vaguely feeling a necessity to do something to calm his visitor. 'My man brought me two cards.'

'Yes, Mrs. Pryde is in your drawing-room, but I wanted to speak to you first and by myself. No, no—I can tell you better standing or walking about.'

'Nore held herself a moment, with both hands clenched close to her throat, where she felt a painful beating.

'What would you think of a girl,' she began, 'who fell in love with a man who was in love with another girl, a man who never gave her the least encouragement—who kept on after she knew of it—and who tried to do all she could to harm and spite the other girl?'

'I should think,' said Dean Forfar gravely, 'that she was quite within the rights of her sex.'

'Well,' said 'Nore, daring him with her eyes, 'I am that girl. I did the most I could and the worst I could against the other girl. And now she is in the next room waiting your verdict.'

'What verdict?' said Dean Forfar, with a start. He

recognized the bitter accents of repentance— 'truth with the hide off,' as he might have said himself.

'Why, I shall come to that immediately. I have got to explain why I am here at all, and why I am sinking all 'maidenly pride' and so on and so forth— all the things dear to your mothers and grandmothers right back to the time when women were just women and there were no fashion-plates. Then I imagine they acted pretty much as I am doing.'

The author felt that a cigarette would have helped him very much in this difficult interview, but that at present was clearly an impossibility. What could the girl be driving at?

I was quite small when I thought Sandy Pryde the handsomest boy in the world, and the nicest. And I liked him all the better because my cousin and sister mocked at him for carrying milk down to my aunt's from his mother's farm. Oh, not before him, of course—they knew better.

Then, when he grew up, he became very learned and all that-got bursaries and scholarships— and though I saw him seldomer, I thought just as much of him. Then he used, sometimes, before he came to London, to walk home with us, and he brought us up to town— my sister and I, and insisted on our coming third class the same as he did. He was masterful, and I think it was that which settled it.

'Of course Lily (that's my sister) chattered at home, and mother would not let him in when he called, but I watched him from the room in which they had locked me. I was in love with him then.'

'They certainly went the right way to make you so,' said Dean Forfar gently. 'I wish I were a girl to tell you how I sympathize— but I am only a man-

thing, and can't. It's there, though, all the same, Miss Sykes!

'Thank you,' said 'Nore, 'but listen. I'm not half-way through. Then he fell in love with Miss V. V. Jones.'

'Oh, yes, Vivian Vivid—I heard about that. I have a photograph of her somewhere. A bachelor picks up such things and keeps them sometimes, because he has no woman about him.'

'Well, I was as horrid as possible, and tried to keep them apart all I could.

'But it was useless—only then I did not know it, not till they all came down to stay at his mother's farm, quite near my aunt's house where we were. And I met him one night. I used to watch the lights of the farm and walk to and fro eating my heart out. Oh, I have no shame to talk like that, but you are an author and it will be good copy. You are welcome to it. I used to watch him too, and one night I found him strolling alone by the side of the Dee Water.

'And I told him—all I have told you—only as a mad girl tells a man . . . the man she loves. You must put in that part yourself, when you come to write. I can't tell it to you the same.'

Dean Forfar sighed. He had known many things about love, but never had he seen any girl blown about by passion like this one. What a glorious temperament this would prove one day for the man whom she would ultimately love—love steadily, not by gusts and thunderbursts.

'No, of course not,' he said lamely enough. And within his heart he thought, 'What a fool that young fellow must be!'

Some vague eddy of what was passing in his mind reached hers.

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'No,' she said resolutely, 'I am not such a fool as to keep that up now. Sandy Pryde is a married man. I would not now be pettish and desperate with him as I was that night. It was in the dribble of the moonlight through the leaves, with his sweetheart coming to claim him, that anger and horror seized me. You do not know—you cannot even follow!'

Dean Forfar nodded his head.

'You are right,' he said, gently and gravely. 'I do not know—no man can—but I can follow!'

'Well then,' 'Nore continued fiercely, 'I broke away and ran right to a deep pool I knew of, the Witch's Pool on the Black Water. It was covered with lilies and when I sank to the bottom I clutched my fingers about the Lily-stems to keep myself from coming up again. And Sandy Pryde had to tear them out by the roots. But he saved me, and now I want you to help me to get a little more even with him. Then, perhaps, I shall feel as if my soul were once more my own!'

'Certainly,' said Forfar, moving uneasily (oh, that cigarette, it would have helped him so!) 'if you will only tell me how.'

Instantly 'Nore stabbed him with the rolled-up paper.

'It is crudely written,' she said, 'but it tells the truth. Directly I read it I thought of you. I had to go first and see his wife. I had to make friends with her—that was easier than you might think under the mutter of that voice in the room beyond, wailing about the book unfinished. I persuaded her to let me have one of the typewritten copies, and the notes. She knew more than I expected—how he had meant it to end. And so I brought her straight here in our motor-car. You must save his life. Finish the book and make me a woman with a soul of my own again!'

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It seemed a difficult—almost an unheard of thing, and Dean Forfar recoiled from concluding the work of a junior. Of course Quiller Couch had finished one of Stevenson's with infinite grace and distinction. But then—Pryde was a junior and to some extent a rival.

'I am not sure that I can disguise my own style,' he said doubtfully.

She swept his objections away with a flash of her eyes and a large outward movement of the hand.

'I am telling you this about myself—you, a man who knows my people. There is that poor girl downstairs, and the man dying over yonder in Kentham—and you make distinctions about style!'

'Very well,' said Dean Forfar. 'I shall do my best!'

'Nore staggered towards him rather than walked. She was deadly pale. She held out her hand and he grasped it.

'Thank you,' she said. 'I will sit down now. Go into the drawing-room and see V. V. I shall be all right when you come back.'

He obeyed doubtfully with several glances back, but 'Nore waved him on.

'I... shall be better—by myself!' she said. 'It has . . . rather . . . taken it out of me!'

And she smiled wanly.

Dean Forfar had a photograph of Miss Vivian Vivid somewhere in a drawer, but he never would have recognized the pale, tired woman with the drawn features and only her great dark eyes still lighting up her face. Sad they were and without any splendour, not starry, but rather like the light of a moon wading among deep clouds.

She gave him the typed copy. Then she showed him, in the big basil-covered book, Sandy's notes for

the final chapters, and dictated her own more extended reminiscences of what Sandy had told her when he came in heated from his writing and incapable of sleep.

