THE RHYMER

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Author: Allan McAulay

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THE RHYMER

By Allan McAulay

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TROW DIRECTORY
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TO
MARY AND JEANIE

THE RHYMER

CHAPTER I.

In the year of grace 1787, Mr. Graham of The Mains, a worthy gentleman and laird of the county of Perth, had a family of seven daughters. This, though hardly at that date amounting to a social crime, was an indiscretion in a man of few acres and modest income. Moreover, his partner in life was even now a blooming and a buxom dame, capable of adding further olive branches to the already over-umbrageous family tree. She had, indeed, but lately performed the somewhat procrastinated duty of adding an heir to the tale of the seven lasses of The Mains.

This was as it should be—but it was quite enough.

It was market day in the autumn of the year, and Mr. Graham, who farmed his own land, had attended the weekly market at the country town of C——. He was about to jog home in the dusk, when he was accosted by a neighbour and fellow-laird.

'Hey—Mains!' called out this personage. 'Bide a bit, man! It is in my mind to do you and the mistress at The Mains a good turn.' Mr. Graham drew rein.

'It is not I that will miss a chance of that,' he observed, in good humour.

'Well, to be straight to the point,' said his friend, 'I have a friend biding with me at this time, one Jimmy Cheape—you may have heard me speak of him, for he was a crony of our college days. He is a man of substance in the county of Fife—and he has a mind to be made acquainted with you and your lady.'

'Ay, ay!' ejaculated Mr. Graham. 'A most laudable and polite wish, truly, and not to be gainsaid!'

'He is in search of a wife,' said the friend, slily, with a dig in the ribs of the laird with the butt-end of his whip, 'and I bethought me that a presentation to a man with seven daughters was the very thing to be useful. So I promised it, and he jumped for it—as keen as a cock at a groset.'

Mr. Graham pricked up his ears.

'That's the wife's business rather than mine,' he observed, cautiously.

'Well! let the wife see him, but see him yourself first. Yonder he is.' The speaker pointed to a burly form, standing with its back to the friends. 'I will bring him forward;' and he proceeded to be as good as his word.

When Mr. Cheape, of the county of Fife, presented his countenance to his possible father-in-law of the future, he was found to be a gentleman of decidedly mature age, already grey, deeply pitted with the smallpox, and of no very alluring address. His salutation was gruff, and his eye shifty.

'To-morrow,' he remarked, with rather alarming abruptness, immediately after the form of introduction had been gone through, 'I will wait upon Mrs. Graham at The Mains, at about eleven of the clock in the morning.' With that he stumped off, for he added to his other peculiarities that of being rather lame of one leg.

'Ah! he means business, you see!' said the intermediary, admiringly. The corners of Mr. Graham's mouth, which had taken an upward inclination at the first salutation of his friend, now drooped considerably, as he gazed after his new acquaintance.

'He is somewhat well on in years,' he remarked, dubiously, 'and there is not that about him that will take a lass's fancy.'

'Tut!' said his friend, 'there is well-nigh one thousand a year about him and his bonny bit place of Kincarley in the county of Fife; and he has fine store of

plate and plenishing of linen—so he tells me—as well as the siller. And *that* takes a lass's fancy fast enough, let me tell you.'

'Well, maybe,' said the laird, and he gave the reins a jog. 'Good-night to you, and you shall hear what betides.'

Mr. Graham jogged home along the muddy roads towards The Mains in a meditative mood. The thought of his seven daughters often sat heavy on his mind. He could not portion them, and, with or without portions, it was difficult to imagine how they could marry or settle in a part of the country so remote, that society could hardly be said to exist—daughters, as they were, of a man who could not possibly afford to send them to share the gaieties of the capital, or even of the distant county town. Yet their marriage was a fixed idea with his wife, as he well knew—the only idea, indeed, for their future which it was natural and proper, at that day, for her to entertain. Alison, their eldest girl, was almost twenty, and at that age her mother had been already three years married and had a thriving nursery; two others, well arrived at woman's estate, trod closely on her heels. Very well indeed could the laird imagine with what enthusiasm his partner would welcome the advent of a suitor, and a wealthy suitor, too. Yet he had vague doubts as to whether he should have placed this temptation within reach of the eager mother of seven daughters. Perhaps it would have been better to have declined the visit from Mr. Cheape once for all. For although this obscure country laird of old-time Scotland had a rough exterior, not differing greatly from that of a farmer or yeoman of the better class, and though he rode a horse that sometimes drew the plough, a clumsy figure in his brass-buttoned blue coat and miry buckskins, yet he was a gentleman at heart, and an honest man to boot. He had been far from admiring the exterior and address of Mr. Cheape of Kincarley, and compunction assailed him when he thought of his Alison, or Kate, or Maggie, subjected to the wooing of such a bear. However, it was their mother's affair, he thought, with that comfortable shifting of responsibility on to feminine shoulders which man has so gracefully inherited from Adam. Besides, he looked forward to telling the news, being a bit of a humorist in his own way. So he whipped up the old horse into a heavy trot.

The Mains lay low and sheltered in the heart of an uninteresting agricultural corner of the Perthshire lowlands. It was a low, rambling, old house, of no pretensions—little better, indeed, than a farm—with small windows in thick walls, and little low-ceilinged, ill-lighted rooms. There were some fine sycamores about it, the abode of an ancient rookery, and a grand lime tree grew in the field in front of the house—so very old that no one knew or could guess its age. To the east of The Mains lay its farm buildings, and beyond them again the old-fashioned tangled garden. Further, and around on all sides, were thick spruce woods, where the wild pigeons crooned in the summer, and there were always

cones for the gathering. Through gaps in the woods, and from certain points of vantage on The Mains's land, you could see the Highland hills. But to Alison and her little sisters these always seemed far, far away—as though in another country altogether.

Lights in the deep-set windows welcomed the laird, and they were cheery in the damp murk of the autumn evening. When he was divested of his mud-stiffened riding gear, he stretched himself at ease before the crackling fire in his own sanctum, and his lady joined him. It was a long, low, dark room, lined with fusty books, which no one ever took from the shelves. The mantelpiece was of solid stone, washed a pale green, and—chiseled roughly—just below the shelf was a motto, rudely finished off with a clam-shell, the crest of the Grahams:—

'In human life there's nothing steadfast stands,
Youth, Glorie, Riches fade. Death's sure at hand.'

So it said. But neither the laird nor the lady of The Mains had any air of paying attention to this warning of a somewhat despondent progenitor.

The mistress of the house was a handsome woman still, in spite of household and maternal cares. Above the middle height, and of comely figure, she had hair still raven black, a glowing colour in her soft unwithered cheek, and the light of a strong and unimpaired vitality in her fine, though rather hard, black eye. She had the complete empire over her husband, which such a woman will ever have over men—a woman, healthy, fresh, strong-willed, though not moulded, perhaps, in the most refined of nature's moulds. He had married her in his youth—the daughter of a small Glasgow lawyer, hardly, perhaps, his equal from a social point of view. But this was a failing soon overlooked in the blooming, hearty, managing bride, who brought fresh blood to mingle with the rather attenuated strain of a genteel Scottish family, which boasted more lineage than looks.

The laird stretched himself to the genial warmth, and prepared to enjoy the communication of his bit of news.

'A gentleman is to visit us here at The Mains to-morrow in the morning, wife,' he began, casually.

'Oh, ay,' said Mrs. Graham, in the tone of one who expects no pleasant surprises. 'It'll be Cultobanocher or Drumore, likely, to speir about the grey mare and her foal.'

'Not at all,' said the laird, 'but a stranger this time—one Cheape of Kincarley, in the county of Fife, at this time abiding with Drumore.'

'And what will he be wanting with us?' inquired the mistress of The Mains.

'A wife, it would seem,' said the laird, in a carefully-suppressed tone of voice, but a twinkle in his eye.

'Tut, laird!' said the lady, crossly, 'you're joking, but none of your jokes for me!' She indeed believed the news too good to be true, and was wroth with the laird for tantalising her on so tender a subject.

'I am not joking—not I,' protested the husband and father. "Tis the living truth, as I sit here. This fellow will be over here to-morrow at noon to see if he cannot choose a wife among our seven lasses.'

Then followed, in answer to a rain of questions from the excited lady, a full and particular account of Mr. Cheape, his means and estate—all, indeed, that the laird could tell. Mrs. Graham's face was flushed, her eyes sparkling; the corners of her full, firm mouth twitched with eagerness. Before the conversation was half over, she had the wedding settled in her mind, with already a side-thought for the bride's dress, and such scanty plenishing as could be spared from The Mains.

'And to think that I was putting poor Ally down for an old maid!' she exclaimed, rapturously. 'The girl with never a man after her yet, and then to have this rich husband flung at her head! She was born with a silver spoon in her mouth, after all—poor Ally!'

'Bide a wee!' said the laird, cautiously. 'Wait till you see the man, my woman! A grey beard, even like myself, and speckled like a puddock wi' the cow-pox. I doubt the girl will get a scunner when she sees him.'

But his partner pounced upon his doubts with righteous anger.

'Laird,' she said, 'if I see you putting the like o' that into Ally's head, I'll be at the end of my patience. Setting the lass against her meat that gait—such foolery!'

'Lasses think of love—' began the laird.

'Love, indeed!' almost screamed the lady; 'and what right has *she* to think of love, and her almost twenty, and never a jo to her name yet, or a man's kiss but her father's on the cheek o' her? When *I* was her age, well knew I what love was; but *she*—let her thank her stars she's got this chance, and needna pine a spinster all her days!'

'Well, well,' said the laird, uncomfortably, 'manage it your own way. I'll keep my fingers out of the pie. And sort *you* Mr. Cheape of Kincarley when he comes to-morrow, for I'll ha' none of him!'

His lady, finding he would respond on the subject no longer, bustled off to her daughter.

CHAPTER II.

'Ally, Ally!' she called in her clear, strong voice all over the house, 'where are you, Ally?' and through the darkening passages she went in eager search of her eldest daughter. The seven lasses of The Mains were variously disposed of in the old warren of a house—in the lesser rooms, in the attics under the roof, reached by a spiral wooden stair, on which their young feet clattered up and down from early morn till early bed-time.

At this moment Alison was putting to bed her two-year-old brother, the 'young laird,' and apple of all eyes at The Mains. She sat with him in her arms at the tiny window of the nursery and crooned him to sleep, and as she sang she looked out at the murky red sky behind the plane trees, at the rooks circling and cawing on their way to bed, at the old lime, a towering mass of black shadow in the gloaming. This was the scene that Alison looked upon continually every evening of her life—this young woman without lovers and innocent of kisses.

Mrs. Graham was breathing rather quickly by the time she stood at the nursery door, and her first elated sentences were somewhat breathless.

'Braw news your father has brought home for you to-night, Ally!' she began.

'Wheesht, mother!' said Alison, 'you will waken Jacky.'

'Ah!' said Mrs. Graham, knowingly, 'you'll soon have done with Jacky now!'

'Sure,' said Alison, lifting round grey eyes to her mother's face, and pressing Jacky's head close to her shoulder, 'I've no wish to be done with Jacky;' and she put a kiss on the boy's curls.

'Tut!' said Mrs. Graham, impatiently, 'you might have little Jackys of your own. Think you never of that, Ally?' Alison blushed in the dark: it was not a fair question. Jacky was so sound asleep by this time that the voices did not wake him, and she rose, laid him on the wooden cot beside her own bed, and happed the clothes about him with deft movements full of a natural motherliness.

'Come down now, Ally,' said her mother, 'I want you.'

Alison obeyed her mother, as hitherto she had always done, in the simple management of her life.

'You are to get a man, Ally, after all,' said the lady, impressively. 'A husband, and a good one. Isn't that the brawest news ever you've heard yet?'

Alison was not quite certain, but there is no doubt, simple soul that she was, that she was impressed and awed, and that a flutter disturbed her quiet heart. Alison had never read even the few romances of her day, and knew nothing about love; and although she sang, in her sweet, untrained voice, as she went about the house, the love-songs of her country, often piercing in their pathos and passion—their language was a sealed book to her. True, Kirsty the dairy-maid had a lover who put an arm round her willing waist, and Alison had seen the pair walking

so, in many a gloaming, by the gate of the cow-park. Would *she* have a lover now, and an arm round her waist? Mrs. Graham did not dwell on such things in the present interview with her daughter; but she spoke of Mr. Cheape of Kincarley with solemn impressiveness; of his house and his lands, and his plate and his linen, and Alison was no unwilling listener. It was a calm-blooded, unawakened nature, this of Alison's yet, moulded in the dim monotony of obscure country life, in daily performance of humble duties; a heart stirred yet by no passion more mastering than a sister's matter-of-course love for other sisters, and the little brother, born so late. She was a sensible, steady girl, yet only a girl, after all; and I do not say, that night, as she lay down in her narrow, hard bed beside the softly-breathing baby-brother, that she did not dream of a bridegroom and a wedding-dress.

Next morning, at the usual hour, Alison attended to one of her accustomed duties, the care of a flock of young turkeys, in a meadow by the farm. They were a late brood, and the object of Alison's most anxious solicitude. This morning her mother had commanded her to put on a better gown than usual, and to place upon her curls a fine mob-cap of lace and cambric, whose flapping frills annoyed her. It was an antique piece of finery, belonging to her mother's girlhood rather than to hers; but fashions at The Mains were not advanced. Alison's looks were not thought greatly of by her parents. She lacked her mother's brilliant colouring and bold, black-eyed beauty. She was rather pale, indeed, though with a healthy, even pallor that a touch of cold wind or a little exertion easily brightened into a pleasing softness of pink. Her hair, which would never grow beyond her shoulders for length, curled all about her ears and neck—tendrils borrowed from the stubborn, reddish locks of her father, only they were not red, but of a light, sunny brown. Her face had the calmness and strength of clear-cut features, and she was tall beyond the common, well and strongly made. Not an unpleasing figure at all was she, as she stood calling to her turkeys, the autumn sun catching at her hair, and shining in her grey eyes. Yet the hearts of her parents misgave them, as they saw her, lest she should fail to find favour in the eyes of Mr. Cheape of Kincarley.

For Mr. Cheape had arrived, and, with laudable punctuality, had stumped into the library, where the laird, who had been talked round the night before into a temporary acquiescence in his suit, waited to receive him. To the pair, presently entered the lady of the house in her Sunday silk, and genteelest manners. A gruff nod to the laird, and a stiff inclination to his dame, was all the salutation vouchsafed by Mr. Cheape, who then stood hitting at his boots with the whip in his hand, and grunting at intervals.

"Tis a fine morning for the time of the year, and grand for lifting the neeps,' began the laird, with a cough.

Mr. Cheape snorted. 'I'm not here,' he remarked, with plainness, 'to discuss

the weather and turnips. I'm come, ma'am, to be presented to your daughters;' and he ignored the laird, and addressed himself to the lady.

'To my Daughter Alison, doubtless?' said Mrs. Graham, with polite firmness.

'Hum,' said Mr. Cheape, 'I understood there were seven of them.'

'We are blessed with seven girls, indeed,' said Mrs. Graham, majestically. 'But our daughter Alison is the only one from whom we could think of parting ourselves at this time. The rest'—coolly—'are bairns.'

'I should like to see them all,' objected the suitor, who felt himself being 'done.'

'You will see Alison,' said Mrs. Graham, composedly. 'You must e'en take them as the Lord gave them—or want!' she added, with spirit. ('To think,' as she said to her husband afterwards, 'if I hadna been canny—he might ha' taken Susie or Maggie, as likely as not—and left Ally on our hands!')

'Mr. Cheape is pleased to be plain and to the point,' here interrupted the laird, not without sarcasm in his tone, which, however, was quite lost upon his visitor. 'We have, indeed, seven lasses, and little to give them, sir, and cannot therefore be over nice in the matter of their wooing. Alison is at her turkeys in the east meadow, wife. Supposing we conduct this gentleman to the spot, and see if he is inclined to make a bargain of it?'

So Alison's fate approached her in this quaint fashion, Mr. Cheape stumping at her mother's side, and the laird bringing up the rear, with a comical eye on the suitor's burly back. They paused at a gate where Alison could not see them, but they could see her in a patch of sun, with the turkeys picking and cheeping at her feet. 'Is that the one?' said Mr. Cheape, pointing at the object of his wooing with his whip.

'Our daughter Alison,' said Mrs. Graham, complacently, with an introductory wave of the hand. 'But twenty, come the New Year time,' for she much feared that Alison looked older.

Mr. Cheape seemed lost in thought and calculation. 'A knowledge of fowls,' he said at last, heavily, 'is useful in a female.'

'Tis indispensable in the lady of a country mansion,' said Mrs. Graham, cheerfully. 'And none beats Alison at that, let me tell you!'

'Alison, come here!' called her father. Alison turned round and obeyed. When she approached the group which held her suitor, she curtseyed, but the behaviour of Mr. Cheape at this juncture was so singular and so disconcerting, that there was no time for a formal introduction between the two. Whether it was the wide, all-too-frankly astonished gaze of Alison's grey eyes, or the young lady's imposing height, or simply a fit of bashfulness that overpowered him, cannot be said. But merely the fact can be given, that at this delicate juncture the

gallant wooer, with a fiercer grunt than usual, and some muttered exclamation which no one caught, incontinently turned tail and fled towards the house, the distracted matron almost running in his wake. Alison and her father were left together.

'Is that Mr. Cheape, sir?' enquired the daughter, gravely.

'Ay, lass,' said the laird. "Tis even the great Mr. Cheape of Kincarley, in the county of Fife!'

Alison said nothing, but with her chin in the air, and lilting the flounces of her good dress above the wet grass she went back to her turkeys. Her father laughed his jolly laugh. 'He will have none of you, Ally, that's plain!' he called after her. 'So don't you be losing your heart to his bonny face, I warn you!'

CHAPTER III.

But so very far was the laird of The Mains from being accurate in his assertion of Mr. Cheape's indifference to his daughter's charms, that when he re-entered the library, which he presently did, he found that gentleman and his wife in the closest confabulation, the subject of their discourse being no other than that of a contract of marriage between Miss Graham of The Mains, and Mr. Cheape of Kincarley. The latter gentleman appeared now to be much easier of demeanour.

'These matters,' he observed, almost jocularly, 'are better settled without the presence of the lady!'

'But, God bless my soul!' cried the laird, 'you hardly saw the girl, or she you—'

'Oh, she'll do, she'll do,' said Mr. Cheape, with an agreeable grunt, but an air of hurry. 'An' now I must away: good-day, good-day!' He stuck out a snuffy hand, which Mrs. Graham clutched with warmth. 'Sir,' he continued, addressing the laird, 'if you will be pleased to honour me with your company at dinner to-morrow night at four, at the King's Arms in C——, we can discuss this matter at our ease. I am in a position to act handsomely on my part, as I have informed your lady. But 'tis better to discuss such matters between gentlemen. Good-day t'you.' He had hurried off, and had scrambled upon his horse at the door, with some assistance from that animal's abundant mane, and was jogging down the approach, before the open-mouthed laird had found time or presence of mind to accept or reject the invitation to dinner.

'Saw ever man the like of that!' ejaculated the master of the house, gazing after man and horse.

'Saw ever woman the like o' you!' retorted his spouse, furiously, 'staring like a stuck pig after an honest gentleman that's done you the honour to speir your penniless daughter, instead of shaking him warmly by the hand!'

'I'd as lief shake the tatty-bogle by the hand,' said the laird, provokingly. 'Wife, you're clever, but you'll never get Ally to stomach yon,' and he indicated the disappearing Mr. Cheape with a derisive finger.

'Will I not?' retorted the lady, with a defiant eye, 'ye sumph, John, to take the bread out of a lassie's mouth like that, afore she's bitten on it. Ye are even a bigger fool than I thocht ye!'

With such plainness was the much-tried mother of many daughters driven to address their exasperating father. The laird laughed: but then and there a serious marital tussle began, the kind in which the laird was never victorious. Mr. Graham announced that he would not dine with Mr. Cheape to-morrow night, or any other: that it was useless, that there was no object in his putting himself about to do so, in as much as that Mr. Cheape's proposals were preposterous, and not for a moment to be seriously entertained. Mrs. Graham, on the other hand, asserted that, dine with Mr. Cheape of Kincarley, at four of the clock to-morrow evening at the King's Arms in C——, he, Mr. Graham of The Mains, in his best blue coat and ruffled shirt, with powder in his hair—most unquestionably would, and should. Gradually, the laughing mood went out of the laird. For his lady intrenched upon money matters, and got him on the raw there, as only a wife or a creditor can. The laird at this time was an embarrassed man, and very eager to be quit of his embarrassments. Previous to the birth of his son, and when it was thought he would not have an heir, but that the entail, at his death, would send The Mains to a distant cousin, he had been careless of money, and had considerably burdened the estate. Now it was the wish of his heart to lift these burdens, and leave an unencumbered inheritance to the young laird; and if it was his wish, it was his wife's passion.

'What is to become of these lasses? Are they all to hang upon their brother?' was the eternal burden of her cry. Twenty-four hours of unremitted harping upon this subject, under all its aspects, reduced the laird to a frame of mind in which he would have dined with Beelzebub, had the dinner promised him a solution of his difficulties, and peace with his wife. Needless to say, therefore, he dined with Mr. Cheape, of Kincarley, on the appointed day and hour; and, moreover, did not come home until past two o'clock on the following morning.

For, let it be remembered, these were the jolly days of the bottle, when a man was no man who could not carry his port, and carry it home, too. The laird of The Mains was no drunkard, but he had a head of iron and a stomach

of leather in the good old style of our ancestors. He was a four-bottle-man with the best of them, and he chanced to find in Mr. Cheape of Kincarley just such another hardened elderly cask as himself. The two sat hour after hour, swallowing glass after glass, at first in gloomy silence; but presently each began to mellow in his own way. The laird's tongue was loosened, and he began to talk about his daughters and his difficulties. Mr. Cheape lost his shyness, became genial and generous; at any time, to do him justice, he was a man not niggardly in money-matters. The settlements he proposed to make upon his bride were more than handsome: to the impoverished laird they sounded princely. And it is a fact—such are the wonder-working powers of the rosy god of wine—that before the night was out, not only were the preliminaries of a marriage contract agreed upon, but the laird had become a borrower on his own account, and Mr. Cheape a lender, of certain sums that the laird had been at his wits' end, for many a day, to lay his hands on. When he got home, which he managed to do upon his horse with the utmost propriety, he was not precisely in a condition to explain complicated money transactions with absolute perspicacity. But the morning brought explanations which were eminently satisfactory to the wife of his bosom. Certain twinges of conscience indeed assailed the laird, and during the morning's narration, he was not quite so comfortable in his mind as he had been over-night. What about Alison's part of the bargain? But he reflected that he was the father of seven penniless girls, and must harden his heart.

Alison, meanwhile, made fun of Mr. Cheape in the attics, among her sisters. True, there was a prick of disappointment at her heart, for her mother had dangled a wedding before her eyes, and a wedding meant a lover, of course. But the happy heart of twenty is sound and light, and by next morning Alison had forgotten her disappointment, and Mr. Cheape along with it. Her mother's early summons gave her no misgiving.

'Come with me to the big press in the east passage, Alison,' said the dame, jingling a bunch of keys, and with the light of battle in her eye. "Tis time we looked at something there, and I have a mind to have a talk with you, besides.' And at this Alison's heart did certainly jump—not pleasantly.

The big press in the east passage smelt agreeably of dried lavender and rose leaves. Here was store of fine linen, and a few of the more valued articles of personal apparel.

'Get out my wedding-silk, Ally,' commanded Mrs. Graham. Alison reached up long arms, and got down the silk, which was laid by, with layers of fine muslin between its folds. It was a superb brocade of sweet floral bunches on a ground of greenish-grey; the flounces of Mechlin on it were fragile as a fairy's web, and ivory-tinted with age. Mrs. Graham fingered and examined the fabric; then she said, significantly:

'So, 'tis you that's going to rob me of my fine silk, after all, Ally? 'Tis just as it should be—my eldest girl!' Alison shook in her shoes, for she knew well that determined inflection of the maternal voice.

'I don't understand, mother,' she managed to stammer.

'Tuts, nonsense!' said Mrs. Graham, sharply, 'you're no fool, Ally: you understand fine. That honest gentleman you saw yesterday is to marry you, and lucky you are to get him!'

'Sure, not *that* man, mother!' cried poor Alison.

'And why not that man, miss?' retorted the matron with a rising colour and an angry eye.

'He's as old as my father,' blurted out the reluctant bride, 'and has no liking for me, for-bye!'

'And why should he ask you when he's seen you, if he has no liking for you?' demanded the matron.

'Because no one else will have him, likely,' said Alison, in desperation. She had never spoken in rebellion to her mother before, and the effort it cost her was truly desperate. 'If I have to take that man,' she plunged on recklessly, 'I'll be the laughing-stock of the countryside and of my very sisters!'

'Alison,' said Mrs. Graham, in a more reasoning tone, for she felt her own strength, 'you are a silly lassie, and just don't know the grand chance you're wanting to throw away. Think what it will be to be a married woman, wi' a house and man of your own—a man of substance, too—and lord it over a whole countryside! Why, here, Ally, you're little better than a nurse-girl and a hen-wife!'

'And I'd rather be a nurse-girl and a hen-wife all my days, than married to that old man,' cried Alison, with a rising sob. 'He'll neither love me, nor I him!'

'*Love!*' cried Mrs. Graham, with a blaze of fury, 'and who taught *you* to speak of love, and you twenty, and never a lover near you! Set *you* up to be saucy, indeed! I had had my choice long afore I was your age, and might ha' turned up a neb at a decent man, maybe. But for the likes of you, it's very different, let me tell you!'

'You lived in a town,' said poor Alison, in weak defence, 'and saw the men.'

'Town or no town makes no difference,' said Mrs. Graham with lofty superiority. 'The men come down the lum to likely lasses, and them that's not likely may be thankful to get a chance at all. What's to become of you all,' she continued, her tone of reasoning degenerating into the high voice of the scold, 'you seven muckle, useless lasses? Are you all to sorn on Jacky, poor wee man, for all his days, and take the very bread out of his mouth?'

'I would not sorn on Jacky,' said Alison, with a quivering lip.

'Then get you a husband, and no nonsense!' said Mrs. Graham. '"Tis,

indeed, a settled business,' she went on, coolly, 'settled by your father.'

'Oh, I'll not believe it!' cried Alison, fairly in tears. 'Let me see my father first.'

'That you shall not,' said Mrs. Graham with force. Well she knew the inevitable effects of a daughter's tears on that weak man. It became an indispensable thing, in fact, that Alison should *not* see her father, and to that end firm measures must at once be taken.

'Up you get to your room, and stay there, miss, till you are of a better mind,' said the stern mother of seven, who did not stick at trifles. She chased Alison up the garret stair, shut the door on her, and turned the key.

'A few days o' *that*,' she said to herself triumphantly, 'and she'll be ready to jump at Mr. Cheape—honest man.'

CHAPTER IV.

I no not wish, in the very opening of her story, to give the idea that Alison Graham was a girl of poor spirit. Perhaps she should have turned upon her mother on the stair, or, at any rate, stood up for her freedom with a bolder front. But the habit of Alison's life, up to this point, had been obedience, and, in the days of which I write, parental authority was no matter to be trifled with. It wanted a hundred years yet to the birth of the Revolted Daughter, and to Alison, even the tacit form of resistance which she was about to offer to her parents' wishes, seemed a very terrible and almost wicked line of conduct. She sat down on the creepie-stool by the little window, where she was wont to sing Jacky to sleep every night, and was too much puzzled and too heavy at the heart to cry. Presently her sisters came and tirled at the door, wanting to know what was the matter; but the key was safely in the maternal pocket, and Alison shut off from comfort and communion of these friendly spirits. Then her tears began to flow, in very pity for herself; but she was quite determined that she would have none of Mr. Cheape.

'The lass will never be got to thole him, I doubt,' said the laird, with a sigh. Now that there was a matter of money between him and Mr. Cheape, his position was complicated, and he could no longer openly side with his daughter.

'Leave that to me,' said Mrs. Graham, grimly. To her mind it was like the breaking in of a colt or filly—a fling up, a few kicks over the traces, and a little

restiveness at first, to be treated with a firm hand, judiciously low diet, and a new bit.

'She's saucy,' said the mother of seven. 'She'll be cured of that in a day or two!'

'Do not be hard on poor Ally,' said the laird, sorely pricked with compunction.

"Tis for her own good,' the lady replied, with no doubt upon that point whatsoever.

In this awkward predicament it was lucky that the gallant wooer of Miss Graham of The Mains gave no trouble. Mr. Cheape of Kincarley having, in his opinion, safely secured a bride, was, in the meantime, returned to the county of Fife, doubtless to make preparation for the impending change in his condition. He required no silly assurances or fruitless antenuptial interviews with the lady herself.

Thus Alison remained a prisoner in her little room, deprived of all her daily tasks and little pleasures, and of all good cheer of warmth and light and company. The actual prisoner's fare of bread and water was indeed not hers, but clots of half-cold porridge and a sup of skim-milk twice a day are not enticing provender, nor greatly calculated to keep up a flagging spirit. Her mother was her only jailer, and with her own hands dunted down this unsavoury dog's mess before her, with the unceasing jibe upon her tongue—angry, persuasive, mocking, cruel, all in turn. The weather, meanwhile, without doors, had broken for the season, and the days were short and dark and dreary. The rain lashed the little deep-set window, and Alison sat shivering beside it, and listening to the howling wind, which whirled the dead leaves off the trees and drove the protesting rooks from shelter to shelter. She was a girl of great good sense and a clear head. She could see her mother's point of view well enough. There were seven of them—she and her sisters—and what was to become of them if they did not marry? She had had no lovers, therefore it was quite true she had no right to be saucy. But to marry Mr. Cheape! Her gorge rose at the thought of him, of the ugly, pitted face, the grizzled, scrubby beard, the uncouth form and fashion of the man. Surely that was not to be expected of her? No! So Alison held out, and the dreary days dragged on, till all but a week had passed.

Then, at dusk one night, when her heart was faint within her, and her body faint too, for lack of fresh air and wonted food, her father, having purloined the key, came creeping up to her attic—very quietly, good man (indeed, upon his stocking soles)—so that the mistress, engaged in hustling the maids in a distant laundry, should have no chance of hearing.

"Tis a pity, all this, Ally,' he said, in the dark.

Alison did not trust her voice to answer.

'Were your mother not so doom-set on it,' went on the laird—'and sure she ought to know what is best for lasses—I would say never mind, and let Mr. Cheape go hang. But she's set on it, sure and fast, Ally; and maybe it's not just such a bad thing as it looks.' He stopped and coughed; nothing but his daughter's quick breathing answered him. 'He's not a bonny man, I will say,' he continued; 'but 'tisn't always the handsome faces and the fine manners that pay best in the end, Ally. Mr. Cheape is most handsome in his dealings if he's not so in his looks; and, on my soul, I think he would do well by a wife.' No answer yet. 'You would not help to ruin Jacky, would you, Ally?' urged the laird, pathetically.

'Indeed, no,' said Alison at last, in a low voice.

'But ruin him you will in the future, if you let this chance go by,' said the laird more firmly, for he was conscious of his advantage. 'Mr. Cheape is a monied man, and generous with his money, and we have profited by that already. I have taken a loan from him, at a nominal interest, which has greatly eased my circumstances; but I cannot hold to that if you give Mr. Cheape the go-by, Ally.'

'I didn't know of that, sir,' said Alison.

'"Tis true,' said the laird, 'and not over much to my credit, for it seems like the selling of you, lass. But 'tis for your own good in the end, too, I swear, or I would hold back yet. What's your future, Ally, but to feed the hens? And when we're gone—your mother and I—to feed them to Jacky's wife, and she perhaps not so willing to let you. There's not much lies before you here, my lassie.' It seemed not, indeed.

'Then there's all your sisters—poor, silly bodies,' pursued the laird, who knew his ground, in Alison's nature, better than did his wife, because it was akin to his own weaker flesh. 'What a chance for them in this braw marriage of yours! You can give them a lift, poor lasses, such as we never can.... 'Tis not to ourselves alone we live in this world, Ally!'

'No, sir,' said Alison, quietly. Then, all of a sudden, she reached for the tinder-box, and, rising, lit the little cruisey lamp upon the wall. By its weak flame, her father could see her standing before him, very tall and straight, her face very white, the cheeks a little hollow with a week of fasting, and the tumbled curls about her broad, soft brows.

'I will have to take Mr. Cheape, sir, I see,' she said, a little doggedly, 'since it is best for everybody, and I will—if I *can*.'

'Now that's a sensible lassie!' cried the laird, 'and how pleased your mother will be!' And, indeed, his own life, from that lady's displeasure, had been little, if at all, pleasanter than Alison's for the past week. 'Come, Ally, kiss your father! Things will be better than you think for, and Cheape a better husband than many a young spark.'

Alison was about to do as she was bid, when her quick ear caught a sound

outside, and she started away from her father's arm.

'Listen, sir!' she cried, 'didn't you hear the sound of wheels? It seems like a chaise driving up.... Father,' she clutched the laird's sleeve, and turned upon him a piteous face, white with fear, 'it will not be Mr. Cheape come back?'

The laird shook her off, crossly; that frightened face gave a horrid prick to his conscience.

'Tut, girl,' he said, 'don't be a fool! Mr. Cheape, indeed! 'Tis you have been in disgrace, and don't know the news; indeed, I had forgotten it myself. Your mother has a friend—'tis a Mistress Maclehose of Edinburgh—comes to lie here for a night on her way back to the town, from a visit. Fine and put about your mother's been—to get the best room ready, and a dinner cooked, and all the best china out, and the silver candlesticks and the tea-set, and all without you. I was for having you down, but deil a bit! She's thrawn, is your mother, Ally, when the notion takes her! But it will be all right now—and there, I must away to bid welcome to this fine Edinburgh madam. She'll set you all the fashions, Ally, and so cheer up!' And the laird hustled off, well pleased with himself in the end. Ally listened to his heavy footsteps on the wooden stair, but did not follow him.

CHAPTER V.

It had been on the second or third day of Alison's incarceration that the mistress of The Mains had been thrown into a flutter by receiving a dispatch from her almost forgotten friend, Nancy Maclehose, craving a night's hospitality for old acquaintance' sake. The country lady now wished to make a good show before the urban one. She could not rival her in the fashions, or in modish gossip, but she could exhibit good store of silver and fine linen, and could set a feast before her of all the country delicacies.

'It'll be a queer thing if I'm not upsides wi' Nancy Maclehose,' she remarked, 'for all the *belle* that Nancy was; it didna bring her much.'

'Ay, ay, I remember her fine,' said the laird, 'nothing but a lassock when we married, wife—but "pretty Miss Nancy" then, though hardly ten. I mind her well when we were coortin', in the old Glasgow days—pretty Miss Nancy!'

'There'll be none o' the "Miss" and little of the "pretty" about her *now*, I'se warrant,' said Mrs. Graham, with meaning, 'a wife, and not a wife, and a widow, and not a widow. There's little to be proud o' there, that *I* can see.'

'Ay, they discorded, to be sure,' said the laird. 'Yet he was a fine sprig, young Maclehose, too. Ye'll mind all the clash about their coortin' you got from Glasgow? That was a neat trick of his about the coach—as neat a trick as ever a young buck played, to my thinking.'