Forfar was extraordinarily gentle and forbearing.

‘Of course,’ he said, ‘I may not be able quite to keep the track. It would make it too much plain task-work if I were to put in all that he thought of using. He might, when it came to the point, have rejected much himself. But I shall stick to the main lines, and if there is any difference— why, I must trust to you that he does not again see his notes.’

Dean went on to explain that he must have a little liberty, or else what faculty he had might not work, and the difference would strike everyone.

‘Oh,’ said V. V., ‘if I only had a chapter to show him.’

‘I think I can promise you one some time tomorrow. It will take me a good while to read all this and to get into the spirit of the thing. But I have already read the first chapters, which will help. I thought them very fine.’

‘Oh, may God bless you!’ said V. V. And she wished that McComie had been here to kiss him. She could not even kiss his hands. That would have seemed too theatrical, but she held one of them in both of hers long and close.

Then Eleanor Sykes came in, almost as pale as V. V., and having laid the manuscript and notes on his desk. Dean Forfar saw them to the car himself.

As he came back slowly, he stood a while on the step gazing after them. Then he turned on his heel impatiently.

‘Oh, hang that fellow Pryde,’ he said to himself. ‘What has he done to deserve ... all that? Even if he

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dies, the beggar has had the best of it.'

CHAPTER THIRTY FOUR

THE WET SLEEVE

The next afternoon Dean Forfar, a quick worker, brought chapters thirty-one and thirty-two of 'Sword Bayonets' typed and complete to 151, Kandahar Road. He was met in the doorway by Armytage McGhie in an oily sweater, grubby overalls, and a pilot-coat with more tear than wear about it.

'Hallo,' said the author, 'what are you doing here? I came to see Mrs. Pryde.'

'You have the chapter?' said Armytage, the great smear across whose face did not cause him to appear humorous in the least.

'I have the chapter—two, in fact,' said Dean grimly. 'Are you another of the worshippers at the shrine?'

'I don't know what you mean, exactly,' said Armytage, instantly frigid; 'but I am running Mr. Pryde's business in the Tenterden Road as well as I can—which is not saying much.'

'I beg your pardon,' said Dean Forfar, immediately contrite. 'Here are the two chapters. Perhaps you will let me stay till I learn how ... he takes them.'

'It will have to be his wife who gives them to him.'

'I say,' said Dean hastily, 'is Miss Sykes—Miss Eleanor Sykes—here?'

'Good Lord, no—what are you thinking of, man? Why should she be here? My cousin 'Nore? What should she be doing in Kandahar Road?'

'Of course not,' said Dean feebly, 'I have had to work so hard to get the spirit and something of the

style of these chapters that I hardly know what I am saying.'

'You do look played out— it is awfully good of you!' said Armytage. This stirred the author. He did not want to be thanked by any casual man—still less one he knew.

'If it comes to that,' he said, 'it is awfully good of you to go about with a smear on your nose as thick as my thumb, and incidentally to conduct Pryde's business in the something-or-other Road!'

Armytage was more convinced than ever that Forfar had been overworking.

'I will go up and see V. V.,' he broke off. 'The doctor has just gone. But Sandy is at it again, as hard as ever— all about 'Chapter Thirty'— you know! But V. V. would tell you.'

'Yes,' said Dean Forfar, 'I promised to help.

And then V. V. came in and took the chapters.

'Oh, you are good, Mr. Forfar,' she said, 'I dare not try to thank you, or I should cry. And I shall need to be bright and ready before him, for his wits are quick. I shall send in McComie!'

'Who is McComie?' said Dean, a little annoyed. He had a vision of some old family housekeeper who would entertain them with conversation of the polite order.

But almost on the word McComie came in, her face a cool clear ivory, her lips scarlet, and her hair coiled and swirled about her brow, here honey-coloured and there harvest golden. She looked at them with the long-lashed North Atlantic eyes, marvellous to see.

Then Forfar, starting to rise, was held down by his companion. 'Hush,' she said, 'sit still—don't talk.' And without a word McComie sat down on a

hassock between them with her eyes fastened on the door. Her lips were parted to listen.

'Heavens!' thought Dean Forfar, 'this is another of them!'

But he changed his mind in a moment, when McComie leaned her heavy coils of hair against Armytage's knee and the hand of that young man went down instinctively till it rested on her head.

Then she turned a little in Armytage's direction in order to listen the better, and at the first words from Sandy's room she clasped both her hands about Forfar's sleeve.

'The book will soon be finished, dear,' they heard V. V.'s voice like a silver bell.

'Nonsense—don't you lie to me like that doctor fellow I fired!'

'I never lie to you, Sandy,' said V. V. patiently, 'and you know it. We are having it typewritten from your notes. There is much more done than you thought—there is, indeed, dear. Don't look at me like that. Did I ever deceive you?'

'No, V. V.— what is that in your hand?'

'Chapters Thirty-One and Thirty-Two! See?'

'I can't see, V. V.,' quavered the voice, 'they look the same, but give me a sniff of that ether, and read a bit to me. I shall soon know.'

Dean Forfar, conscious that the spirits of life and Death were busy circling somewhere close about their heads, and passing in and out of that low door like swallows into the windows of a granary, gave a deep gasp and was about to stand up.

But the fingers of McComie's grasp clung more tightly about his sleeve. She laid her head down on the netted tips and weighed on him, so that perforce he had to keep his place.

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V. V. began to read.

'Yes, yes,' said Sandy, low and hoarse, 'that is what I thought—of course—the man cold and surprised, not meaning to give way, but the love of the woman getting the better of him. But I don't remember to have written it out.'

'You are very ill, dear. How can you remember anything with your head shaved like that and ice all about it?'

'No, of course not— a little more ether—never mind what the swab of a doctor said. Read the end of Chapter Thirty-two.'

It was one of the love-scenes, and Dean Forfar had excelled himself. He had taken Sandy's tone, which was more outspoken than his own about such matters.

'Capital,' said Sandy, 'and now I think I shall go to sleep. I can now, you know. Very good idea, that of yours—getting all the stuff typewritten. But will it go right to the end?'

'Right to the very end, and the publishers are so pleased!'