'I never heed such clash,' said the lady, severely.

'Hoots!' said the laird. 'It was when miss was sent to Edinburgh to the school, being become too forward for her age, as all were well agreed, and Maclehose could not get acquaint with her, for all he had tried. So he ups and takes every place in the coach she was going by to Edinburgh, and so he got the lass to himself, and a bonny way to do it, too!'

'And what was the end of it all?' said Mrs. Graham, witheringly. 'If ye must tell thae tales before these lasses,'—they were, indeed, seated at table, and six pairs of ears were taking in with avidity these indiscreet revelations of love's audacity,—'it ill beseems you, the father of a family, to forget the lesson that's aye in them! But *I'll* tell ye what came o' all that havering trash o' coortin' in a coach, fast enough! They hadn't been married five years, when off goes the fine young buck to live among savages at the West Indies, and leaves his wife and bairns to charity at home. And that's love, misses! Love!' she continued, in tones of immeasurable scorn, 'love, indeed! A guid stick is a better name for it, for that's what it comes to in the end as often as not. I e'en wish your silly sister Alison was down here this minute to get this fine love story! It would do her good!'

And the mother of seven daughters, having pointed a moral with due emphasis, went off to count napkins out of the linen press. The six younger Miss Grahams then relaxed the solemnity of their listening countenances, and chattered among themselves of this tale of a lover and a coach, with a great impatience to behold its heroine.

That lady, meanwhile, in no very heroine-like mood, was being jolted towards The Mains in an old country post-chaise—an interminable cross-country journey along muddy by-roads, in the lashing rain and wind of the autumn day. She almost repented the impulse which had induced her to come out of her way to renew acquaintance with the friends of her girlhood. 'It's little but sad memories I'm like to get for my pains,' said she.

Stiff with long travel, cold, weary, and even wet, for the deluging rain dripped through the covering of the crazy old trap, she was landed at the door of The Mains in the murk of the evening, just as the laird descended the front stair from his daughter's room. What he saw was a little, slight woman's figure, covered from head to foot in a black hood and mantle, stepping in out of the dark, and receiving a genteel welcome from his excellent lady.

'Come in, come in,' the lady of The Mains was saying, standing in the hall, in her best silk dress, flanked by a shy daughter or two. 'You are welcome, Mrs.

Maclehose—*Nancy*, it used to be!'

'It must be "Nancy" still, surely!' So sweet a voice it was that spoke, that the sudden contrast to the country lady's hearty tones was like the change from a trumpet to some delicate stringed instrument that thrills upon the ear. It was quite drowned in the laird's jovial welcome which ensued.

'Ay, it's not only "Nancy,"' said he, 'but "Pretty Miss Nancy"—we've not forgotten that, ma'am, not we!'

'Ah, little of that now, Mr. Graham!' and the speaker sighed and smiled; not a very deep sigh, and a very engaging smile. Mrs. Graham had now removed the travelling mantle from her guest's shoulders, and a dainty little figure of a woman stood forth, less considerably than the average height, and slender, but with a full slenderness that gave no hint of angularity or meagreness. Mrs. Maclehose, at eight-and-twenty, was not of the *beauté éclatante* which the public expects in one who is known to posterity as the idol of a love-poet. Hers was the kind of beauty that did not suit all tastes; for some, her mouth was too big, for others, her eyes made too much play, and these would say that she ogled. It was a fascination that she had rather than beauty, aided by her sweet voice, and soft, flattering ways; and over all there seemed to be a kind of innocent voluptuousness, which allured, even though you resented its allurement. Withal, her little person was daintiness itself; an oval, small face, velvety, soft, dark eyes, lips of a pomegranate redness that parted in bewitching smiles, little hands and dainty feet. Suddenly, beside her, the buxom lady of The Mains seemed coarse and blowsy, and all her rosy daughters to have wondrous clumsy waists, and thick red wrists. Such was Nancy Maclehose, on the very eve of her apotheosis—the '*gloriously amiable fine woman*' of the enamoured Burns, the 'Clarinda' of so many a bombastic love-letter, and the 'Nanny' of songs that are sweet for all time.

But 'Clarinda' had not met her 'Sylvander' at this date, and was merely a little grass-widow, in rather doubtful circumstances, and a guest at The Mains. She tuned herself to her company with natural adaptability, and endured with heroism the massive hospitalities of a provincial evening. She was docile with the mistress of the house, and bewitching with its master; went through an introduction to six shy country girls, with a pretty word for each. She praised the china, and envied the silver; vowed no turkey ever tasted half so good, nor home-brewed ginger cordial half so luscious. And she meant it all, though all the time her delicate travel-tired limbs ached for bed, and she felt all the worst shivering premonitions of a bad cold; the chilly strangeness of a new-comer was upon her, and the low-roofed, rambling old house seemed dark and draughty and comfortless. The evening ended with a toddy-bowl, of which the contents forced the tears into her eyes; then the long-suffering guest was ushered into the glories of the best bedroom, and left in peace.

The firelight danced upon the walls, and upon the chintz hangings, with their shiny floral pattern. The best bed yawned for its occupant, but now she seemed in no mood to succumb to its allurements. She pulled a pink wrapper out of her trunk and put it on; and then out of the same receptacle came a certain book, and with this on her knee, and her chair pulled close to the fire, she sank into a fit of musing. The book was a manuscript book, elaborately bound, and fastening with a lock and key. It held verses; the fair reader conned a morsel, then with a pencil added or erased a word, her lips moving the while, and her smooth brow puckered into the frown of composition. Most assuredly the best bedroom at The Mains had never held a poetess before. Her soft mouth smiled to itself, and her great dark eyes flashed and shone in the firelight. The muse apparently was gracious. Presently, however, a sharp sneeze brought the lady's romantic meditations to a prosaic ending.

'As I'm alive,' said the little woman to herself, with a shiver, 'I have an influenza coming—and no wonder!' She got into the high bed and slipped between the glossy linen sheets, but then she could not sleep. The old house slept, but with many creakings to a super-sensitive ear: the whisper of the wind among the eaves and in the ivy, the rattle of a casement, the tinkling fall of ashes on the hearth. Now an owl hooted as it fled through the night, and now a rat scampered in the wall. Then a strange, puzzling noise teased the ear,—a sort of *sliddering* sound,—she could not guess its origin. It was only Alison's pigeons on the roof, trying to get a foot-hold on the slanting slates, and then slip, slipping down with an angry croon and flutter, to scramble up again, and so *da capo*.

'Perdition take the night and the noises!' muttered the guest, with a flounce among the sheets. Then she curled herself up, and felt a delicious drowsiness creeping on; but at that very instant came a new and unmistakable disturbance. Somebody in the room overhead began to sob and cry.

CHAPTER VI.

Nancy sat up in bed with a jerk, never less asleep in her life.

'Now, is there some ghost in this old barrack?' she asked herself. But the sound was too material for that; such a hard sobbing never came from ghostly throat.

'This is intolerable,' muttered Mrs. Maclehose; 'I cannot lie and listen to it;

'tis inhuman.' She got out of bed and slid her feet into little slippers that had high red heels and no backs to them. She threw on her wrapper, and taking the rush-light in her hand, opened the door softly and listened. The passage was dark and cold. To her left, a wooden stair led upwards. From that region the sobbing came. "Tis some fellow-creature in distress,' thought the kind little guest. 'Most likely but some servant-lass in a scrape, and in terror of her mistress: God knows I'd be the same. I'll go up—a comforting word never came amiss.' She set forth, but the red heels made such a tap, tapping on the bare boards, that she was terrified; she slipped off her shoes and crept bare-foot up the stair. She knocked at the first door she came to, which was the right one. The sobbing ceased at once, but no one answered. Then she lifted the latch softly and looked in.

What she saw was the bare little room with the deep-set window where Alison slept with her little brother. The child's cot was beside her bed, empty, for her misbehaviour had deprived her of Jacky. Alison sat up in bed, so dazed by the light that she could scarcely see the little figure with bare feet, and in the pink wrapper, with the neat lacy night-cap over the dark hair. Nancy could much more advantageously see a grey-eyed girl whose face was wet with tears, and whose childish curls tumbled about her neck and ears.

'Now, this is no servant-lass,' said Mrs. Maclehose to herself, and then, aloud, 'My love, don't be frightened, I beg! I heard someone crying in the night, and thought I might be helpful. If 'tis an intrusion, forgive me, and I'll go away.' Alison stared at the speaker with parted lips.

'Who are you?' she murmured. The little lady laughed softly, closed the door gently, and came nearer, shading the light with her hand.

'You may well ask,' said she, 'since I only came to-day! But tell me first who *you* are—come!'

She deposited the rush-light on a chair, and plumping herself down on the edge of the bed, drew up her little bare feet under her, and peered into Alison's face with the most coaxing, the most beguiling, air in the world.

'I am Alison Graham,' stammered the daughter of the house.

'What! another of them?' cried Mrs. Maclehose, aghast; 'why, I saw a host—four—five—six; you're never a seventh, surely?'

'Yes,' said Alison, dolorously. 'There are seven of us: I am the oldest.'

'But you were not there, or spoken of,' persisted Mrs. Maclehose, scenting a mystery. 'Were you ill, love?' Alison turned her head away.

'No, not ill,' she said, truthful always, 'but—but my mother was not pleased with me, and so I was not down the stair.' Mrs. Maclehose put a soft little hand under Alison's chin, and turned the reluctant face towards her.

'Ah, child!' she said, "tis some love trouble, never tell me it isn't! Tell me about it, for I am more learned in such than any other person in the world! I am

an old friend of your mother's, but not so very old neither, in years, you know; and I am Nancy—Nancy Maclehose, to my sorrow. Now, come, out with it; 'tis a love tale—I know!'

'If it is,' cried Alison, between laughter and tears, but fairly won,' 'tis a love tale with no love in it, ma'am!'

'The very worst kind of all!' cried the confidante, serenely. 'And now, sure, I know all about it without being told! 'Tis some marriage they are forcing upon you for prudence' sake: some suitor—distasteful, old, uncouth—'

'Ah! they've been telling you,' murmured Alison, blushing.

'Not a word—I swear!' cried the vivacious little lady, enchanted at her own sagacity. 'But am I not right? A distasteful marriage, dictated by prudence; a fond heart that will have none of it, but faithful to another—'

'Ah! now there you are at fault,' began Alison, and then paused: why should she, to a perfect stranger, confess the humiliating fact that she had no lover, and no secret romance? But her native honesty prevailed.

'There is no "another,"' she murmured, shame-facedly.

'Some day there will be, then!' said Mrs. Maclehose, cheerfully, 'and you, be faithful to him, child!'

'Faithful?' cried Alison, wide-eyed. 'But I've never seen him, ma'am; he doesn't exist.'

'Ah! he *does* exist, somewhere—a kindred soul,' said the romantic visitor, nodding sagely. 'He is only waiting for the chance—the divine chance....'

'I doubt he will never get it at The Mains,' said the prosaic Alison.

'Faint heart!' cried Mrs. Maclehose. 'Believe in Love, the greatest of all the gods!'

Alison, never thus adjured before, looked doubtful.

'My mother and father tell me not to think about love,' she said, hesitatingly; 'they say 'tis a delusion.'

'They blaspheme, child!' cried the visitor, with energy. '"Tis love that has wrought me all the woe in my own span of life, God wot, yet I believe in him—believe in him still, with all my heart and soul.... But tell me, love,' she went on, breaking off in her rhapsody, 'who is it they would tie you to?'

'"Tis a Mr. Cheape of Kincarley, in Fife,' said Alison, hanging her head. Mrs. Maclehose uttered a little trill of laughter.

'Oh, never, never, Mr. Cheape!' she tittered. 'Don't tell me 'tis the inevitable, the invincible, the inveterate Jimmy Cheape! ...'

'Then you know him?' cried Alison, eagerly.

'Oh, Lord, child!' said Mrs. Maclehose, 'who doesn't, dear? He has stumped the streets of Edinburgh, and every sizeable town in the country, in search of a wife this twenty years and more! Jimmy Cheape! No, Alison (for

you'll let me call you Alison? I like you, child, and will love you, I know—'tis all arranged by our Fates). No, no! 'tis not you that are destined for Mr. Cheape; never think it!'

'I would not think it, if I could help it,' said the literal Alison. 'But 'tis all arranged—indeed it is—and my mother set upon it in her mind, and nothing will turn her.'

'*I* will turn her!' cried the lively little grass-widow, with her charming smile and a flash of her dark eyes.

'Will you?' said Alison, solemnly, leaning forward and gazing at her new friend with devouring, wondering eyes. 'How?'

A clock struck two. It was a timely diversion, and Mrs. Maclehose jumped down from the bed on to her little bare feet.

'Two of the clock!' she cried, 'and me with a cold creeping down the spine of my back like a rill of ice-water! I must away to my bed, love.'

'Ah!' cried Alison, 'how selfish of me to have kept you in a cold room, talking.'

'"Twas I kept myself, dear,' said the visitor, lightly. 'Not the first foolish thing I have done in my life, or likely to be the last, either. Will you call me, Nancy, child, and kiss me good-night?'

'Sure,' cried Alison, 'I think you are a dream, a fairy, or an angel!' The dream put out its arms, took Alison's head into their embrace, and kissed her curls.

'We'll meet to-morrow,' she said, 'and then you'll see I'm no dream.' Then she paddled over the cold bare boards on those little feet, and casting a last bright look over her shoulder to Alison in the bed, she was gone. Alison watched the light in the crack under the door, until it grew fainter and fainter, and then disappeared. Then, not a little comforted, she turned round in her nest, and slept like a child.

The next morning, Alison ventured to take her usual place in the household, and was met with smiles.

'Now you are come to your senses, Alison,' her mother said, 'and you will live to thank me that I showed you the way. See here, now,' she went on, 'this fine Edinburgh madam that has come here while you were up yonder, has gotten an influenza that will keep her in her bed for a week, I'm thinking. Not that I grudge it her either, for it aye goes clean against the grain wi' me to have sheets soiled for the one night; I'd far sooner get the week's work out o' them. You must take madam's breakfast up, though, and make yourself civil, Ally. She was aye a clever, going-about body, Nancy, fine and gleg at the dressing of herself up. 'Tis a God-send her coming now. She'll set us in the fashions for your wedding, and show us how to sort my bonny silk.'

Alison shuddered; but she prepared the tray for the visitor's breakfast, and proceeded to take it upstairs, her heart beating fast with curiosity.

Under the flowered curtains of the best bed a little figure, still huddled in the pink wrapper, was gripped in the agueish shivering of an influenza cold. It started up, however, with unimpaired liveliness when Alison appeared.

'Ah, child,' she cried, 'I knew it would be you! Come, let us look at each other in the broad daylight. Why, what a Juno it is!' looking Alison up and down. 'What a great, big girl, to be topped by those baby curls.'

Alison came to the bed, pulled the tumbled coverlet straight, and shook up the pillows, with her sensible literal air.

'You are feverish, ma'am,' she said, 'and shouldn't talk. Here is a warm shawl my mother sends to hap about you, and she says, please, will you keep still and warm, and she will bring you a hot posset presently.' The invalid laughed in the grave, girlish face.

'Oh, Solomon!' she said, 'and do you expect me to obey your good mother, and do the wise thing at the wise moment? You little know poor Nannie yet.' Her dark, bright eyes grew full of sadness for a moment, and she had the air of some pretty, soft, appealing little animal—a kitten, perhaps—checked in its play by a hurt. 'I want to talk,' she said, 'to talk, and talk, and talk. We must, you know, Alison, so as to see how we are to outwit Mr. Cheape.'

'When you are better,' said Alison, 'we will talk. I doubt you will hear plenty of Mr. Cheape,' she added, soberly.

At this moment a diversion occurred of a sufficiently prosaic nature to defer further confidences of a sentimental kind. The driver of the chaise in which Mrs. Maclehose had arrived the night before sent a message to say that he could wait no longer, but must return whence he came, and to that end he must be paid.

'Here, reach me my reticule, dear,' said the invalid to Alison, and she hunted in the dainty velvet bag for her purse, and in the purse for the necessary coin. This, however, did not appear to be instantly forthcoming. A slight frown ruffled her forehead, and the faintest flush rose on her cheek. '"Tis most provoking, Ally,' she said. 'I have run short. Will you run and ask your father, love, to pay the man for me, and I will this day write for more money to my cousin Herries, in Edinburgh, who manages my affairs. You see I trusted to be back in town immediately, and that's how I've let myself run into so beggarly a state.' She laughed lightly; her embarrassment was gone.

Alison duly ran down to her father, who paid two guineas to the driver, cocking his eye to himself as he did so.

'Women's debts!' he remarked within his own mind. 'It's little likely I'll ever see the colour of *that* again.' And it may here be mentioned, as a little matter

strictly between him and the reader, that he never did.

CHAPTER VII.

As the sagacious mistress of The Mains had foretold, the influenza kept Mrs. Maclehose in bed for a week. Fever succeeded ague, and cold and headache followed in their wake, and it was, for some days, a very sick little woman indeed, that tossed and tumbled between the linen sheets, under the flowered hangings of the best room. Alison waited upon her with a patience and prudence that had presently their own effect upon the volatile nature of the invalid; these solid, good qualities in the country girl seemed to have a singular fascination for the little town lady, in whose character, it is to be feared, they were conspicuously lacking. Alison, on her part, felt also curiously drawn to her guest. This delicate little personage, with all her pretty belongings, her petulant temper, and pretty ways, was a new type at The Mains. Simple Alison felt it a privilege to wait upon one so fine and dainty. She could lift her in her bed as though she were a child, and both her tiny hands could lie in Alison's one palm, and be spanned by a finger and thumb. And yet Alison felt there were more wits in one finger tip of this little lady than perhaps in the heads of everybody else at The Mains put together. Were there not poetry books upon her dressing-table, and did she not, indeed, write poetry herself? Alison had been for one year at a young ladies' seminary in the town of Stirling; but even the 'finish' imparted by this experience, could not diminish in her a sense of awe at the literary accomplishments of her new friend. But I think it was the storming of her confidence on that first night of their acquaintance that really impressed Alison with a sense of the new-comer's cleverness and power. To the intensely reserved, there is something almost preternatural in those qualities in another which overcome and overleap that reserve. And then Mrs. Maclehose knew all about Mr. Cheape! Secretly, but not very hopefully, for Alison's was not a sanguine nature, she hoped for deliverance from her threatened bondage, a deliverance that the cleverness of her new friend should effect.