'I should think they are. It is ripping stuff. I did not think I had it in me— but for ten days I hardly knew what I was writing, trying to hold the old horse's head up—(that's me, V. V.) lest he should come down and break his knees. I'm glad he didn't sooner. You'll see that in old Bungay's hands, or who ever it is. I'm going to sleep for a week, now that the work is done.'

Dean Forfar went out into the freshness of the late autumnal air, thinking how curious it was to have a wet coat sleeve, and not to have spoken one word to the girl whose tears soaked it. He had not even been introduced. But in Sandy Pryde's

neighbourhood, all the wisdom of the wise seemed somehow to turn withershins about. On his way he sent a wire to 'Nore Sykes, 'Articles successfully delivered, Forfar:'

She was at his rooms waiting for him. But there was a new hope in her face, a brighter light in her eyes, and if her face was still pale it seemed somehow to have filled out.

She was pacing the drawing-room nervously— a room hardly ever used by Forfar and which he abominated because of what he called its 'fussiness.'

'Come into the study,' he said, 'we shall not be interrupted there!'

And he told her the story word for word— without, however, saying anything about McComie, though his sleeve was still wet with her tears. 'Nore Sykes would never do that. Her eyes were dry and the sockets were a dark lilac very tender in hue.

A kind of anger against Pryde took hold of him, and he told his tale badly enough, but the end was satisfactory to Eleanor.

'He was sleeping soundly when I came away,' he said, raging inwardly. 'I wanted to see you, so took my chance and wired. I felt I could not bear to go on without seeing you. I am doing this for your sake, you know— not for Pryde's.'

'For my sake,' said 'Nore, 'after what I have told you!'

'Because of what you told me!' said Dean Forfar. 'I never thought any girl in the world had the sand to go through with that!'

'Girls have always sand somewhere,' said 'Nore emphatically; 'more's the pity that so many of them keep on playing with mud pies all their days.'

Forfar did not pursue the subject. He longed to

say something personal, but there in his own house, to a girl who had cast herself on his mercy for the sake of another man, he dared not. However, Eleanor had much more to say.

'You can write to me at my club' (she gave an address). 'I don't expect much. You have a great deal to do, and Sandy's book to finish also.'

'Oh, only twenty thousand words and the way roughly marked out—that won't take me long, now that I know I can do the rough Northerliness of the style. I have to be so confoundedly outspoken, too—it rather makes a man of my age a little ashamed to be writing about love all the time.'

But 'Nore was too deeply engrossed in her own thoughts to follow him.

'Don't mistake,' she said, 'I am not going into a nunnery, nor shall I turn nurse for contagious cases, not do any of the usual things. I have no call that way. I can't tell yet what I do want, but I am quite sure it isn't my lot to hang on caring for a man who does not care for me. I owed him this, on account of those Lily-roots. But if he gets better, I shall have paid my debt. I shall stand clear and be my own woman again.'

Vaguely the author of 'Tom from Their Moorings' and other world-famous works wondered where he was to come in. But he had more sense than to express the thought now.

Still he liked to hear that she meant to make a life for herself. He ventured to say as much and 'Nore glanced at him keenly.

'Make a life for myself?' she repeated. 'Well, that remains to be seen. A mistake at my age, made by my own fault, may leave a scar—probably it will. But it need not shape the fifty years or so I have in

front of me—that is, if I am lucky. I mean to live every day of it, too—as soon as this is off my mind. Only I can't stay at home. I must get something to do. If I had money enough I would go round the world or shoot big game the same as men do—or say they are going to do—though most of them never get farther than Cairo!

With the utmost difficulty Dean Forfar restrained himself. He would have liked to say that for any or all these things he was at her service. If she would only marry him, she might go round and round the world, and shoot all the lions in Africa. He knew a man in North Nyassa Land.

But what a fool he was. Still not such a fool as to speak to 'Nore just then. And Dean Forfar was grateful for his thirty-five years. 'If I had been ten years younger, I should have gone at it like a bull at a fence, and . . . never looked her in the eyes again. Now she trusts me. That is always something!'

And in fact it was, for the way in which Forfar had received her confession, taking it and ennobling it, approving of the worst of it, had been balm inconceivable to Eleanor Sykes. Already she looked forward to his letter at her club. She laid her hand casually on his arm at a turning where the stairs were a little dark. 'Your sleeve is wet!' she said, and looked at him.

'Yes,' said Dean, 'a girl cried upon it.'

'What girl?' 'Nore asked sharply.

'Her name was McComie. I did not speak to her.'

'Oh,' said 'Nore, 'she belongs to Armytage McGhie. He is serving seven years for her in the get-up of a sweep. I wish somebody would do as much for me!'

'Well,' said Dean Forfar with a sigh, 'if you don't mind my present costume, I shall go and write

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another chapter of 'Sword Bayonets.'

So you see he said it after all and was rather proud of himself.

CHAPTER THIRTY FIVE

'MY POOR LOST CHILD'

Sandy got better, 'Sword Bayonets' had been published serially and the latter chapters especially had been pronounced as much in the best vein of the author as anything he had done. The secret was well kept and no one had raised the least discordant murmur.

'Nore had begun to look upon her daily letter to her dub as one of the necessities of life. She went there a great deal to get rid of her mother, who was for ever grinding at her that the days of her youth would soon be over and that if she did not marry young De Tracy of the Heavies (such good people, my dear—estates in Ireland') she would never have another chance. But it so happened that she mentioned this persecution to Armytage McGhie, and that strong-thewed mechanic, seated on a bench at the garage (new portion, recently built) showed her certain marks on his knuckles.

'These were made against the orbit of Master Farmond's eye,' he said. 'I may look like a sweep, as you say I do—but he is one. Don't have anything to do with him, 'Nore. I'm sorry I can't marry you myself, but I daresay Kit Sykes would oblige. He, at least, is a decent fellow.'

'He's Lily's prize,' said 'Nore. 'Lily toppled him from his perch long ago— besides if I did want—well—I know . . . where to look!'

As she spoke she glanced at her cousin whom she trusted.

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'Yes,' she continued, 'I might— and he would — oh, like a shot. But I want to feel that I can spend a whole evening with V. V. and Sandy without feeling beastly about it. If I discover the least little qualm of jealousy, I sha'n't marry the man who wants to marry me.'