The first moment she could sit up in her bed, Mrs. Maclehose demanded pens and paper, and said she must write letters.

'Could I not write for you, anything that's necessary?' Alison asked. 'You are still so weak.' The invalid shook her head and smiled.

'Ally,' she said, 'you don't know, or you don't realise, I expect, that I'm a mother, and there are my two poor little men all alone in Edinburgh town, wondering what has happened to their mammy.'

'Your two little boys,' cried Alison, eagerly. 'I'd like to know about them. Are they bigger than Jacky?'

'Lud, child, yes, I should think so!' said the fond mother, with, perhaps, a slightly-discontented air. 'Monsters of eight and ten years old! At least, Willy is a well-grown monster, the eldest. The younger is small; he's in but a crazy state of health, God help him! I know not what to make of it.' She moved uncomfortably in the bed, as if the thought goaded her. 'For the bairns, or their servant, Jean, I daresay you could scratch me a line, Ally,' she went on, 'but I've other and more solemn letters in hand. You must know I have one most sapient and noble cousin, Archibald Herries, a writer to His Majesty's Signet, who lives in the town, and to him must I render grave and solemn account of myself, with a prayer for monies, Ally, of the which I stand in parlous need at the present moment.'

'To be sure I could not write *that* letter,' Alison acquiesced. Her patient, with a chin supported on a little white hand, was regarding her attentively. 'Do you know, Ally,' said she, 'you are rather like my cousin Archie yourself, a sort of Solomon, all the virtues and all the wisdoms and sobrieties combined.'

'Then you don't seem to like him much,' said Alison, with a pout.

'May God forgive me for an ungrateful and most base wretch, if I do not!' cried her friend, with unexpected energy. 'For of all the debts dependent women ever owed to protecting man, mine to my cousin Archie is the greatest. I should have been in the street, and my poor babes in the gutter long since, but for him. And that's the truth, Ally, and the plain truth. He who is my natural protector, bound to me by all the most sacred laws of God and man, chose to desert me, and leave me to the care, and even the charity, of others. God be the judge between us! I swear I was guiltless in that matter, and indeed guilt has never been imputed tome. Do you believe it, Ally?'

'Sure, I believe it with all my heart and soul,' cried Alison, with kindling eyes.

'And there spoke an enthusiasm and a trusting warmth of nature that were never Archie's, dear,' said Mrs. Maclehose, laughing once more. 'No, you are not like him, love. 'Tis for a coldness of nature, a perpetual suspicion that I blame him. He's not a kindred soul, and we are ever tacitly at war. God knows poor Nancy is no saint. But he misjudges me ever, and the injustice pricks. But there, that's enough. Let me get finished with this proper, virtuous, tiresome letter.'

In the long evenings of convalescence this seemingly ill-assorted pair were drawn closer and closer together in the links of their sudden friendship.

'Sing to me as you sing to Jacky, love,' Nancy would say, nestling down

among the pillows. And in the gloaming of the quiet room, Alison, folding her hands in her lap, would sing in her sweet deep-throated voice those peculiarly poignant ballads of love and longing and loyalty, with which, since the memorable "45,' the whole of Scotland was flooded.

'Where got you that trick of song, love?' Mrs. Maclehose would ask, sentimentally, 'since you say you have never loved?'

'I had one dozen of singing lessons at the school,' replied the ever-practical Alison, 'and I had begun to the harp before I left.'

'Was it that year of school made you different to your sisters, think you, Ally?'

'Am I different?' asked Alison, wonderingly.

'Oh, I would not miscall the honest lasses,' cried Nancy, 'they are all good and sweet, I am sure. But about you there is a difference—a gentler accent, a shade of softness—I know not what.'

'"Twas a very genteel school, indeed,' said Alison, respectfully. 'But it was too dear. So I only stayed but the one year, instead of three, and poor Kate and Maggie never got at all.'

'You'd be a treasure, with that "wood-note wild" of yours to our bard, Ally!'

'Our bard?' inquired Alison, not at all certain what a bard might be.

'Ay,' said Nancy, with a kindling eye. 'Our bard, but not ours only! The world's poet—the singer for all time, and for all hearts—Robert Burns! Child, haven't you heard of him, the ploughman poet?'

'A ploughman?' said Alison, conjuring up the vision of one Donald, the ploughman at The Mains, with his stubbly beard and bowed legs.

'A ploughman, yes,' cried Nancy, 'but what a ploughman! He has had the town at his feet, Ally! From the highest to the lowest in the land, all men do him honour. And as for the women, child, they are ready to kill each other for a glint of his eye! The very duchesses hang about him, and there's not a titled lady that will not sorn upon and flatter him to get him to her tea-table. Never has the town gone so mad about a man before!'

'And have you often seen him?' asked Alison.

'To my lasting sorrow and vexation, never!' cried Nancy, vehemently; 'and, oh, Ally, 'tis the one burning wish—the longing of my heart! And there's that insensible wretch, my cousin Herries, who has the entry almost everywhere the poet goes, and last winter saw him almost nightly, and he scorns the privilege that I would sell my soul for! Him have I plagued, and others have I plagued, to get me known to my idol; but in vain, as yet! It will come, though! Never was so ardent a wish that did not bring its own fulfilment, ay, and its own punishment too, sometimes,' she added, with a sudden wistfulness. 'Ally, *you* never have these passions, these rebellious cravings, do you, child?'

'Sure, never,' said Alison, soberly, 'and never would, I think.'

'But I'm made up of them!' cried the little woman, 'and nothing stays me—no scruple, no prudence—when they are hot within me! Know this of your friend, Ally, and be warned in time. I wish you to know me as I really am. Nature has been kind to me in some respects, but one essential she has denied me utterly: it is that instantaneous perception of the fit and unfit, which is so useful in the conduct of life. But you are rich in this, Ally, and that is why I think that you might be my friend, and sometimes save me from myself.'

'I will be your friend,' said Alison, softly, 'though, sure, there never was a humbler one!'

Thus would these two swear an eternal friendship, over and over again. Alison heard more, also—heard a great deal, indeed, about the wondrous ploughman poet, whose image seemed to possess the ardent imagination of her friend. There was a certain little brownish, roughly-bound book amongst those which were wont to litter the coverlet of the best bed. It had a dog's-eared and most ungenteel appearance, but it was the Kilmarnock edition of the poems of Robert Burns, and had its letters been in gold and its binding of scented satin, it would not, in the then inflamed state of public adulation of the poet, have been too richly dressed. To the contents of this little book Alison listened, with a sort of tingling in her blood. She had a nature full of unuttered music, and she had been born and bred among those simple country scenes of her native land, whence the poet drew his inspiration. So he became, as he had become to thousands of his tongue-tied, voiceless, and strenuous countrymen and countrywomen, the very mouthpiece of her soul; and thus, long before a tangled thread from this man's chequered destiny became in-woven with the simple web of her own life, Alison got her first knowledge of Robert Burns.

But, in the meantime, the gay little invalid at The Mains, announced herself cured, and, in a cloud of pink wrapper and enveloping shawl, tottered from bed to the arm-chair by the fire.

'And, now, Ally,' she cried, 'now that my spirits are come again, now for your good mother and Mr. Cheape!'

CHAPTER VIII.

The task which the romantic Mrs. Maclehose had set herself in regard to Alison,

was one entirely after her own heart. She considered herself a past-mistress in all things relating to the tender passion; and though she herself had met with signal and disastrous shipwreck amid the shoals of matrimony, there was nothing in life that interested her like affairs of the heart. On this occasion, indeed, it was the marring, and not the making, of a match, that she had in hand. But what mission could be more legitimate, what endeavour more congenial, than that of helping to liberate a young and interesting friend from the horrid bondage of a loveless contract? That the mistress of The Mains viewed the matter from a different standpoint, she was, of course, aware; in her fertile brain she had arranged a plan of warfare, and went to the battle wreathed in smiles.

The lady of the house herself opened the campaign; by marching into the invalid's room one morning with an armful of silk—the wedding silk, which she spread forth before her guest.

'Ye were ay a handy body at the clothes, Nancy,' she observed. 'Now tell me how to sort this silk for Alison, in the newest modes.'

'Ah! your lovely Alison—how interesting!' murmured the guest, sweetly.

'Alison's well enough,' said her impartial parent, coolly. 'We think her none so lovely here—a good girl, but homely; none the less likely to make a good wife to an honest gentleman.'

'To be sure, to be sure,' said Mrs. Maclehose, in a sprightly tone, 'a little bird has told me of that interesting matter!'

'Then it needna have fashed itself,' said Mrs. Graham, alluding to the feathered purveyor of secrets, 'for I was fair bursting to speak of it myself. 'Tis a most extraordinary piece of good fortune to us, this substantial offer for a tocherless lass like Alison. I cannot get over it yet, myself.'

'And yet, Alison'—said the guest cautiously, 'Alison herself does not speak of the matter with the enthusiasm one expects in a young heart on such an occasion.'

'Do you gather grapes from thorns or figs from thistles?' inquired Mrs. Graham, contemptuously. 'No, nor sense from glaikit lasses! Alison's a fool, and doesna ken what's good for her. But—' grimly—'I've been teaching her, and she'll learn yet!'

'And the gentleman, ma'am?' inquired Nancy, casually, 'I protest I have hardly heard his name?'

'"Tis one most excellent respectit laird,' said Mrs. Graham, swelling visibly with the importance of the announcement, 'one Mr. Cheape of Kincarley in the county of—' But here Nancy broke in upon her with a sharp titter, which, however, she had the appearance of politely suppressing. Mrs. Graham looked at her sharply.

'What's wrong wi' *you*?' she sarcastically inquired.

'Oh, la, ma'am! nothing, I assure you,' said Nancy, in an obvious struggle with a mirthful tendency, 'only Mr. Cheape—ha—ha—' and she tailed off into a giggle.

'What dirty gossip o' the gutters ha' ye got about the man?' said Mrs. Graham, with rising anger and a flashing eye, 'out with your scandal, if ye must!'

'Oh, scandal, lud, ma'am, no!' said Nancy. 'Scandal and poor Jimmy Cheape were never named together, only—'

'Only *what*,' cried the irate lady of The Mains, with a stamp of her big foot.

'Well, ma'am,' said Nancy, coyly, 'I'd sooner bite my tongue out, sure, than that it should meddle with Miss Alison's good fortune. Only, since you ask me, it does surprise me that so distinguished a family as Graham of The Mains shouldn't look higher for their eldest daughter than poor Jimmy Cheape.'

'A distinguished family,' said Mrs. Graham, with a mincing mimicry of her guest's tone, 'a distinguished family wi' seven daughters has to take what it can get. It can ill afford genteel ideas like yours, Nancy,' with somewhat withering significance. 'But what's wrong wi' Mr. Cheape, to *your* fine notions, may I ask?'

'Well, ma'am, since you *will* have it,' said Nancy, with an air of reluctant candour, 'simply that he's the leavings of so many other folk,—that's all.'

'Oh, is he, indeed?' said Mrs. Graham, with fine sarcasm.

'"Tis so old a tale, indeed,' pursued Nancy, pictorially, 'that it stretches back clean and away beyond my poor memory. But even to my knowledge, Jimmy Cheape has been the rejected of ladies more than I can count, and such as are not worthy to tie the shoes of Miss Alison.'

'Oh, ay!' commented Mrs. Graham, with a vicious eye upon her informant. 'Well?'

'There was Jenny M'Lure,' continued Nancy, with a reminiscent air. 'All of one winter he was after her, not that *she* would look at him though, and the whole town laughing and looking on. And then there was Molly Baleny—*she* might have had him, for she was near forty and no beauty, but she put him to the door too. And there was Jean M'Gregor, the cutler's daughter, you know, in Nicol Street; a fine dance she led him, the hussy—for, after all, a laird was a bit of a string to her bow. But, of course, she gave him the go-by in the end, and, in my opinion, she was heartless in the way she held up an old man like that to be the jest of the town: 'twas no womanly behaviour. And there were others, I assure you; he's been on his knees to some girl or another in the public park, 'twas the season's great joke, but I forget her name. 'Tis not that he's wicked or a man of ill-conduct in any way, ma'am—but he is so comical, and no woman will marry a man that is a laughing-stock.'

'Will she no?' said Mrs. Graham, with a darting eye. 'But some'll take a wastrel, and no be able to keep him when they've got him!' Nancy winced visibly

under this vigorous blow, from no uncertain arm. 'My woman!' her hostess proceeded, 'if I find you setting Ally against her beau, it's the door you'll be shown, and that in a hurry! She's got to take Mr. Cheape, or she's got to beg. There's some's content to beg, but it'll no be my daughter!' And the lady of The Mains, gathering up the wedding silk, and with her head in the air, marched out of the room.

Nancy sank back in her chair, worsted, she felt, in this encounter.

'Your good mother, Ally,' she said to her friend, when Alison, appeared, 'is somewhat bludgeon-like in her methods of war. My poor little weapons are too fine.' Alison smiled rather wanly.

'Our mother is very strong in her wishes, and the getting of them,' she remarked. '"Tis not easy to move her.'

'Ah, but wait till I get at your father,' cried Nancy, recovering her spirits. 'I'm a wonderful hand with the men.'

'My mother is angry with you now,' said Alison, quietly, 'and with me too. She has put me to the clear-starching with the maids in the laundry, all the afternoon, for fear I should sit with you.'

'Oh, ho!' said Nancy, 'sets the wind in that quarter? But we'll see whose cleverest yet. Keep a good heart, Ally—you'll not marry Mr. Cheape!' But Alison shook her head despondently, and vanished. There were no more twilight talks and songs in the gloamings after that.

Thus matters remained at a standstill for several days, and Nancy chafed under the well-meant but awkward attentions of Kate and Maggie, who were sent to take Alison's place in the best room, about the invalid. She longed to be gone. The dreariness of the country at this season depressed the little townswoman, and she settled a day in her mind for her departure.

'But I'll save that child from her virago of a mother,' she said to herself, with determination, 'even if I have to carry her off with me by force. Though where,' she added, with a little grimace to herself, 'though where I'm to put the big creature, if I take her, Lord only knows! Is there a corner of my garret she can sleep in? Well, Providence must see to that!'

Nancy was never frustrated in a kind action by so paltry a detail. The charming vision of herself in the blotched old mirror—she was at her first *toilette*—smiled back at her approvingly, with the humid sparkle of her long, soft,

dark eyes. She was about to try her arts on the laird.

CHAPTER IX.

The mistress of The Mains, having mounted the gig, was away to the weekly butter market; Alison was invisible, set, in a distant corner of the house, upon some interminable domestic task. Nancy opened her door, peeped out, and listened; the house was quiet. The laird, she knew, was within and at her mercy, for she had heard he had the rheumatics in his back, and could not go forth in the damp. She tripped away down the passage, and by peeping into one room after another, at last found the library, and the laird in it.

'Here's the den,' she cried, gaily, 'and the lion within!' And she looked up into her host's rugged face with those eyes of hers, which no man in his senses could resist, saving, indeed, a certain legal gentleman, in Edinburgh, of a hard heart.

The laird was in a doleful mood, inclined to those modified views of the desirability of life which are fostered in a man by a touch of lumbago. He stood with his back to the green-washed mantelpiece, with its pessimistic motto, and his countenance was dourly set. It, however, melted in a smile at the sight of his guest, as, indeed, that guest intended that it should.

'And now I'm come to have a confidential talk with you,' said she, ensconcing herself in his big chair, and shaking a finger at him. "Tis of your daughter, Alison. Laird, it can never be that a man like you gives his daughter to a man like Jimmy Cheape!'

'Sells her, you mean,' said the laird, sourly. He was indeed Alison's father, from whom she had taken her own direct, literal ways of thought and speech. "Tis true, we have sold the lass.'

'For shame—for shame!' cried Nancy. 'Your best and bonniest! I'll not stand by and see it done. Sure as I'm a woman, I forbid the banns, and will prevent it!'

'You'd need be quick, then,' said the laird, with a short sarcastic laugh. 'Ally doesn't know it, for her mother keeps it quiet as yet, but the man comes tomorrow s'en-night, and expects to find all ready for the marriage.'

'Lord-a-mercy! then we must act promptly, indeed!' said Nancy. 'I'm not without a practical suggestion in the matter, I assure you. Instead of giving the

lassie to old Cheape, like a tit-bit to an ogre, give her to me. Do you hear, laird?'

'Ay, I hear,' said the laird, laconically. 'I would if I could, mistress, for my stomach rises at this marriage. But the wife is set on a husband for Ally.'

'I'll get her another,' cried Nancy, eagerly. 'The town's full of sparks, and to spare!'

'A bird in hand is worth two in the bush, the wife would tell you,' said the laird, with a sorry smile. 'Besides, there's money between old Cheape and me. I cannot back out of the bargain now.'

'Tut, he'll never mind the money!' cried Nancy. 'He's been a lender to half the fathers, brothers, uncles, and guardians in Scotland; for 'tis the only way he can get word with a woman. It's second nature to him to get the go-by, and if he misses Ally, he'll take up with one of her sisters in the twinkling of an eye.'