'And whom you want to marry?' said her cousin, turning swiftly upon her.

'Well, yes, I do!'

'Then, you little goose, 'Nore— what is the use of splitting hairs about by-gones? You are not the sort to want to marry one man and care for another!'

'But I mean to be quite sure!'

'Very well, then,' said Armytage, 'you can have them all to yourself tonight if you can fix up the necessary invention for home consumption. I am going to take McComie to see Sweet Nell of Old Drury and you can put in a good deal of other people's domestic dullness, between dinner and the time you have to go. I can send round one of our cars about ten, if that time will suffice you to wallow in the pleasures of home.'

Sandy, largely convalescent, was sitting in an armchair, big account-books at his elbow, pencilled calculations and notes ready for Armytage, Gilston, and Brother John in the morning. A writing-pad was across his knees and on this he was scribbling notes when V. V. brought 'Nore in. He rose gratefully and took her hand.

'It is good of you to come— and there has been no end to your goodness in asking about me all the time I was ill—so V. V. assures me. That, I think, touched me most—I mean it is simply splendid to see you looking so well and coming over so far to see us!'

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V. V. pushed back a bundle of notes and rough sketches.

'Are you, too, caught in the rush of the wheels?' said 'Nore, smiling at her.

'No,' said V. V. 'I have been house hunting out of London. I have been looking at a pretty cottage built for an artist near Witley, all balustrade, verandahs and climbing roses. I made some rough sketches for Sandy to see. He ought to be moved as soon as possible.'

'But the others? What will they do?' said Eleanor. 'Mr. John— Armytage, Mr. Gilston and...'

'Oh, nobody counts when it is a question of Sandy,' said V. V. quite sternly. She seemed to have forgotten the part that 'Nore had played in Sandy's recovery, so immersed was she in that wonderful yet gracious selfishness of loving people who are all and all to one another. 'Nore gave herself every chance. She called her pride to her aid, and failed to find it. She tried the more tender sentiments, but they were off with Armytage and McComie to see Sweet Nell — and Fred and Julia Terry making the lovely vision of young Sam Pepys more lovely still.

Then her sense of hmnour came to her aid and she laughed at herself. It passed, and she was left to explain her laughter.

'It seems so funny here,' she said, 'so different from being at home; here you are all working happily away— marrying and giving in marriage—quite a colony— you and Sandy are married. John, they tell me, is married, and Armytage is going to follow your example as soon as you raise his wages. I do think you might give the poor fellow his chancel By the way, is there nobody for me?'

'There's Rob Gilston,' said Sandy grimly, 'but I

rather think he may be counted as pre-empted, and Freddie, but he . . . is, well— not recommended as a good wearing article.'

Before ten o'clock 'Nore was so weary of the domestic bliss of others, of hearing the wonderful cottage at Witley explained, and of Sandy's suddenly stopping in full flow of conversation with a 'Do excuse me, I've just thought of something I must make a note of. V. V. does not object, and we won't make a stranger of you...' that when she stepped into Armytage's car to go home, she nearly yawned in Sandy's face.

And what happened as a sequel was curious. A few days after 'Nore went into her father's study and after rubbing his grey furze of hair the wrong way, a petting trick she had, she laid an oblong paper before him.

'I married Dean Forfar this morning,' she said quite serenely, 'but only at a registrar's office. I did wish I could have brought you along too, for you are a pretty decent old dad. Only I should have got you into horrible disgrace. Now, I want you to tell me if you think the mater would prefer to be a martyr, or to come to a little service we are going to have tomorrow morning, at St. Nicholas's round the corner.'

Mr. Sykes was not so surprised as he might have been. He understood 'Nore better than any other in the family.

'Well,' he said, 'this comes of clubs and...'

'It comes of a lot of things, dad, but never mind about that just now. Tell me what you think about mother's preferences.'

'I fear,' he said, 'that if consulted, she would lay claim to martyrdom. But if we tell her that we are

keeping all the grand weddings and presents and fuss for Lily—that may comfort her a little. Come here, you lost, disobedient, undutiful, disgraceful child! I shall never forgive you! Never!’

And he folded her in his arms.

As Mr. Sykes had foretold, his wife elected to play the part of Suffering and Persecuted Martyr. On no account would she countenance the wedding in the church even when, rather than leave her out, Mr. and Mrs. Dean Forfar declared themselves quite willing to do without any religious ratification of the law of the land.

But here Mr. Sykes insisted, and in due course gave his daughter away. Lily made a pretty bridesmaid and Kit Sykes communicated what he thought about that matter to Armytage, frock-coated and clean for the day, but in the most uncousinly way possible wishing himself back in the grimy building and repairing shops at the crner of Tenterden Road.

When they came back, Mrs. Sykes, who was not strong enough for violent emotion, forgave them after her manner.

‘My poor, lost child!’ she said, catching 'Nore's head and pulling it violently towards her sofa on which she reclined, like one inexperienced in tenderness, ‘my poor, poor lost child, I hope all may turn out better than we have any reason to hope!’

'Nore caught her husband's eye over her mother's shoulder. Her head was extremely uncomfortable, yet she could not help telegraphing, ‘What did I tell you?’

Mrs. Sykes turned towards Dean Forfar, who stood gravely and patiently waiting her pleasure. ‘And now that you have, as it appears, obtained

possession of my daughter, what do you mean to do with her?’

‘Take her to gnaw crusts in his wretched, miserable Grub Street garret!’ promptly asserted Mr. Sykes in hollow tones.

Whereat they all laughed—even Mrs. Sykes being compelled to join in. ‘I wish you would not be so foolish, Edward—there is a serious side to this.’

‘Indeed there is, as Forfar will soon find out. He has to keep that young woman in clothes—not to speak of food, fuel and lighting—and in addition he talks of taking her a little trip round the world.’

‘To Bournemouth would be much more respectable,’ said Mrs. Sykes, ‘for when it is wet you can go into the arcade and sit down. Besides, I know a lady there who has seventeen King Charles spaniels. Perhaps if 'Nore called and was very sweet to her, she might give them one. I could easily look her up in my address-book. I met her at Folkestone Royal Hydropathic—quite a nice woman and so much more practical than going round the world. They might never see a spaniel that was worth having.’

‘Young people will be young people, said Mr. Sykes with a grave face, ‘but then they say that with the new railway and all the navvies, the roads about Bournemouth are not at all safe—all under trees, you remember, Esmeralda.’

‘Oh, I had quite forgotten,’ said Mrs. Sykes; ‘but then it must be greatly changed from the Bournemouth of my day, even on the East Cliff nothing but respectable people lived, and the men at the railway-station were most polite.’

‘It isn't at all like that now, my dear,’ said Mr. Sykes, with gravity, ‘I heard of a lady—perhaps the

very one with the spaniels— who dropped a purse with more than a hundred pounds in it, and when a common workman brought it back to her, she gave him sixpence. And what did the man do? He threw the coin on the ground— it might have nourished his little children for a whole day— and after crushing it into the sand with his boot-heel, he spat on it!’

‘Oh, what are the lower orders coming to, Edward? Have not I always prophesied it?’

‘You have indeed, my dear!’ said Mr. Sykes, and with his eyes on the ground, he sighed deeply.

‘Perhaps in that case,’ said his wife, releasing her daughter so suddenly that her head bounced up, ‘it will be safer for them to go round the world—though as for the passage-money . . . !’

‘Not a penny of it shall they have from me,’ affirmed Mr. Sykes, with sudden ferocity. Then calming himself as suddenly he added, ‘But after all, Nore can ship as a stewardess, and if Dean cannot manage to go as a stowaway, he can always work his passage as a stoker!’

‘Well,’ said Mrs. Sykes resignedly, ‘anything is better than these lonely roads about Bournemouth and those dreadful, common men!’

‘Oh, father, how could you?’ said Lily, giving his arm a shake, ‘such fibs as you did tell the poor mater! I don’t believe there was any woman at Bournemouth who lost a hundred pounds.’

‘Nonsense, child, go to Bournemouth and ask the very first policeman! He will tell you. He may not have heard about the sixpence, but he will think it quite likely. He befriends all the cooks at the big houses and knows what their mistresses are capable of.’

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'Poor mamma!' said Lily, 'she will never want to go back there again all her life! You ought to be ashamed, papa!'

'Well, girls,' Mr. Sykes owned up manfully, 'I don't deny I was thinking of that. For to an active man, Bournemouth is— well— not Paradise. Besides, if I don't know how to manage my own wife by this time, I wonder who does. And you, Lil, when your time comes, whether you run away or stand up to a grand wedding, I shall have to go through much more than that for your sake— but it will never happen, of course. You are a fixture, aren't you, Lil—our immovable, unlost, imlosable, stay-at-home, nobody-will-have-her, dear and only remaining child!'

'Don't be so sure of that, dad!' said Lily, smiling delightedly.

'Oh, what a goose of a father is ours!' said his eldest daughter to her husband with her arm about Mr. Sykes's neck.

At which Dean Forfar ventured to smile also. And they were all very happy—especially Armytage, when he had kissed the bride and hastened to change back into his smutty working-clothes in the garage at the corner of the Tenterden Road.

CHAPTER THIRTY SIX

THE OLD ORDER CHANGETH

But among so many things which, like the waters of Siloa, seemed flowing softly, there remained one eventuality which continued to thunder menacingly in the ears of all concerned. Lord Balmaghie, incited by Lady Balmaghie and imagining that his nephew had wilfully raised his heel against him, would by no means recall the edict which expelled the Prydes from their century-old tenancy of Fernielands.

To the old man the well-known field and fold and pasture-lands looked more gloomy than ever before under the beating of the winter rain. He would never see the grain yellow on these slopes again. The dark pines of Forresthill Wood made a mourning border to a very dark page indeed.

Every dike, fence, gate, all the office-houses and enclosures had been the work of the hands of Prydes of other generations, and now all were to pass into the hands of the young man with the loud voice and the boisterous manner—the nephew of the factor.

Mrs. Pryde could not look at her sixty kine filing out slow and orderly to the scanty spring pasture without shedding tears. The 'house lass' and the 'byre lass' were partakers of her grief, for they knew that they would never again find so good a place. Nancy Malcolm of the 'Dairy' was not so deeply moved. There was, she knew, a cothouse adjacent to the little farm of The Cruives on Creeside, and if Jo wanted to begin life there—well, she might at least think about it.

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The long illness of Sandy had made a kind of empty space during which the old folk could think of little else. Mr. Walkerburn and his nephew went and came as if the place belonged to them. They looked at rooms with proprietary airs. They took measurements and trailed chams athwart the farm without anybody paying much attention to them. But all the same, the Prydes had a dull feeling somewhere within each of them that the time of their own peace was short.

Jo and Allen had been to The Cruives and thought well of it. 'Plenty of room' (they reported) 'for black-faced sheep. Allen could herd for a while at least. Jo would be needed about the house. Perhaps, too, a boy for odd jobs. But within doors their mother, with Nancy Malcolm to help her, could do everything. They could keep about three of their sixty cows.

And here the old lady, who loved her kye next to her boys, burst into tears.

'They might keep one horse. Also the pony would be handy, while, at any rate, there was no limit to the number of hens for which provision might be made.'

But the old folk clung to the ancient house of Fernielands. Its smoked oaken beams were dear, immeasurably dear. Then there was the 'ben-the-hoose,' which Mrs. Pryde had never learned to call the parlour, the big bed-room, where all the Prydes had been born and where many had died, the 'boys room,' a long gallery which abutted on the stable and barn, and was indented and scratched with inscriptions—a grand place for pillow-fights—the 'Maids room'—kept apart as a spare room during the present tenancy, because no maids had been given

to John Pryde the elder and his spouse—the chamber of conserves and honey, scented languorously with dropping from the comb—the door through into the cheese-room, which also when open gave forth so good a smell.

‘Ah, waes me! Waes me!’ said Mrs. Pryde to herself ten times a day, when at every turn the coming Exodus was thrust sharply before her. She would busy herself about her work and perhaps for a moment forget. But sharp and sudden would come the awakening. By the end of May all these things would have ceased to be.

Armytage McGhie was quite unable to do anything. His entrance into the great business concern of Flyde & Co., Tenterden Road, had shut the door even with my lord. And my Lord Balmaghie was completely under the thumb of my lady. Mr. Walkerburn played his cards well, and his nephew, Laurence Walkerburn, already took the airs of the man in possession of Fernielands.