'Tis easy to be speaking to *me*,' said the laird, grimly. 'Why don't you speak to the mistress? 'Tis her business rather than mine, surely?'

'She's not to be moved,' said Nancy, demurely. 'But, laird, that which cannot be done by force, can often be done by guile. Are you willing, in your heart of hearts, to be off with this marriage? I know you are!'

'I am,' said the laird, rather heavily, for his conscience spoke at last.

'Well, give me a hand, and 'twill be done!' said Nancy. 'I leave this place in four days, and a man and chaise from C—— take me to Green Loaning to get the Edinburgh coach—isn't that so? And I must leave this door in the dark of the morning, before six? Isn't that the case?'

'Ay is it,'—said the laird, 'an awkward start.'

'Make it yet an hour awkwarder,' cried Nancy. 'And let no one know the time, save Ally and me, and you. Let the chaise be at the outer gate, and we'll slip down and be off before a soul's stirring. Is the mistress a good sleeper?'

'A gey and heavy sleeper in the mornings, now that she puts on years and weight,' answered the husband, with a sigh. 'She talks enough at night, God wot! But 'tis snoring in the morning, and I that have to rise to bustle the maids from their beds. Well?'

'Then you can slip down without danger and see us away,' said Nancy. 'I doubt, without your countenance in the matter, Ally would never come. But with it she'll fly this marriage as she would the devil.'

'I believe she will,' the laird muttered; but he seemed to hesitate. "Tis a simple enough plan,' he conceded. 'I see nothing to hinder its working. But how can I consent to foist the lass on to you? Her future—'

'Ah—bah—the future!' said Nancy, 'let the future take care of itself! There is but one for a fine girl like Ally. And this storm will blow by, besides, and you be glad to see her here again, long before I am ready to part from her. For I'll be glad of Ally, let me tell you. There's nothing so needful in my unhappy situation

as a companion of my own sex. Are not the prudent among my acquaintance telling me so every day of my life? So consent, for my sake as well as Alison's, and believe that you confer a favour by doing so.'

'You make the debtor seem generous,' said the laird, not unkindly, 'but I consent. Though the Lord only knows what I shall say to the wife when you're gone!'

'Ah, men must be brave—'tis their duty!' cried Nancy. 'And now, be wise too, and say not a word of this to a soul—not to Ally even, for her terror and indecision would discover themselves in a moment. I'll break it to her but the night before, and carry the citadel of her conscience and her scruples by storm—sweep off with her on the wings of surprise. You arrange with the driver of the chaise: I will manage the rest.'

It was not, therefore, till practically but a few hours before the meditated flight that Alison knew of the change in store for her. She had gone to bed drowned in tears at the prospect of her friend's departure, and in quiet despair at the conviction that now all chance of a rescue from Mr. Cheape was gone. Then Nancy came creeping up to her room in the dark on tip-toe, like the little conspirator that she was, shading the rush-light with her hand. Jacky slept beside his sister again, so their talk was in excited whispers.

'Ally,' Nancy said, leaning over the girl, and patting her wet cheek with a little hand, 'cry no more, dear love, 'tis all arranged with your father, and in the happiest way! No horrid Mr. Cheape for you; you are free! And you come with me to Edinburgh town in the morning!'

'I—to Edinburgh?' whispered the startled Alison.

'To me, child, to me!' Nancy whispered back. 'Did you think I was to part from my Ally without a blow struck for her freedom, and leave her to her fate? Oh, fie! faithless one! 'Tis your father and I have fixed it all between us; your mother knows naught. The chaise comes while she is still abed—more than an hour before she thinks—and we steal away, with your father, good man, to speed us at the gate. 'Tis quite an elopement, I declare; only I, alas! am of the wrong sex. You must rise, Ally, and put a few duds together; the laird says he will send a trunk after you to town. He has mine taken down already, so there will be no noise in the early hours. Will you come with me, Ally, and share my humble garret? 'Tis a poor thing, but mine own, and you're thrice welcome, God knows!'

Bewilderment still reigned in Alison's eyes and brain. 'Must I leave them all,' she whispered, 'my sisters and Jacky—?'

'Ay, must you,' said Nancy, with a little not unnatural impatience, 'or stay, and be taken from them by ogre Cheape in a fortnight!'

'In a fortnight! Was he coming so soon?' said Alison, with a white face, and then the magnitude of her friend's action on her behalf dawning upon her,

she cried, with a half sob, 'Oh, Nancy! how can I thank you for this deliverance?'

'Then you'll come, Ally?'

'Come? How can I fail?' said Alison. 'And, Nancy, what'll I say? But I'll not speak, I'll do. I'll try with all my strength to do something that shall reward you. I'll be your servant, anything!'

'Be my own friend, sweetest—'tis enough,' said Nancy. 'And now, mind, not a moment later than the half after four. 'Twill be as pitch as night, a strange start. I protest 'tis a perfect adventure! I'd not have missed it for worlds. Keep a good heart, Ally, just not too soft, you know, and brave.' And she tip-toed away again, nodding and smiling.

Alison rose and dressed, and did not sleep again that night, but sat still by Jacky's cot, her young brain whirling with confused, grave thoughts. When it was time to go she kissed Jacky, pulled up the coverlet where he had tossed it from his rosy limbs, and smoothed his curls, that were so like her own. He had been her charge since birth, and now she was leaving him to others. She took a last look round the bare little room of her maidenhood, and then with her bundle in her hand, she slipped away down to the distant kitchen to light a stealthy fire, so that Nancy might have a cup of chocolate to start on. The old house of her childhood seemed full of accusing shadows as she flitted through it, dark and cold and strange to the eye in these unholy hours. She was thankful when Nancy joined her; they both crouched over the fire, for it was bitter cold. Both, too, heard presently, with the sharp ears of excitement, the distant rumble of wheels. The chaise had come.

The laird put his head in at the back door.

'Come, lasses,' he said. He had a lantern, and they followed him out into the starlight of the winter morning. A wind, forlorn and cold as the grave, blew in their faces. The chaise was already piled with Nancy's goods—the laird's doing with his own hands. Alison could see the rough familiar figure of him moving about with the lantern, the father whose weakness and whose strength she knew and understood, the man so much finer and nobler than the woman who ruled him. The heart of the girl yearned over him, and she flung her arms round his neck.

'There was nothing for it but to run, Ally,' he said, patting her shoulder. And then he helped her into the coach, for she stumbled, blind with tears. And then the coach rolled away into the dark, leaving the laird alone at the postern, whence presently he turned slowly away. For in an hour's time he had to meet his wife; and it is my opinion that, in these degenerate days of ours, a man has

won the Victoria Cross for less.

CHAPTER X.

On one of those dull November afternoons which Mrs. Maclehose spent in convalescence at The Mains, her two little sons, in the good town of Edinburgh, set out to walk from their mother's house in the Potterrow, of the old town, to their cousin Archibald Herries's office in the then very modern George Street, of the new. As far as the North Bridge their servant Jean accompanied them, basket upon arm; but she had shopping in the Leith Row, and dismissed them in the direction of George Street, with directions 'to be guid bairns, not to play themselves on the road, to be civil to their cousin and give him the message, and to hasten home again before it was dark.'

They were little fellows of eight and ten respectively, the elder, a well-grown sturdy boy with red cheeks, the younger, a puny creature, with a small pale face, in which were set his mother's eyes without their laughter. Both were dressed alike in little green suits which they had long out-grown, and the frilled edges of their wide white collars were in places frayed and torn. Their shoes were worn, and as the younger one walked, indeed, the sole of his little left shoe threatened momentarily to part company with its sustaining upper, and slip-slopped upon the pavement at each dragging step. The two walked hand in hand, casting anxious glances upon the imposing-looking houses to their right.

At the extreme west end of George Street, indeed as far west as it then extended, was the house they sought,—a high granite-built edifice, with steps leading up to the door, upon which a brass-plate held the names—'Herries and Creighton, Writers to the Signet.' It was with difficulty, and only by standing on tip-toe, that Willy could reach the knocker, and the attitude had the effect of stretching him to such an extent, that it seemed quite impossible he could ever shrink again within the limits of the little green suit.

'I doubt that was another tear, Danny,' he said gravely to his little brother, as an ominous crack made itself heard in the region of the arm-hole; but he managed to wriggle the sleeves to his wrists again without further disaster. A cross-looking old woman opened the door and admitted them to the office.

In a light, handsome room to the front, above stairs, the walls lined partly with books and partly with piled-up boxes of deeds, a young man sat writing at

a table. He was of slight and decidedly graceful figure, and soberly dressed; his powdered hair, tied with a black ribbon, lent perhaps additional delicacy to his fair, rather over-refined, regular features. He turned about in his chair, and his cold blue eyes lit up, not unkindly, as the two little boys were ushered into his presence.

'Well, my men,' he said, 'so here you are. What's the news?'

'Mother's coming home, Cousin Archie,' said Willy, pulling a letter from his pocket.

'Ay, so I hear,' said the young lawyer, not without a dryness in his tone. 'I have a letter from your mother, too, you see,' and he tapped an open missive on his desk.

'There is a beautiful new lady coming home with mother, to stay with us,' said Danny, lifting his large dark eyes to his cousin's face.

'You don't say so!' said Cousin Archie. He took the child up on his knee.

'Yes,' continued Danny, settling himself against a comfortable shoulder. 'She has a little brother of her own, and so she is to be like a big sister to us.'

'Oh, that's the idea, is it?' said Archibald Herries. 'And does your mother say where this mighty fine young lady is to find a room?'

'It was Jean sent us to ask you that,' said Willy, innocently. 'I sleep with mother, you know, and Danny by Jean in the other room, but mother says the lady will want Jean's bed, and Jean would know where she's to sleep, and may she get M'Alister, our landlord, to hire us the garret? It's empty, and 'twill make no difference to him.'

'Except in the matter of the rent—none whatever, Willy,' said Herries, more drily than ever. 'But that's a secondary matter which we need not mention.'

He was frowning, and his delicate features looked severe and cold. Nevertheless a smile lurked about his lips, and it ended in a rather bitter laugh.

'Tell Jean to get the garret from M'Alister,' he said. 'You would not put her out in the street for the new lady—would you, Danny?'

'To be sure not,' said Danny solemnly. Herries had absently held one of the boy's thin legs, and with a movement the ragged foot-gear caught his eye.

'That's a sorry shoe, Danny,' he said. 'What's the matter with it?'

'Well,' said Danny, gravely, 'it is the sole coming off, I think. It has been coming off for a long time.'

'Why don't you get it mended, man?' the cousin enquired.

'It should have been mended,' Danny answered, lifting those soft, dark eyes of his again. 'But Jean said there was no more money.'

Herries threw back his head and laughed.

'That's a sad complaint,' he said. 'But come, boys, I'll walk home with you, and on the way we'll get a new pair of shoes for Danny. Come!'

The three issued forth together, and walked along George Street eastward. At the head of the Leith Row they went into a shoemaker's, and Danny was fitted with a stout new pair of shoes, for which his cousin paid. Then they began to climb the old town at a brisk pace, but presently the younger child lagged behind.

'Are the new shoes hurting you, my man?' asked Herries. His usually rather curt tones were very kind when he spoke to the little boy.

'"Tisn't the shoes, Cousin Archie,' said Willy, answering for his brother. 'But Danny has a sore leg that makes him hirple when he walks far.'

'Oh! he has, has he?' said Herries, looking at the child in perplexity. 'Come, boy, I can carry you up the brae, I think.'

He lifted the little creature, infinitely too small and light for his years, to his right arm, and, with a pause now and again for breath, carried him a long way. They were mounting still, sometimes by steep and narrow causeways, sometimes by actual flights of steps. A wintry sky of dulled flame was spread over the wonderful rock-built city round them, but the deep-cut valley in its midst was lost in a murky vapour—half smoke, half fog. When they got to the Potterrow, Herries set the child down, and stretched his cramped and aching arm. He was not a robust man, and the burden had taxed his muscles. They walked on until, in the narrow, echoing street, they came upon an archway, commonly yclept 'The General's Entry,' under which a door admitted to the common stair leading to the humble lodging occupied, at the present time, by Mrs. Maclehose.

'Now, be off, boys, and away up to Jean,' said Herries.

'Good-night, Cousin Archie,' the children's voices dutifully answered.

Herries heard their feet clatter on the stone stair, then turned away.

A solitary walk was no novelty to Archibald Herries, for he was, though young, a somewhat solitary man in circumstances, perhaps by inclination as well. He was the last living representative of a good old family in the south of Scotland, which had, by a series of misfortunes, political and other, lost lands and houses, and now threatened itself to disappear. An orphan since his infancy, Herries had been destined by his guardians for the army, but a constitutional delicacy showed itself early in the lad, and such a career became manifestly unadvisable, though all his dreams and ambitions, as a boy, were centred round it. He was bidden to fix his thoughts on the law, then considered perhaps the most highly respectable profession in Scotland, and it was intended that he should be called to the Bar as an advocate. But here again his unlucky star intervened, for Herries soon found himself wanting in those very qualities of brilliance and assurance which alone can lead to distinction in such a career. The more sober avenues of the law remained open to him, and these he finally entered and pursued. His circumstances—he had inherited a modest but certain income—made his entry into a good legal house, first as a subordinate and finally as a partner, secure;

and from that point onward his success was solid, progressive, and, indeed, distinguished. Intellectually well-balanced, shrewd, long-headed, prudent, and not a little cold, Herries at thirty, had all the weighty qualities of character essential in the best class of family lawyer. The heads of his firm retired, but not a client deserted him, and he had, at this time, when he was about thirty-three, perhaps one of the most extended legal concerns in Scotland—a business worth many thousands of pounds. He had taken as partner a very respectable man of the name of Creighton, much older than himself, who had been senior and confidential clerk of the firm for over thirty years. Mr. Creighton occupied lodgings of his own, from which he daily came and went; but Herries lived in the fine modern George Street mansion, which he had bought, in solitary state, but for his old housekeeper and a valet. Creighton had his office in one of the rooms by day, and four clerks did their work in yet another. It was a most substantial establishment, already one of the landmarks of New Edinburgh. In the eyes of the world, Herries was indeed a successful person. Yet he carried, locked in his bosom, that sense of failure and disappointment which dogs a sensitive man, who pursues an uncongenial occupation, and succeeds, yet without attaining a single desire of his heart.

Socially, Herries had the Edinburgh world at his feet. He bore a good name, he was a rising man, and had a pleasing person and gentlemanly address. Caps were set at the successful young lawyer, naturally. But Herries, though not averse to occasional dalliance, was hardly a lady's man. One winter, indeed, a great beauty took the town by storm, and Herries did a little more than dangle in her train, and got a little more, too, than mere crumbs from her table. But the beauty, though she weighed him in the balance, found him wanting, and married a title. It was a disappointment to ambition—the wish to win and wear what all men coveted—rather than to love; yet it had been a shock, too, that drove further inward the already inward nature of the man. He had buckled to his business after it with a more dogged exclusiveness than ever.

Preoccupied, as usual, Herries walked rapidly down towards the New Town, his thoughts busy for the moment with the children from whom he had just parted. As he rounded a corner, with bent head, he knocked up against a man, who seemed to be loitering on the causeway, none too respectably, with a woman. The figure of the man was big and burly, and he had a countryman's plaid about his shoulders. The woman was of the poorest class, of a tall figure, in a draggled cotton gown, a shawl drawn over her head. She seemed to cling to the man, and the man, half in jest, yet half in earnest, to cast her off. She laughed—an odd, rather wild, laugh, with little mirth, it seemed. Herries turned about and stared after the couple, for he knew the man. All Edinburgh knew that figure, and a passer-by, a labouring man, accosted Herries with a laugh,—

'Ay, ye may glower,' he said, with a boastful air, 'ye may glower, and your eyes be fu' o' pride—for that is Robert Burns!'

But if Herries stared after the retreating figure, it was certainly not with pride. An expression of disgust curled his fine, severe lips into lines more fastidious than ever.

'The dog!' he said, shortly and aloud, and turned on his heel.

CHAPTER XI.

When Herries re-entered his house, he did not go up to his own rooms at once, but turned into his partner's office, which was on the ground floor, to the front. It was a smaller apartment than his own, and its aspect was even more strictly in keeping with the dry and severe nature of the legal profession. Wire blinds shielded the rather grimy windows from the street, and piles of dusty documents, tied with tape, covered the bare tables with a kind of methodical litter. A scorching fire, untidily smothered in its own ashes, heated the room to a stifling closeness.

Creighton himself was a tall, lean man, long over fifty, gaunt as a withered reed, with a face of a yellowish waxen pallor, which betokened delicacy—a good deal of reddish whisker, fading into grey, and sparse hair of the same colour. The rusty black of his dress was respectable; a shrewd eye, a dry manner, constituted the rest of the outward man. Of the inward, little, if anything, was known to anyone, even to his partner. He was the son of a minister; a deadly quarrel with his family in early life had separated him from every individual of his own blood. So much was known. He made no friends, and cared for nothing in the world but his business—so much seemed apparent. Between the man and his younger, but superior, partner, there existed a certain, but absolutely unspoken sympathy; there was a decided likeness in the strength of their reserve and in the solitude of their lives. As a matter of fact, though Herries, in his youthful hardness, never dreamed of such a thing, the elder man cherished towards the younger, hidden as though it were a crime, a sentiment of deep, and even soft affection. Herries attracted, dominated, and possessed his partner; yet no one knew, as Creighton did, his faults and weaknesses. And no one dreaded for him, as Creighton did, with the experience of an embittered life behind him—the effects of the cold solitude and dry absorption in business in which the young man lived. He was for

ever making efforts—little, tentative timid efforts—to influence Herries to relax the young severity of his aspect, and the rigid regularity of his habits. It was sometimes rather an odd game that the two played between them, out of business hours, and, in an initiated onlooker, would have provoked a smile.