Several times the young men Jo and Allen came nigh to throwing him over the dike into the road, but they had been warned by their father to do nothing contrary to the law. It was better, said Mr. Pryde, to bide a little, and not to put oneself in the wrong.

Sandy, strengthened but wholly unable to travel, was at the Witley cottage with V. V. He would have supplied all the money that was necessary, but Lord Balmaghie, and especially my lady, did not want money. The rent might have been doubled and it would have made no difference. The Prydes were to clear out of the Balmaghie estates. Their heritage in the kirk—square pew, eldership, and influence were to be taken by another.

This edict had been pronounced ‘for doom.’ John

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had gone north once or twice, but always he had brought back word that nothing better could be made of the business however, also that his father was stout of heart— his mother considerably less so. Sandy wished to go to them immediately, but the risk of a cast-back in his slow convalescence caused the doctors to forbid it. V. V. also knew that he would only anger himself for naught, and the angers of Sandy were terrible. So she could not let him go. John could be spared and John should go to the 'roup'—or that terrible sale of the stock, implements and everything that could not be housed in the little holding by the Water of Cree.

'And you are not to talk the least little bit of business with Sandy— please, Mr. Shieldhill,' said V. V. It is immensely good of you to come.

'I will do my best,' said Mr. Shieldhill, 'and indeed I am not sorry to have a holiday— my wife is out of town with her people and everything is running smooth. I shall take Sandy all about Witley and let him see the cottages Birket Foster painted. Who can help me to push the bath-chair?'

As if rubbed up by an Aladdin lamp Ben Meares stood grinning and working his shoulders on the path. He had dealt out to himself a new chauffeur's cap on the strength of this fresh duty.

'Not quite sixty horse power,' he said, smiling, 'but it's rum. I never thought to see Muster Pryde in a bath-chair. Wy, he took Humpy Jo and another bruising kid out of the old 'Vic.,' knocking their heads together all the way, and their four feet never touched the ground!'

'Ah,' said Mr. Shieldhill, 'but a chimney-pot may fall on anybody's head!'

'It may,' said Ben Meares doubtfully, 'but Muster

Pryde was never afeard of anything, sir.'

'Nor am I yet, Ben,' said Sandy, smiling; 'wait a couple of months and give me a good three weeks' training. Then we'll see!'

'Nay, Muster Pryde, nay— I've had my doin'!— Now or never's the time for me to tumble you in the ditch.'

At this they all laughed, for when one is weak, laughter comes easily, if it comes at all, and those who stand about are glad to laugh also. The sound keeps up the patient. So Sandy and Mr. Shieldhill spent a fine open-air day together, but at the end of it the patient jealously counted the hours he would have to spend without V. V.

He went early to bed, and the next morning Mr. Shieldhill had to return to town. Sandy was left alone with Ben Meares. So he established himself in a corner of the garden under the pleasant shade of an apple-tree, just then covered with flowers.

'Now, Ben,' he said, 'tell me all you can remember about V. V.—I mean Mrs. Pryde, in the days when she used to be at the Kentham 'Vic'— before she knew me, I mean?'

And with slow care and willing precision many traits of V. V.'s goodness were recalled— how kind she had been more than once to a married chorus-lady, and to the trapeze-man with the broken leg, how she would not take away another girl's part, though the manager threatened to dismiss her for it. Merry tales, too, he told— how once, dressed in an ulster and jockey-cap, she had held a horse while the rider, Mr. Adney, had gone all over the theatre looking for her. He was always giving her things she didn't want, but she never accepted anything 'except the 'leettle dorg' that you saved and plastered up.

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Here, Adney, Where's your mistress?'

Then Adney ran about on his hind legs and whined pathetically.

So in far-off Witley, under the blossoms of the apple-trees beloved of good Birket Foster and his son William, near the cottage they have so often drawn and painted, began the day that was to be so terribly exciting on the hill-top of Fernielands.

Nothing, not even a funeral winding its way black and narrow down the beech and birch copses and across the open face of the moor, is so sad in the Scotland of the farmlands as a 'displeenishing sale.'

On the posts of the loaning-gate, and all along the road within a good six miles of radius, the black and white announcements are pasted. The sale at the farm of Fernielands was a 'big sale' and the placards were by the popular rules of measurement 'as long as your arm.'

The respectability of the vendor was thus tested in plain linear measurement. The day began early. Indeed before the twilight of that May day the lads and the herds were on the hills gathering the 'out cattle.' Hie sheep were all to be sold at the auction marts of Cairn Edward on the following Monday. But in the home park there were a number of 'nowt', the sixty cows, three bulls of various ages and strains, all strangely out of place, all discontented, all in an uneasy humour, with a vague sense in their placid hearts that things were not just as they ought to be.

For them, too, the old order was changing, and certainly they did not like the new. There were quarrels, homings, and even combatants which needed to besep-arated and sent to other fields to snort out their wrath.

Within the big yard of the farm, foursquare and

cleanly swept, the implements were ranged—'Harvester' mowers of the most recent type, reapers-and-binders, fanners, ploughs, harrows, rollers—all the necessities of a big arable farm such as Fernielands, long inhabited and well plenished with gear.

In the corner near the entrance of the dairy, where McComie and Nancy Malcolm had talked of their lawful prey, ran a table, long, narrow, and carefully spread with white. Behind, under the shelter of a temporary tent erected by Jo, were to be found the refreshments. Sandwiches were ready cut and covered with damp cloths to keep them from drying in the sun. There were roasts of beef and boiled mutton at which to out and come again.

The whole was served by McComie in a plain black dress and 'the sweetest little hat' of the same sombre hue—a costume which looked nothing, but because of its cut and style cost a lot. With her was Nance Malcolm in her Sunday best, pretty also, but obviously belonging to another world.

Time hung heavily after everything was ranged in order. Mrs. Pryde could not bear to choose among her kitchen things and declared that she would take them all, even if she had so little room for them that she had to throw them into the Cree. But her husband took her off into the 'ben room' and signed to John and the 'house lass' to make a clean sweep of the bigger pots for boiling the food for wintering cattle, which would not be needed at The Cruives.

So it was done, and then the people began to arrive. They straggled up at first by the avenue in gigs and four-wheeled dog-carts. They appeared from nowhere in particular among the grey crags,

SANDY'S LOVE

and over the stiles which led from the circling woods.