As Herries entered his partner's room on the present occasion, the latter, rather like a school-boy caught in some illicit act, slipped a book under some papers on his table. It was a little, coarsely-covered brown book, seen, at that day, on the tables of all men, gentle and simple, but perhaps not quite the most suitable reading for an elderly lawyer. Herries took a seat, his accustomed one in interviews with his partner.

'This room is over-hot, Creighton, surely,' he said, 'but comforting enough after the streets.'

'My chest has been troublesome lately,' answered the elder man. 'These north winds flay me alive. You have been out—it is good to be young!'

'Oh, ay!' said Herries, discontentedly. 'I have been out with my cousin's children—plague take them! Did I tell you that the annuities hitherto paid to Mrs. Maclehose by the Writers' and Surgeons' Benevolent Societies are stopped? I had trouble enough getting them for her, five years since, when Maclehose left her. Now that 'tis known he is making an income in Jamaica, naturally such charitable support is withdrawn.'

'Ay, to be sure,' said Creighton, quietly.

'I am writing to that damned scoundrel Maclehose,' Herries went on, 'to say I will not pay another penny for his wife and family. Yet there are the school fees due for the boy Willy, and I must give the lie to my words to-morrow.'

'Well, well,' said Creighton, 'the laddie must have his schooling, sure enough.'

'I'll be cursed if I can see why I should pay for it, though!' said Herries, angrily. Perhaps there were few things that exasperated him more than his partner's attitude in regard to the affairs of Mrs. Maclehose, as they concerned her cousin. Here was a man, Herries reflected, who, of all men, should have resented the intolerable and altogether unbusiness-like nature of an arrangement which made one man responsible for the support of the wife and family of another, and that other, one who was earning a substantial annual income in a foreign country. Agnes Maclehose was, indeed, cousin-germain to Archibald Herries—the daughter of his mother's sister—and his sole living relative. On her quarrel with a worthless husband, he had considered himself to play but a kinsman's and a lawyer's part in arranging for her the details of a separation; and when, with two young children on her hands, and friendless, she had come to Edinburgh, he had done his best to ameliorate for her the hardness of her situation. He had taken in hand her money matters: she had a small income derived from money

left her by her father, but it fell far short of the modest necessities of even a little household in the Potterrow. Out of his own pocket, Herries supplemented its deficiencies, and it was not the money he grudged, but the violation of a principle that he resented. And here was Creighton—a lawyer, a man of sense and of extraordinary shrewdness—who, instead of sympathising with his resentment, would for ever try to soothe it with ridiculous excuses.

'She is your own blood,' he would say of his partner's relative, 'you cannot put her on the street.' Or, 'It is but a sup of porridge the bairns will be wanting just now, not much, a flea's bite,' and so forth, and Herries would fume in vain. The old lawyer's private opinion of Mrs. Maclehose was none the less of an extremely unflattering character; he believed her to be a daughter of the horse leech, who doubtless preyed upon his friend after the manner of her kind, and the sound of her voice in the passage sent shivers down his back, for he was a woman-hater, or something very like it. But she was yet, in his mind, the one tie that Herries had, binding him to the world of kinship, of human interests and human affection. And so the man, whose own heart had perished of atrophy within him, strove to keep life in the heart of the other by the one means that naturally offered itself.

Herries, failing thus, as usual, to rouse his partner's sympathy on the score of the Maclehose difficulty, rose to go, and by a chance movement of some papers on Creighton's table, he disclosed to view the guilty little brown book hidden under them. His finely-drawn eyebrows arched themselves in a kind of contemptuous query. 'At it again?' he said, 'that jingle that the town rings with? Your poet's star is in the descendent now, though, Creighton,' he added.

'Never, sir!' said Creighton, hardily. 'That star will never set! It shines to all time,—like Shakespeare's, like Homer's, for the matter of that. You'll not put me out of conceit of my poet, sir!'

'Deuce take him!' said Herries, half carelessly, half in earnest. 'My ears are sick of his name. We are like to hear less of it this winter, though, I think; the creature palls at last. How the women fawned upon him last year. Pah!'

'Women will fawn on anything—a dog, a dwarf, a china monster,' said Creighton; 'but neither their fawning nor their neglect will touch the fame, the genius of Robert Burns!' He spoke with heat, and his dull eye kindled.

Herries looked at him with a mild wonder.

'It passes me,' he said, 'this mad enthusiasm for a rhymer—of dirty rhymes, too, for the most part. To me they reek of the midden and the yard, and neither they nor their author are fit furniture for drawing-rooms—that's my contention. But there, sir, good-night! I leave you to your poet. By the way,' he added, 'this reminds me that I saw Master Bard on my way home to-night, at his old tricks. But it is not duchesses and fine ladies are his game now, but his own kind, it would seem.'

'God send him back to the fields and the hills!' ejaculated Creighton, with warmth. 'The town is no place for poor Rob, and I doubt they have ruined the lad between them all! But I must be gone, too, sir. Dick has been waiting on me this hour and more in the cold.'

Dick—well known to half the town as 'Creighton's Dick'—was a dog, a gaunt and hairy Skye terrier, with appealing eyes, who owned Creighton as master. Every morning he followed the lawyer to his office, returning home by himself, and every evening he came for him, waiting on the doorstep for Creighton to appear. He never failed, and the townspeople, on his line of route, would time their doings by the punctual coming and going of the lawyer's dog.

'Come, man!' Creighton would say, as he closed the sounding door behind him, and the dog, though stiff and old, would spring at his knees. This night was one of a penetrating coldness, and Creighton seemed to shrink together as he met the blast. But he faced it, and man and dog took their accustomed way down the windy granite street.

CHAPTER XII.

Alison's journey to Edinburgh with her new friend was certainly the most exciting and novel experience which her quiet life had yet afforded. It was hardly more than daylight when they got to Green Loaning, and exchanged their country conveyance for the Edinburgh stage coach. There were but few people travelling at this season, and they had the interior of that vehicle all to themselves. Nancy soon had it littered with all the paraphernalia which ever seemed a part of herself—the down cushions, the scent bottles, the poetry books, the pencil and tablets for recording any sudden outburst of the Muse—all the thousand little odds and ends, so new and so marvellous to Alison, the country girl of simple habits and few possessions. Nancy was in high glee, the mood, as it were, of some general of a feeble army, who, by an adroit and timely stratagem, has defeated and outwitted a foe infinitely stronger than himself.

'Well, Ally,' she said cheerfully, for Alison was a little tearful, just at first, 'is it not a comfort, child, that you've left home with the blessing of one parent at least? As to the other, well, your mother is a resourceful lady, I am sure, and will find a good use for Mr. Cheape yet. She will get him for Kate or Maggie—'

'Oh, no, no!' cried Alison in horror. 'But, indeed, my mother will be sorely

vexed,' she added; 'and what my poor father will say to her, I cannot think. And, Nancy, how shall I ever face her again myself?'

'"Tis far too soon to think of that, love,' said Nancy, comfortably. 'Perhaps you need never face her at all, in the way you mean. What you have to think of now, child, is all the pleasant new things you have before you—the town, new friends, new faces. 'Tis but a hole and corner of a home, I'm taking you to, Ally, but it has a cheery hearth, and you'll not be dull, I think.'

'How could I, how could anyone, be dull with you?' cried Alison. And, indeed, that seemed a very unlikely contingency, the least likely of all.

The coach rumbled on, sometimes smoothly, when Nancy chattered without ceasing, sometimes with din and noise, when she would fall into a pensive mood. Once they had a long pause for a rest or change of horses, and it was then that Nancy rummaged in her bag and drew out a little case of miniatures.

'Ah, my little men!' she said softly. 'You haven't seen them, Ally.' The case held pretty little pictures of Willy and Danny—Willy with his rosy cheeks, and Danny with his mother's eyes, turned sad and sorrowful. Alison looked at them with delighted interest; these were to be the substitutes, for a while, for Jacky and her sisters.

'You have not seen the mother-half of me, Ally,' Nancy was saying softly; 'and yet, do you know, I am nothing if I am not a good mother; 'tis my best point.'

'Yes,' said Alison, sympathetically, and yet with a faint feeling of surprise. She had heard so much about so many things from her fascinating new friend, but so very little about the children. However, Alison reflected, people always speak least about that which lies nearest their hearts.

'Yes,' Nancy went on, gazing at the miniatures the while, 'there are friends of mine, Ally, who say to me they wonder I can love the children of such a father. My answer is, I love them the more, owe them the more devotion and duty, for having given them such a father!'

The sentiment seemed unexceptionable, and found instant echo in Alison's loyal breast. She noticed there was a third miniature in the case, but it was covered with a piece of silk. Nancy now removed this and disclosed the portrait of a young man, extremely handsome, in a dark style, but the reverse of pleasing.

'"Tis he!' she said, holding the miniature out to Alison, and turning her head away, with a sigh.

'Mr.—Mr. Maclehose?' whispered Alison, delicately.

'Ay,' said Nancy, 'my deserter, my betrayer, I may, indeed, call him! For did he not betray my youth, ruin my happiness, destroy my life? And yet, I'm made so, Ally, that I can't part from his image, but keep it there, with the faces of his innocent children. He was the lover of my youth—I can't forget it!' She propped the miniatures up on the seat in front of her, and continued to gaze upon them,

with many head-shakings, and soft, moist eyes. But presently the coach went on, and her mood changed utterly; she fell to discussing the contents of a little basket, which the hospitality of The Mains had prepared for her over-night.

'"Twas only meant for one, Ally,' she laughed. 'Little your good mother thought that two would be at its demolishment! But there's enough and to spare; the lady has a generous hand.'

They had quite a gay little meal. The neglected miniatures overturned with the jolting of the coach. Mr. Maclehose's, indeed, fell down among the straw at the bottom of the vehicle, and it was Alison who finally picked him up, dusted him, and replaced him in the case. The short day began to close in now; the tired travellers spent the rest of the journey half asleep, and mostly in silence.

It was a clattering over cobble-stones—a din indescribable of wheels and horses' hoofs—that woke Alison at last to a realisation of her arrival in the town. The coach drew up at its office in the Grassmarket, and they got out there. A man was waiting, with a 'hurley' or barrow to take their boxes, while the two ladies themselves walked, a link-boy flashing his torch before them. How high and dark seemed the houses, how narrow the echoing streets! Alison, dazed and a little frightened, kept close to her companion, who chattered gaily, with undiminished and irrepressible vitality. They came to the Potterrow eventually, and to the dark archway and stone stair which led to Nancy's 'garret,' as she called it. A very decent serving-woman was holding a light at the stair-head, and presently two little boys had rushed out, and half-smothered their mother with hugging arms and raining kisses.

'Oh! gently, boys, gently!' cried Nancy, laughing and kissing all at once. Then she put an arm about Alison. 'Come, Ally,' she said, 'and be welcome to my little nest!'

It was a little nest indeed. Allison thought it the tiniest, yet the cosiest and homeliest room she had ever seen. Such a bright fire leapt in the polished grate, such cosy red hangings were drawn across the windows; the polished panelling of the walls gleamed so cheerfully, and there was a table drawn to the hearth. Presently, they were sitting there, over a dish of tea; but Nancy could get no peace to eat or drink for the boys. They seemed both on her knee at once—Willy, with rough boyish arms about her neck—Danny, with adoring eyes, never taken from her face.

'You see, they love their little mother, Ally,' she said, and her eyes were full of tears. Alison cast a motherly eye upon the children. It was very late, she thought, in her matter-of-fact way, for little boys to be out of their beds, especially the younger, who looked so small and 'shilpit.' Then she reflected she would ask Nancy, as soon as possible, to be allowed to let out their clothes—more especially Willy's—for the discrepancies of the little green suits were at once

apparent to her practical eye. Nancy, in the meantime, was frolicking about the little room, putting things into place, giving a pat here, a push there—a little tug to a curtain, or change of position to a screen or chair. Presently, she fell upon a packet of letters that had awaited her arrival, and was instantly absorbed in them, her quick, little, ringed fingers busy with their fastenings. All at once she gave a little cry of rapture and surprise.

'Ally,' she called, 'oh, Ally! what do you think? The gods are kind at last—Fortune smiles! Did I not tell you I'd get my heart's desire? Here is a letter from my cousin Nimmo—Miss Nimmo—and she asks me to a tea-drinking at her house to-morrow; 'tis actually to meet—to meet and be made known to, the Poet—my poet—the world's poet—the immortal bard—ah! magic name—to Robert Burns!' Alison smiled down at her friend with her kind, gentle grey eyes.

'I'm so glad, Nancy,' she said; "twill be a great event—and how lucky you are home in time!'

'La, yes, child, indeed!' said Nancy. 'Supposing I had missed it, I'd have gone mad, I think, with sheer vexation! Ally, you've brought me happiness, you've brought luck to my house!' She flung an arm about Alison's waist; she was almost dancing with glee. Her great dark eyes shone and glowed, her vivid lips were parted, to let her hurried breathing come and go. Beside the quiet, calm, unstirred country girl—a something tropical, she seemed, turning to passion, as the flower turns to the light it cannot live without.

'But now, to bed!' she cried. 'To bed, boys, Alison, all. To-morrow must come quick, quick—on wings, Ally, on wings!'

So the little rooms were darkened, and Alison, feeling rather big and strange amid her new surroundings, took possession of Jean's closet, feeling more at home when she found that Danny slept beside her, in a little cot like Jacky's.

CHAPTER XIII.

A north wind, whistling at the windows, awoke Alison next morning from rather troubled dreams of The Mains, and her mother, and Mr. Cheape. But it is difficult not to be cheerful at twenty, and Alison, who was a sensible and wholesome young woman, had soon put away night-thoughts, and was prepared to enter heartily into all the brisk novelty of her surroundings. Nancy's home, if a garret, was a very lively garret, with the boys at their play, Jean's cheerful industries,

and its own gay, fascinating little mistress, tripping here and there, with laughter ever on her lips and in her eyes.

'Why, Ally,' she cried, 'the sun shines on you, child! 'Tis the first fine morning for a month. You must get a walk and see the town.' She was busy with a dress, as she spoke, a gay thing of rose pink, just sobered down with black, that she had taken out of a press.

'For, you see, love,' she said, 'I must be modish to-night, if ever so in my life. Had there been time, I'd have had a new gown to deck poor Nancy's fading charms, and fit them for a poet's eye.'

'You'd look pretty in anything,' said Alison, meaning every word. Nancy laughed, with the liquid sparkle of her wonderful almond eyes.

'But, child, you shall not sit in here all day, watching me trim my silly self for Nimmo's tea-drinking,' she said. 'I will tell you what we'll do. Willy and Danny shall take you between them: I have not, indeed, the time myself this morning, or I'd come with my Ally as the first of pleasures; but you shall walk over to the New Town, and to my cousin Herries's, and get me the packet of monies that is due. 'Tis mighty awkward in him not to have it waiting me here. I've to borrow from Jean already; but it makes a nice outing on a sunny morning. Will you go, child?'

'Surely,' said Alison. And she went away to prepare herself, for her first walk in the streets, in the little closet she could hardly turn in. She tied on, as she was wont to do at home on Sundays, her wide hat of rather sun-burnt straw, over the 'mob' that was supposed to keep her hair in order. So that her sweet, grave face had a double framing of clean frills and soft unruly curls. A cross-over tippet covered her handsome shoulders. It was almost a summer suit, but Alison had nothing else.

'Lud, what a country figure the poor child cuts,' was Nancy's inward comment as Alison stood before her. 'I must see to her clothes presently, presently.' She came to the stair-head to see the little party set off, bidding the boys take great care of their friend.

A gay north wind blew high that day through the grim streets of Edinburgh town. It was a morning of bright, shallow, winter sunshine. When they had gone down into the Cowgate, and up again on the other side, Alison and her little guides found themselves on the ridge of the city, and below them they could see the nascent New Town spreading itself, and beyond that, a lovely distance, rounded by the blue hills of Fife, and watered by the widening Forth. It was a day and scene to lift the spirits to their zenith. The keen wind searched the thin folds of Alison's summer gown, and blew the curls about her face, which grew rosy with the cold. Her blood ran warm, and she laughed, with the little boys, just for pure health and happiness and freedom.

However, when they reached George Street, Alison became subdued. Was she not, probably, about to meet the terrible Mr. Herries, that most exacting and particular gentleman, of whom even Nancy stood in awe? The severe aspect of the housekeeper, who sourly asked her business at the door, entirely failed to reassure her; and what with the flutter in her manner, the low tones of her voice in which she asked to see 'the gentleman in the office,' it was not surprising, perhaps, that a mistake arose. So that she was shown into Mr. Creighton's room, instead of Herries's, the little boys tugging dumbly, but unavailingly, at her skirts the while.

Mr. Creighton rose in all the confusion and dismay of spirit which the entry of a female into his sanctum was wont to cause within him. In his gaunt, elderly figure Alison perceived the very image of Archibald Herries, which Nancy's casual references to her cousin had managed to call up in her imagination.

'Will you be good enough to excuse this interruption, sir?' she timidly began, seeing that Creighton made no effort to open the interview. 'I am come from my kind friend, Mrs. Maclehose, on a message, to receive a packet at your hands which she expects.'

Creighton was looking at her with the unsparing penetration—it had a kind of gimlet-like quality—of his habitual regard. Alison's unconscious grey eyes met his without flinching; it was indeed he who first looked away. 'Who was the woman?' he wondered. Somehow, with her full, large presence, her fresh face and country attire, there seemed to have come a breath of the fields and hills into his fusty room.

'Mrs. Maclehose is not accustomed to confide her messages with me, madam,' he said. 'It is likely she meant you to apply to Mr. Herries.'

'Why, sir,' said Alison, confused and blushing, 'are you—are you not—' The lawyer emitted a dry chuckle.