But every face was turned towards the house on the hill-top. And few there were, who, meeting with a neighbour, did not pause to say (after the usual greeting of 'Warm day, James!') that it would be an unco sight to look up at Fernielands and think that there was not a Pryde there. That was something they had never seen— no, nor their forbears before them for many generations.

Still, it was, they supposed, what they had all to come to. Then they speculated theologically on the future fate of 'Walkerburn' and judged that when he came to suffer for his sins, it would not be of cold! And as for his nephew, the ash-plant which somebody would have to break across his back was a fine stout bit of timber already.

And there were many lads who would be willing for the job— aye, aye, in the Lord's ain time, dootless. He could cast down the mighty from their seats. ... In His time— aye— aye, and in the meanwhile they must just do the best they could as humble instruments.

'Walkerburn will be the grand big muckle man this day!' said Garvie of Ulloch bitterly.

'Aye, this day— maybe - but the morn? 'The mills o' God'— ye ken the rest.'

His neighbour from the Craig it was who answered him, grimly and darkly nodding his head. Craig was literary and took in all the books of poetry that were brought to him by travelling merchants.

CHAPTER THIRTY SEVEN

MY LADY AND MY LORD

'Oh, to see the byres standing full like this at sic an hour on a May morning,' said the 'Wee Heelanter,' clinging to the neck of one after another of her favourite cows. 'Och, Meckie, you that should be in the far pasture, up to the knees in guid girse—there ye stand, thinking that maybe they will sell ye to a milk man that will strike ye to the marrow three times in the day—and water your milk after!'

Comely Kirsty McCron (the house lass), being a daughter of the country, knew where to make the best use of her grief. The sorrow was real enough, but round at the back by the pig-sties was a low wall very convenient for sitting upon. Kirsty did not mean to be of those who weep and are not comforted.

So many young men that day took turns at the consolation of Christina, and she had to say to most of them, 'Gae wa' wi' ye, ye dinna mean what ye say!'

But all the same she looked with a well-founded expectation for that day to fructify, saying to herself that among so many there would at least be found one or two who did mean what they said.

V. V., with whom Mrs. Pryde had developed a very precious sympathy, stayed with the old people, behind the blind which was drawn down in the devastated 'ben-the-house' room.

But for all that, the quick ear of the Mistress of Fernielands caught and interpreted each sound outside.

'That's him coming now,' she said. 'Oh, he's a fine man, Maister Mallet—I'm no sayin'. But how he can joke on siccan a day, beats me!'

'Hush, lass,' said her husband affectionately; 'do you not know that he does it to get us good prices? He tells his stories to take the laugh, and he has the ready tongue to wile a buyer out of the bid he had not meant to make.'

'Oh, I ken, I ken,' she wailed, casting her hands loosely abroad on the table, 'but it's a' terrible— it's terrible. I would rather be a gravedigger at a parish kirk wi' a fat kirk-yaird.'

From outside arrived the crooning noise of a great throng of people, silent or speaking low for the most part. Looking through a chink of the green blind V. V. could see that the crowd, entirely masculine, gravitated toward the refreshment-stall held by McComie and Nancy Malcolm. She saw a big, self-assured, red-faced man who went hither and thither among the throng, whispering to one well-to-do farmer and then to another. Him she recognized. He was one of the men Sandy had thrown out of the window the terrible day of the Spangled Poster.

He took men by the arms two at a time and marched them up to McComie as if he were at a booth in a fair.

'See here, my lass,' he would say, 'let us have three whiskies and a large soda for these gentlemen and myself.'

But Mr. Walkerburn had first made sure that Sandy Pryde was not on the ground and that he had nothing to fear on that score. Also he and his nephew were the actual possessors— indeed, the masters of Fernielands—or, at least they would be in a few days, as soon as Lord Balmaghie's letter of confirmation arrived.

The young red-faced man also spent a great deal of his time in hanging about the refreshment tent.

He had seen McComie smile, and had caught a glimpse of the witchery which lurked in the stormily-tender oceanic eyes of the girl in black. Yet somehow he dared not speak to her.

As might have been expected; McComie was the only one who had the true conception of the proper demeanour to be observed in the conduct of a 'roup.' She was more than at home among so many men—that they were mostly men of Nancy Malcolm's kind did not seriously matter to McComie. She knew that in order to get good bids, you must please the buyer and in this way loosen his money in his pocket.

So she smiled upon all—not with any fixed smile, but as if appreciating every man at his own estimation of himself—a most discriminating young woman was Miss Alice McComie.

She infected Nance Malcolm with her spirit, and the stall soon became the centre of all attraction. So much so that laughter never quite died away there.

And even John, moving quietly about, seeing that all things were numbered and in order—auctioneer's lists laid out in triplicate for auctioneer, clerk, and vendor, and a stand ready for Mr. Mallet when he came—stopped to listen. He heard McComie's laugh ring out. He heard the jest that entranced the clown and that other which caused the rich tenant of half a score of 'led-farms' to unbend. Then he, too, smiled grimly, thinking of the wistful brown eyes of Bessie at home in Ealing.

He thought also of his brief midsommer madness about McComie, and realized that he was not the man to keep in check a girl whom it took Sandy and V. V. all their time to manage.

But in his heart, and in all hearts that day, McComie became the centre of a great goodwill. No

hurtful words—no hot and hasty Galloway curse, not even the light speech of a wild Irish drover was heard near the booth where the two girls served so deftly.

Everyone made sure that it would be a record sale.

At last, amid a push and a hush, Mr. Mallet was in his pulpit, hammer in hand. Allen and Jo stood ready with two teams of splendidly matched plough-horses—pedigreed Clydesdales, descendants of the famous Rob Roy in the male line. The four were greeted with a murmur of admiration as they ranged up to be sold in pairs. There was really no need to say a great deal about them, but that was all the more reason why Mr. Mallet launched into his subject, jesting, making sly hits at this one and that other, each understood and intensely appreciated by the crowd.

Certainly, save for his own reputation, he might have saved himself the trouble. Because every man within ten miles knew the quality of the Fernielands stock—horses and cows—stable, dairy, byre, pigsty and all that was Fernielands'.