'I am not Mr. Herries,' he said, smiling. 'In the matter of years I have some advantage, doubtless, over that gentleman, but he is my superior, ma'am. I am only Andrew Creighton—at your service, of course. May I ask, now,' he went on, drily, 'how you are led to think of Mr. Herries as old enough to be his cousin's father?' ('It was like the little Jezebel,' he was saying to himself, and he meant poor Nancy, 'to make her cousin out an old man, and spoil his chances with a likely lass!')

But Alison protested she knew nothing of Herries's age, stammering, as all truthful people will, over a white fib.

'You thought all legal gentlemen were old, perhaps?' said Creighton, quite genially, 'but I protest not; some of us are young and handsome, I assure you!' He invited his guests to a seat, which they were too timid to refuse, and had soon evoked from Alison her name and county.

'Graham—Graham of The Mains, to be sure,' he said. 'Why, I remember your father well. He used to be in and about the town in his youth, but he never comes now, I take it.'

'"Tis a long way off, and my father is busy, and there are too many of *us*,' Alison explained, and the lawyer seemed fully to understand this pregnant statement.

'Family cares,' he gravely remarked, 'soon make a solid man out of a young spark. But you,' he went on, 'you are come on a visit of pleasure, I understand, and must do our old city the fullest justice. You must see the sights, madam—Holyrood, the Castle, the Crags. But, doubtless,' with a clumsy effort to be gallant, 'there are plenty ready and willing to do the honours of Auld Reekie to Miss Graham of The Mains.'

'No, indeed, sir,' said Alison, quite simply; 'there is no one but Mrs. Maclehose, but she is the kindest of the kind, and will show me everything that I ought to see.'

'Oh, ay, indeed!' said the lawyer in a different voice. After that Alison rose to go.

'I will bid you good-day now, sir,' she said, with the modest air that had so taken the crusty old lawyer, 'and I will trust to your kindness to let Mr. Herries know that his cousin sent a message for the monies.' ('Trust her for that!' interpolated Nancy's instinctive foe.)

He saw his guests to the door with, for him, a singular show of courtesy. When he came back into his room he stood at the window, peering over the blind, holding a rough chin between finger and thumb in an attitude of deep contemplation. 'Graham of The Mains,' he muttered; 'a good name, and a fine lass! She looked true. They cannot *all* be deceivers and liars, surely. Will *he* give any heed to her, though? There will be opportunity, chances enough. But no, no; I need never think it.' And rather impatiently he turned to his interrupted work, and was soon buried in its details.

CHAPTER XIV.

When Herries, who had been absent on business, returned to his house, he was annoyed to find that he had missed the emissary from his cousin. 'That means, I suppose, that I must e'en trail out over there myself after office hours,' he said to

himself. 'Plague take the woman! And yet she must be visited at some time or another.' Visits, rather of business than of pleasure to his troublesome charge in the Potterrow, were a part of the routine of his life. They would generally be spent in a wrangle over accounts, and yet hardly a wrangle either, for it takes two to make such a thing, and Nancy was incapable of quarrelling. But Herries would spend a laborious hour trying to instil into his volatile charge some notion of the nature of money, and the value of keeping and giving an account thereof. He might as well have tried to instil into the passing winds an appreciation of these practical details. Nancy had but one notion of money—to spend it. Not that even Herries, in his severest moments, could call her selfishly or systematically extravagant, which was the more provoking. It was an infinitesimal house-keeping—that of the tiny household in the Potterrow; but by systematic ideas of cutting her coat according to her cloth in all things, Nancy would not, or could not, be governed, and Herries would drive himself nearly crazy over the futility of his efforts to coerce this delicate, frail, light, feminine thing that so smilingly defied him.

This night, as he prepared himself to walk over to the Potterrow, another annoyance from a feminine source assailed him. Lizzie, his housekeeper, demanded an untimely interview by knocking at his door and then entering his room, followed, at a discreet distance, by, apparently, a satellite.

'Well, woman, what is it?' he demanded crossly.

'Weel ye s'ud ken what it is,' said Ailie, who used all the freedom of speech towards her master of an old servant of his family, which, indeed, she was. 'Was I no' tellin' ye yestreen it was the day I was to gar ma sister's husband's niece—it's the lass Mysie—come oot ower frae the Wabster's Close, to see if she wadna do ye for a help tae me aboot the hoose, noo a'm that auld and failed'—

'Oh, the devil take her!' said Herries, impatiently. 'Of course she'll do if she suits you. It's your business, isn't it?'

'Na! it's just no my business!' retorted the old woman, sourly. 'For when I said I wad like weel to hae a lass, ye hummed and haw'd, and—"the dangers o' the toon!" quo' you—to a young lassie wi' the beaux and sic like. 'Od, I'se gar ye see I'se gotten ane that wull hae nae sic havers. Come ben, Mysie!' She called to her relative, who had remained, meanwhile, on the landing without, and who now obediently appeared. 'Tak the screen aff ye!' commanded Lizzie, alluding to the tartan shawl commonly worn about the head and face by the poorer women of that day.

Mysie divested herself of this garment, and disclosed to view a countenance certainly destitute of any conspicuous allurement to the aforesaid beaux. She was a very tall and somewhat grenadier-like young woman, with a pale, rather haggard, face, a quick, roving glance, and a general air as of something newly caught and altogether untamed.

'She has the three nieces wi' her gude man, ma sister,' continued Lizzie,' and I'se warrant ye weel I waled the little bonniest o' the bilin'! Mysie 'll no be bathered wi' the lads, I'm thinkin'.'

She contemplated her connection with grim approval, almost pride; but Mysie, who had hitherto listened to the curious encomium of her lack of dangerous charms with a perfectly apathetic indifference, uttered, at the last words, a sudden, odd laugh. Herries looked up sharply, but the naturally rather heavy face had become stolidly grave again, and Mysie, ordered to do so by her relative, proceeded meekly to leave the room.

'I've seen her before, somewhere, surely?' said Herries, thoughtfully, teased by some vague reminiscence. 'Rather a rough diamond, isn't she, Lizzie?'

"Oo—a wee thing, mebbe—ay!' said Lizzie, cheerfully. 'She's fresh aff the fields, doon Colinton way, howkin' tatties ... but she's takken wi' a notion for genteel sairvice i' the toon. 'Od, she'll get it wi' me, onyway!' Thus promising abundant, wholesome occupation for her hopeful *protégée*, Lizzie departed to nether regions, well pleased. Herries felt that he had not cottoned greatly to his new retainer. But the choice of a scullion seemed, for the time being, a matter of such infinitely small importance, that he had presently forgotten Mysie as completely as though she had never existed.

Presently, having dined, he walked briskly up the town in the gloaming. Lights were beginning to twinkle from the houses in the old town—lights so high up in the gathering haze, that they seemed to strain to the stars. The ill-lighted and malodorous wynds and closes clattered to the deafening din of their granite-given echoes; harsh voices called to each other across the narrow spaces; there floated from the castle height the toll of a bell, giving the hour. Herries picked his way to the Potterrow, and was admitted to his cousin's house by the discreet Jean.

With the privilege of intimacy, he walked unannounced into the little parlour. But for the dancing firelight it was in darkness, the cosy, red curtains drawn, and those within seemed in no hurry for the lights.

'Well, cousin!' said Herries, carelessly, as he entered. But so very tall a woman's figure rose from the hearth, where it seemed to have been seated—displacing two little boys as it did so—that Herries realised at once it was not his Cousin Nancy. Jean saved the situation at this critical moment by bringing in a pair of lighted candles. And thus Archibald Herries and Alison Graham saw each other for the first time.

Alison shook in her shoes, for she felt that this could be none other than the redoubtable Herries. And Herries, who was in a bad temper, inwardly cursed his luck which had betrayed him into an awkward interview with a country miss.

'Mrs. Maclehose is gone out to a tea-drinking, sir,' Alison managed to say,

standing shyly where she had risen. 'But she should presently come home. It is past the hour when she promised to return.'

'I apologise for my intrusion,' said Herries. 'Let me present myself, in Mrs. Maclehose's absence—her cousin, and your servant, Archibald Herries.' He bowed, with the accustomed little flourish and affectation of the day, and Alison stole a look at him half frightened and half fascinated. She had never seen so fine a personage as this young man in all her days, with his smartly cut, if sober, coat—his laced frills, the powder in his hair, the ring upon his finger. How fine and delicate and clear-cut were his features, how cold and keen his blue eyes, under those ironically-arched and finely pencilled eyebrows. No wonder, Alison thought, that Nancy was afraid of him. He was terrible: much more so, being so smart and fine, than if he had been a snuffy old gentleman, such as Alison, in her fancy, had painted him. And yet, behold, the moment he sat down, Danny inserted himself between his knees, and Willy lolled against his shoulder, with the clumsy affection of boyhood. The children, evidently, were not afraid of this terrible person. Alison, in an agony of shyness, was wondering if she must introduce herself, when Herries saved her the trouble.

'And so you are come to explore the capital, Miss Graham,' he said, showing that he knew her name, 'but doubtless you knew it before?'

'No, indeed, sir,' said Alison. 'I never was in a town in my life, excepting Stirling, where I was at school.'

'Ah, indeed!' said Herries, suppressing a yawn, but not at all suppressing a bad-tempered tendency to be covertly rude to this country girl, who was going to bore him. 'And when you were not at school, in Stirling, you lived—?'

'I lived at my father's house, sir,' said Alison, quite simply.

'Hum-m,' said Herries, perhaps a trifle disconcerted. 'I believe that I have often heard of The Mains,' he went on, condescendingly, 'a rural solitude. And what did Miss Graham do at The Mains?'

'I minded the turkeys, sir,' said Alison, 'and did as I was bid.' She was not, in spite of her shyness and timidity, very well pleased with the condescending tone of this fine young townsman, and spoke roundly. The answer was amusing to Herries, and changed his mood. He looked attentively at the speaker, but would not admit there was anything to admire. A 'big bouncing miss,' he called her in his thoughts. But, nevertheless, he looked again; and once, he caught, full in the eyes, the innocent candour of her wide grey glance—and before it, he was aware that his own gaze fell.

'And have you made friends with these little men?' he asked, in a totally changed tone; and Willy and Danny grinned. After that they conversed very amicably about the little boys, their lessons and their play, Danny's delicacy and Willy's school. Herries made himself vastly agreeable, as he well could do when

he chose; and Alison was quite startled when she saw how low the candles had burnt, which were quite respectably long when Jean had brought them in. But still Nancy tarried.

'My cousin is late, surely,' said Herries. 'I, too, was bidden to the great Nimmo's, but I suspect I have passed a much more profitable evening where I am.'

'But, indeed, no, sir!' said Alison, in all good faith. 'For the great Mr. Burns, the poet, was to be at Miss Nimmo's, and 'twas to meet him that Nancy was so wild to go.'

'I'm the more glad I was absent, then,' said Herries. 'Mr. Burns is not a person to my taste.'

'Why, sir,' said Alison, wonderingly, 'don't you admire his great poems?'

'I never read them,' said Herries, 'and never wish to. And, moreover,' he continued, severely, 'I gather they are no fit reading for a lady, whatever they may be for men.'

'But why?' cried Alison, forgetting her shyness, in her surprise, 'sure, sir, there's the most beautiful things in them, all the best feelings you can think of, and so often religion and the highest thoughts....'

'Then all I can say is,' said Herries, shortly, 'that their author adds hypocrisy to vice, and becomes the more odious in consequence.'

Alison gave a little gasp. She, who pored over 'The Cottar's Saturday Night,' and poems to 'The Mountain Daisy' and 'A Field Mouse'; and Herries, who heard the town talk of 'Holy Willie's Prayer,' and the even less-edifying satires, were, indeed, little likely to agree on the subject of the genius of Burns. But even had Herries stopped to consider the difference of their points of view, his opinion of the poet would have remained unaltered. And so it was that Alison found herself, for the first time, fluttering against that stone wall of prejudice which raised itself so soon in Herries's nature. She had too much tact to pursue the subject, and presently there were sounds without which proved a timely interruption. It was the chairmen, putting down the returning guest at the foot of the stair.

'Ah, there's Nancy at last, sir,' cried Alison, 'so you'll see her before you go.'

CHAPTER XV.

All her life long, even when she was an old, old woman, did Alison remember the vision that Nancy made as she came, fresh from Miss Nimmo's memorable party, into the little parlour that night. She was in her pretty dress of pink and black, her little shoes had high pink heels, and a pink rose fastened the lace lappets in her hair. But it was her face that was illumined: her parted lips were scarlet, her eyes glowed, her cheeks were delicately flushed. She clasped her hands together as she ran into the room, crying to Alison: 'Oh, Ally, I have seen him! And, oh, much more than that: I've talked with him! 'Tis the crowning night of my life....' And then, all at once, perceiving Merries, her face fell, and she stopped short in her rhapsody. 'You here, cousin!' she said, in a changed voice. 'Well, 'tis an age since we met. And now I must postpone my raptures, I know, for you'll not approve their object.'

'No need to name him,' said Herries, blandly, 'Miss Graham has enlightened me. And so,' he added, very disagreeably, it must be confessed, 'that dog has come back from the dung-hill to the drawing-room.'

'Herries!' exclaimed Nancy, passionately, 'how ... how dare you speak so?'

'Tut, cousin! I've the freedom of my tongue, haven't I, even though I speak of your consecrated bard? But there, I'll not wound your sensibilities and those of Miss Graham any further to-night.' Herries laughed as he spoke. 'I'll take myself off, and leave you ladies to enjoy your raptures. A mere man has no chance when there's a poet on the *tapis*.'

'Nay, Archie,' said Nancy, more gently, throwing herself, with a little sigh, into a chair and leaning back in it. 'Stay a while. 'Tis no wish of mine to drive you away, God wot!'

Herries stood on the hearth, looking down at his cousin with his cool, critical, half-satirical regard. Her little innocent arts, so infallible, as a rule, in the conquest of his sex, her languishing glance, her merry smile, had no more effect upon him than summer breezes on the bastions of a fort. He called her in his thoughts, 'a little baggage,' teasing as a midge, perhaps, but hardly more important in the general scheme of things. That the 'little baggage' might have passions, strong to move her, and strong to move the little world around her—strong enough, perhaps, to turn aside the deep and placid current of his own existence—was a thought that never crossed his brain. Nancy, in the meantime, appreciated perfectly his attitude towards her, and it inspired her with a kind of petulance—the petulance of a charming woman at fault with a man, for once. Yet she always tried 'to be pretty with Herries,' as she phrased it. It was her nature, and her weakness, to be 'pretty' with everyone.

Alison, at this juncture, had left the cousins alone, taking Danny to his bed, for the child drooped with fatigue, in spite of his eagerness to sit up late. Herries watched her departure.

'I don't quite gather who she is, and where she comes from, your very—your very ample young friend?' he enquired, lazily.

'My friend is Miss Graham of The Mains,' said Nancy, with some tartness.

'Oh, I know that much,' said Herries. 'But how she comes to be your friend, and to be here, gives food for enquiry. I've hitherto not seen that misses from the country were much to your taste.'

'She has a little history, Archie,' said Nancy, covering her stony relative (quite unavailingly) with one of her softest glances—'a little history that might melt even your hard heart.'

'Let us hear it, and perhaps I'll melt,' said Herries, drily.

'I found the child in a dreary, God-forsaken hole of a country place,' Nancy began, in narrative style, 'one of a prodigious family—seven girls—think of it! And they were going to marry her, against her every wish and instinct, to a man old enough to be her father. And so I acted Providence and bore her off, in spite of them, and here she is.'

'Good God, cousin!' said Herries, with a lift of his eyebrows that Nancy particularly disliked; 'you mean to say you took the girl from her parents—interfered with their projects for her future—and now burden yourself with the responsibility of her maintenance? Heavens!'

'Her own father helped me—at the end,' said Nancy, pouting. 'He was a decent man, and thankful to be off the devilish bargain of selling his daughter to an old horror. Yes, I call it devilish—hellish—if you prefer the word!'

'Oh, Lord!' said Herries, as though words failed him. 'And who, pray, was the bridegroom you have helped to cheat?'

'Old Cheape—you know him—Cheape of Kincarley,' said Nancy.

'A most respectable person, and excellent parti!' exclaimed Herries, now in his most provoking mood. 'Why, a warm man is old Cheape, with as cosy a bit of property in the east neuk of Fife as there is in broad Scotland. And you have cheated Miss Graham out of this fine setting-down! What better could she have hoped for, in her situation? Upon my soul, but you have done the poor girl a bad turn. And how do you mean to make up for it?'

It was no soft glance with which Nancy now eyed her exasperating relative; her eyes flashed, and her little fingers literally tingled to box his ears.

'Archie,' she said, with a little toss, 'I think 'tis time you were back among your law books and your papers, for you can't breathe, I think, in a kindlier atmosphere.' Herries laughed, not ill-humouredly, however, for there was real mirth in the twinkle of his eyes.

'I'll be gone, dear cousin,' he said. 'I'd present my condolences to Miss Graham, but she's vanished. Poor young lady, I protest I grieve for her. Well, good-night, Nancy. We will converse on business another time—your packet is

on yonder table, by the fire.' He took his departure, still smiling—that provoking smile of his, with the eyebrows raised.

'I'm d——d if it's altogether a laughing matter, though'—he said to himself as he went down the stair. 'For is Nancy—or am I, rather, for it comes to that—to feed, clothe and fend for that prodigious miss up yonder? 'Tis a mighty practical question, and no joke.' It was a question—a rather delicate one, perhaps,—which only time could answer, which it did, in all due course, and with the greatest plainness.