So intent was the crowd on the opening address of the auctioneer that the purr of a noble automobile outside hardly caused it to turn a single head. Doubtless this was some laird or newcomer who had run over to see what he could pick up for his home-farm—none of their kenned lairds, who, of course, would buy through their accredited men of business.

A tall young man dressed in black, and very quiet in manner, made his way through the crowd. Galloway folk are always polite, and make room for a stranger, presuming that he has a reason (which

they have not) for being in a hurry.

The gaze of Mr. Walkerburn and that of the young man, his nephew, were now on the four Clydesdale horses. These had been well accustomed to the farm. It would be a pity to let them slip. But unless something were done, the price would be a stiff one. So much was a certainty.

‘Of course you have a recent guarantee given by the veterinary surgeon?’ Mr. Walkerburn demanded, speaking at large.

Before the auctioneer could refer him to the terms of sale, John Pryde, ordinarily a man of few words, cut in.

‘There are two hundred men here today, sir, who know my father's horses better than any veterinary surgeon. The price they will bid will be the best certificate!’

Mr. Walkerburn was silent, but still more determined to buy.

‘Now, gentlemen, for the first pair—sired by Rob Roy, out of Pride of Forresthill.’

The young man in black standing just in front of the auctioneer, but behind the factor, raised his hand as if to demand silence.

‘I thank you, Mr. Mallet,’ he said, ‘but there will be no sale today. Your charges shall be at my cost. Gentlemen, you who have come so far, I am sorry if there should be any disappointment. But it is inevitable. Mr. Pryde will not leave Fernielands—nor, I hope, will his sons and sons' sons after him! For this, as good neighbours, you will, I know, rejoice.’

The factor turned hastily, his face congested and purple, and pushed his way towards the voice.

‘Who the devil?’ he began, and then as suddenly

stopped.

'Mr. Armytage McGhie—I beg your pardon, I am sure. But in this matter there can be no interference, I assure you. I have my lord's warrant in my pocket. The farm is let, or as good as let.'

'I think not,' said Armytage calmly.

'But I have a letter from my lord saying that he would consider my nephew's offer, and that in the meantime I was to push on with the sale. My lord says also.'

'What lord?' said Armytage, more coolly than ever.

'My Lord Balmaghie, of course!'

'I am Lord Balmaghie!' and Armytage's clear voice carried far in the hush of the people, assembled to listen to the duel between him and the factor. 'My uncle died at St. Heliers, in the Isle of Jersey, on Tuesday night. There is a telegram for you at the estate office.'

'I have not been there this week,' growled Mr. Walkerburn, 'but I don't believe a word of it.'

'As to that, you may please yourself. This is my late uncle's lawyer—Mr. McPhail, of Messrs. Murray, Jamieson and McPhail. Perhaps you know him. Ah, I thought so. Well, you need not trouble yourself to go back to the office, Mr. Walkerburn. We will forward the telegram, and the management of the estates will devolve, at least for the present, on my friend Captain Kit Sykes.'

He got no farther. Already there grew among the crowd a curious kind of hollow sound, a hum of delighted comment, restrained by the thought of the dead lord whom they had known so little, but mainly of triumph that the reign of the hated Walkerburn was over for ever.

If they had been any other than a Galloway

crowd, they would have cheered Armytage, instead of shaking hands with him silently and awkwardly, before moving off to make way for a friend who would as grimly repeat the ceremony.

In the midst of all this there came the clatter of hoofs, and Walkerburn and his nephew, seated in the new high gig, galloped out of the yard. Then at last there came a faint 'Hooray,' and a few of the young men, ill-disciplined, but excellent of intention, sent a shower of clods after them. And so in the midst of dusty explosions, public feeling convoyed the tyrant and his parasite out of this history.

'And this,' said the new lord, giving his hand to McComie and leading her forth, happy but grave—not a dimple showing, only her eyes changeful and wet like the sweep of multitudinous seas 'is my wife, the Lady Balmaghie! You are many of you my tenants, and in due time, at a more fitting occasion, we shall meet again and make a feast together, with, as you see, a hostess worthy of you and far more than worthy of me!'

Out of the darkened room the old folk tottered to the door, dazed and amazed. They were not to go—not to go (so a score of voices assured them)—their hands were wrung. Yet they could not believe it. People talked in their ears, but their ears were stopped. V. V. brought them a telegram from Sandy full of love and congratulations. It was to them as a tale that had been told. The words danced and ran into prismatic colours before the wet spectacle glass.

Not till the people had disappeared, not until the motor had whirred down the road with the Edinburgh lawyer, Kit Sykes, and the auctioneer, did the Prydes, still (Thank God) of Fernielands, begin to take in what had happened.

SANDY'S LOVE

They had been told that Armytage who worked with their son was the new Lord Balmaghie and that McComie was my lady. The words simply stopped outside. The meaning refused to penetrate.

But when the sixty cows had been loosened from the ring-halters in the byres, and began to take their contented and sober way back to their own well-beloved pastures as if nothing had happened, Mrs. Pryde suddenly dropped her head on V. V.'s breast, and wept for joy while her husband patted her very gently on the shoulder in a sublime ecstasy of consolation.

As soon as she could after this, V. V. flew back to her room to look up the Bradshaw she had brought with her. Yes, she could easily catch the boat-train at Cairn Edward that night at ten. She would be with Sandy tomorrow morning—twelve hours at least before he would be expecting her.

But when she got to Witley, where all about the Surrey flowers scented their finest there on the platform was Sandy—a wreck of a Sandy, but... Sandy, bright-eyed and expectant, looking from carriage to carriage.

‘How did you know? It is a miracle!’ she cried.

Sandy smiled, and for once, because he caught the station master with his back turned, he forgot the famous rule about not kissing in public places.

‘No,’ he said, ‘it is not quite a miracle. Ever since the day after Shieldhill went away, I have met every London train!’

‘Bless me,’ cried V. V., ‘what for?’

‘Just because I wearied for you, V. V. And now, take me into the orchard and let me look at you. By and by I can hear the news!’

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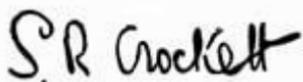
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'Mayhap that is the best fortune of all – to be loved by a few greatly and constantly, rather than to be loudly applauded and immediately forgotten by the many.'

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "S. R. Crockett". The signature is written in a cursive style with a prominent "S" and "R" at the beginning.