In the room which the young lawyer had left, and to which Alison had returned, the candles flared down in their sockets, and the fire burned low, but still its two occupants remained there, deep in talk. Or rather, one talked, and the other listened; for it was Nancy who poured forth all the pent-up raptures of her first interview with the poet, while Alison sympathised—struggling, it must be confessed, with a certain feeling of sleepiness the while. For it was no doubt because Nancy tried to describe precisely that which is indescribable—the nameless fascination of genius—the overpowering magnetism of an unique personality—that she failed, on this occasion, completely to convince her usually pliant listener.

'I am afraid,' said Alison, presently, with a pensive air, 'that your cousin, Mr. Herries, does not think that Mr. Burns is quite a—quite a good man.'

'Herries!' exclaimed Nancy, indignantly, 'you heard him! And pray, did you ever hear anything so intolerant—so insufferably unjust, in your life? Because, forsooth, a man is not cut precisely after his own pattern—cold, bloodless, passionless, like himself—Herries condemns him! He will make no allowance for a nature different to his own—subject to temptations which never assail him, and the sport of circumstances whose difficulty he has no idea of. Herries, indeed! Ally, if life were as Herries would make it, 'twould be a desert, and I'd die of thirst. But, Heaven be thanked, though I depend upon him in a measure, and must therefore obey him in many outward things, he cannot bind my soul! That is free—to take its own flights—to seek its own companion in a kindred spirit, which understands it, and whom it understands.'

Sleepy Alison did not pause to enquire whether this was merely a poetical generalisation, or whether the 'kindred spirit' were Mr. Burns. She looked gently and patiently—a little wonderingly, perhaps, at the fretted, passion-tossed little creature at her side.

'Come to bed, Nancy,' she whispered persuasively, as to an excited child. "Tis so late, dear—long, long past one of the clock.'

'To bed!' exclaimed Nancy. 'And who could sleep, after such an evening as I have spent? But, of course, I'll come, love. 'Tis a world of prose, and one must eat and sleep, as though poesy were not. But, Ally'—she crept close to the

girl, and whispered at her ear with flushed face, and brightening eyes—'Ally, he is coming here!'

'Who?' said Alison, a little startled. 'The—the poet?'

'Ay, child,' said Nancy, 'the bard. He's to honour my poor hovel with his presence. Think of it! And you will see him, Ally—ay—and hear him. For don't suppose that I forgot my Ally in my raptures. I said to him, "I have a song-bird, sir, up in my eyrie, whose wood-note wild will delight you." You remember how I told you, Ally, he delights in a voice to sing over to him the old country airs and catches, and this he told me himself to-night. So you must be in song, sweetest—when he comes, in a day or two—and we will tune the old harp, and have a heavenly evening with the Muses.'

This, surely, was a prospect to delight any girl, and fill her brain with dreams. But Alison, as she went to bed that night (prosaic girl—I grieve to state it of a heroine), never thought of the honour in store for her. In the first place, she was sleepy, and in the second—well, in the second, her thoughts seemed inclined to stay elsewhere. There flickered before her eyes—it would come—the most teasing, tantalising little picture—the cameo-like outline of a profile, virile though delicate—and oh, so dreadfully severe; the steely penetration of cold, cold blue eyes; the lines of a figure that held Danny on its knee, and had Willy leaning heavily against its shoulder. And the following, or something like it, was Miss Graham's last waking thought that night.

'I've heard Nancy call him "little," but he's as big as me, and I' (with a deep sigh) 'am so much, much too big for a woman.... If I were as wee as Nancy, I'd call him ... tall.'

CHAPTER XVI.

The figure of Robert Burns at all the Edinburgh parties of the winters of 1786-1787 is as classical among the classical portraits of literary history as that of Byron at Ravenna, or Shelley at Geneva, or Scott among the woods of Abbotsford. It is the imposing and yet pathetic spectacle of a Titan in a chain of flowers. For here was a man, a peasant pure and simple, taken from the plough, to be the pet for a while of fine ladies in genteel drawing-rooms, and the plaything of men, who, though they were pigmies beside him, yet covered him with an easy condescension, and held him as the object of a gracious, if fitful, patronage. Burns

had borne the ordeal of his sudden popularity with wonderful steadfastness of mind. The natural shrewdness of the Scottish peasant was combined in him with the splenetic melancholy of the poetical temperament; and the combination aided him to a singularly just view of his position and its dangers. He was never over-sanguine; he suspected that his course, like that of other meteors, would be brief, if brilliant; and, so far as it lay within the bounds of Edinburgh society, so it proved. That society—that brilliant little world of fashion, intellect and power—has been held to account for its treatment of the peasant-poet, whom it *fêted* for a season, and then dropped. It had hailed him with acclamation because he was a peasant—the more wonderful a genius for being so—and then, because he was a peasant, it held him at arm's length. It was no more than he himself had foretold, though in foretelling it he had hardly realised the embittering effects upon his proud and sensitive temper. It was a great and cruel injustice—the thoughtless inconsistency of a selfish world—but, under the circumstances, it was inevitable and almost natural. It seems certainly to have been the fact that, by the time his first season in the capital was over, the attitude of two-thirds of its society towards the poet was, like that of Herries, one of a growing repulsion.

It was at this juncture, at the beginning of his second season, that Burns met Mrs. Maclehose in the drawing-room of Miss Nimmo. All the little world gathered at that party had smiled at the result; but it was a smile entirely devoid of malice. No one knew, or even thought, any harm of the charming little grass-widow—victim of a heartless desertion—who lived so simply and so blamelessly with her two young children in her garret in the Potterrow, under the strict guardianship of that most respected and rising young man, her cousin, Archibald Herries. Her weakness for the Muses was well known, and her passion to be made acquainted with the poet of the hour had long been a jest. While, as to Burns, there was no question at all what his opinion would be of a pretty and charming young woman of lively parts, who was ready to fall down and worship him. So, when the two came together, and sat the whole evening side by side upon a sofa, engaged in a conversation so absorbing, that they had neither eyes nor ears for the rest of the world—everyone nodded and laughed and let them alone.

Burns at this time had come to Edinburgh on business connected with the publication of his works. He was lodged in a couple of rooms in St. James's Square in the New Town, and kept, on the whole, but doubtful company. Fine friends, as already hinted, were growing cold, and fine ladies, in high places, fastidious. In the lesser intellectual circles—as at Miss Nimmo's—he was still welcome. But it was not a happy or prosperous period in his life. Money matters worried, and conscience pricked. A summer's dalliance in his native place had reduced his much-enduring Jean Armour to a condition which resulted in that meek woman's ignominious expulsion, for a second time, from her father's

house. Other matters, also of a tender and delicate nature, were giving trouble. From a poet's love affairs it is seldom discreet to lift the veil. It can only be said that their frequency never seems to negative their fervour, while they last. Burns had a capacious heart, which could furnish shrines for several idols at one time; a complex nature where, as ever, the Soul and the Satyr strove for unequal mastery. It may be imagined how delightful to such a temperament was the balm of Mrs. Maclehose's generous adulation. The poet was precisely in that condition when a man desires to be soothed, to be flattered, to be made to forget his own shortcomings and the world's cruelty. And who so clever to keep him in such a mood as the fascinating little grass-widow of the Potterrow? So their spirits rushed together, and they swore an eternal friendship on the spot. In a couple of days, it was arranged, the poet should come and take a dish of tea with Mrs. Maclehose at her house, and that lady was in the seventh heaven. But, to quote the bard himself,—

'The best laid plans o' mice and men
Gang aft a-gley'—

and the tea-drinking, at that early date, never took place. Either on the way home from Miss Nimmo's, or on some errand the following day, the poet was knocked down in the street by a coach, and thus, instead of hastening to the Potterrow on the wings of an exalted friendship, he found himself crippled and confined to his lodging in St. James's Square with a broken knee-pan and a highly-irritated temper. In the Potterrow the news of this untimely accident came as a crushing disappointment. Nancy cried like a child, and Alison, who had not shed such tears herself since she was seven years of age, strove to comfort her with every device of words and every promise of future compensation that she could think of.

'He'll come yet—of course he will, Nancy,' she said cheerfully; 'and then, you know, he'll write.'

Alas! easy words! Had poor Alison but foreseen with what a fatal facility he would, and did, write: with what awful and voluminous avidity they both would fall upon pens, ink and paper, she would not have spoken so lightly. Could she but have had a vision of that weary sequence of thick letters, that only too often her own faithful though unwilling hands would have to carry, she would not have been so delighted when the first one was written and the first received. Nancy, in a fever of thwarted eagerness, had at first threatened to rush off to visit the bard in his confinement.

'I must see him!' she cried, stamping her little foot. 'I shall, and will! What's to prevent me? Am I not a wife and mother? Are we not all relatives—

sons and daughters of Adam? Why should a censorious world put difficulties in the way of my visiting my poor friend? I'll not be bound by these ridiculous conventionalities!' But Alison's sound natural sense averted the threatened indiscretion.

'"Twould embarrass the poor man to receive you, Nancy,' she sensibly said. 'You know you have told me yourself how low is his station in the world, and 'tis little likely he has a room fit to see ladies in, and it would hurt his pride that you should find that out. And then—and then, your cousin, Mr. Herries, who does not favour—'

'Drat my cousin!' said Nancy, petulantly, 'and you to quote him, as solemn as the owl himself! But 'tis true—God's truth, indeed—I daren't offend him. And most consumedly it would offend his highness—such a visit on my part—if it got to his ears. No, you are right, Ally—wise, Ally! I see it. I'll abandon this visit, though 'twould but be one of kindness and mercy. I'll take me to my pen. Thank Heaven for the pen, Ally, that permits no real separation—no severing of souls—between friend and friend!'

The Pen! Little, busy, inky devil, that, when the tongue would stammer and the lips be stiff, blabs out the inmost secrets of the heart! Betrayer and telltale, with a treachery that is worse than tongues, because indelible! Specious ally, who turns king's evidence, and becomes the most relentless witness to our follies! Pin's point, now steeped in honey and now dipped in gall, oh, power of hurt, far deadlier than the honest sword, this pricking Pen! Sensible Alison, when, long, long years after this, she came to hold in her hand certain letters, yellowed and faded with age, and to read, marvelling greatly, their turbulent, passionate pages, thought this, and more, of the dangerous doings of the quill; although, to be sure, she never expressed herself in the language of hyperbole. That was not her way.

When, however, the first two or three of these letters were written, and their answers received, in those gay early days in the Potterrow, Alison was delighted, because they made her friend so happy.

'We are to make it a regular thing,' Nancy explained, 'and who knows, Ally, but that it may become one of the classic correspondences in our language? We are to have borrowed names chosen by him. How I love this fancy of Arcadian names in such a commerce; it gives the last delightful touch of romance. He is to be "Sylvander," and I "Clarinda." Now is not "Clarinda" a pretty name, Ally? Heard you ever a sweeter or a more musical?'

'"Tis very pretty, indeed,' said Alison, good-naturedly. Secretly she thought it an outlandish appellation. 'I think "Nancy's" quite as pretty,' she added, truthfully; 'though, to be sure, a stranger could not call you so at once.'

'Why, that's just it!' cried Nancy. 'Don't you see how we avoid vulgar familiarity on one hand, and chilling formality on the other? 'Tis the most perfect

idea. I am in love with it, Ally!'

Alison smiled benignly on her little friend, quite unaware that the cloud, no bigger than a man's hand, had appeared on their horizon, the cloud that would some day cover the sky.

CHAPTER XVII.

One day, about this time, our heroine received a great surprise, not to say a violent shock, in a letter from her father. She came running in with it to Nancy, who had not risen, with a very white face.

'Lud, child!' cried her friend, looking up from the composition of a morning poem, 'what is it?'

'My sister Kate is to have Mr. Cheape!' gasped Alison. Nancy burst out laughing.

'Well, love,' she said, 'what did I tell you? And why pull such a long lugubrious face over it? Could any arrangement more altogether natural be imagined? There is another of you disposed of, your mother pleased, and Mr. Cheape fitted with a wife at last.'

'Oh, how could she do it?' wailed Alison, alluding to her less-fastidious sister. 'Kate, too, the bonniest of us all!'

'Well, dear, she gets the wedding silk and a man with it,' said Nancy. 'I'll be bound she is quite content.'

But Alison, not so easily consoled, wept over the horrid fate of her sister. Her father, otherwise, wrote cheerfully. The impending wedding had restored good humour to his consort, and he expressed a belief that Alison, if she had a mind to, might now return home, and all would be forgotten and forgiven. The laird, however, proceeded to counsel his daughter to remain where she was for the present, and 'get all the good she could for her coach-hire to the town,' as he expressed it, after the matter-of-fact manner of The Mains.

'Sure, Ally, you'd never think of leaving me?' said Nancy in sincere alarm, and with imploring eyes.

'Indeed, I've no wish to,' said Alison.

'For, you know,' went on the little woman, clinging to Alison's hand, which she fondled as she spoke, 'I get to lean on you, Ally, day by day, and more and more. You're so big, and strong, and steady, not a poor little straw like me, blown

about by every wind.'

Alison looked a little doubtful. 'I'm big and strong, I know,' she said pensively, 'but I doubt 'tis more in the body than in the mind, Nancy. I'm like a child in leading-strings, I sometimes think. 'Twas our mother kept us all so, I suppose, being herself strong-willed.'

'Well, to be sure,' said Nancy, with a laugh, 'you'd have married Mr. Cheape if it hadn't been for me.

'Yes, I believe I should,' said Alison, slowly. 'It seemed best for everybody. I'd never have had the power alone, to break with it. So, you see, I doubt my own strength, Nancy, when I'm put to it.'

Possibly Alison's straight mind was already puzzling itself over the problem of that Platonic correspondence which had now become such a part of life in the Potterrow—bringing a feverish element into it. Letters came and letters went every day. Sometimes they were entrusted to the 'caddies,' or town's messengers, but these proved a disagreeable class to deal with. Scenting an intrigue, they were extortionate, and Nancy's slender purse could endure no such constant drain. So it came about that Alison, only too naturally and too often, became friendship's messenger, and very heartily did she grow to dislike the walk between the Potterrow and the poet's lodging. St. James's Square, now little better than a 'slum,' was even in those days an unattractive locality. Unlike the rest of the New Town, it was meanly built, and had a squalid air, its denizens being not among the most respectable or desirable of the city. Disagreeable and meaning glances would be cast at the tall young lady, still very countrified in her air and dress, who hurried along, either alone, or only with a little boy for company. Then, at the dingy house where the poet lodged, the door would be opened either by a rough-looking man, with a very insolent and disagreeable manner (it was, indeed, none other than the poet's precious friend and crony, Nicol), or by a slatternly woman, with a sly glance, greedy for a bribe. The bribe, alas! at Nancy's instigation, was given by Alison's innocent and shrinking hand. How could she help it? This element of secrecy—of the underhand—in the affair vexed her to the soul. She did not doubt that the correspondence in itself was perfectly innocent. Nancy gave her to understand it was the most high-souled, the most improving, the most inspiring correspondence that ever was carried on. It treated almost exclusively of religion and the Muses, and it was to be the means of bringing the poet to better ways of thinking—especially on the former important subject. Yet, Nancy said, this was a censorious world; it would at once wickedly misunderstand a correspondence between a married woman, in her delicate position, and a man of the poet's character and condition. Therefore, it must be kept quiet—most especially from Herries, with his distorted views and unjust judgments, must it be kept a secret. Alison sighed, but she loved and trusted her little friend, and acquiesced.

Nor, at this time, must it be supposed that Alison's life was all a running of messages, or even a willing drudgery for Nancy's little boys, which she herself would gladly have made it. Far too kind-hearted was the little mistress of the Potterrow to permit of this. She desired above all things that her young friend should be seen and admired, and one fine morning she had suddenly said,—

'And now, Ally, we must see to your clothes, love! Look, the sun shines! We'll e'en away to Madam Cantrip's this very minute, and see the fashions.'

'But,' cried Alison, aghast, 'I've no money to buy new clothes, Nancy!'

Nancy simply pinched her cheek and laughed, ever so sunnily and gaily.

'The world may call me poor,' she said, 'but I'm not too poor to have the luxury of giving to those I love—once and away. And, child, if you say one word about it—make one objection—I'll pack you off back to The Mains, and never love you more.'

So Alison submitted, and it was not with a bad grace. The discrepancies of her *toilette*—entirely conceived, cut and furnished forth at The Mains—troubled her greatly. Remember that she was only twenty, and had never had a fine gown in her life.

'A pelisse for the cold streets, dear, and hood to match,' said Nancy, cheerfully, 'and a muslin—yes, I think, a muslin for the evening—the East India muslin is so much in vogue.'

This was as they walked down to the mantle maker's, and that diligent personage, as she eyed the proportions of her new customer, was quite of opinion that a pelisse was the very thing to do them justice.

'The elegant and the fragile for you, Mistress Maclehose,' she astutely remarked, 'the handsome for miss!'

And very handsome indeed that pelisse proved when it came home, being of cloth of a cosy crimson, silk-lined and fur-bordered, with a most coquettish hood, that would just show a curl or two, and was indeed mighty becoming to its wearer. To Alison it seemed a garment fit for a princess; she could not get over its wonders and beauties, and hardly knew herself when she put it on. And, in truth, it worked a wondrous transformation in her air.

'Well, I declare!' Nancy exclaimed, eyeing her over when she tried it on, 'you are quite the fine lady, child, and I feel put away in the shade!'

The white muslin robe was also a triumph—cunningly embroidered, and showing more of Alison's fine white throat and shoulders than had ever been seen before. Nancy's taste finished it with a blue silken scarf, and a blue snood for the curls.

'There,' she cried, 'you'd charm the eyes of Archie himself, if he had any, but he's blind, dear; we must seek you some gallanter beau.'

Having thus enhanced the charms of her *protégée* with fine clothes, Nancy

was not content, but turned a careful eye on her accomplishments.

'You must have lessons on the harp, Ally,' said she, 'and for the voice, love. Such talent as yours must not be neglected. And then you will be the more able to charm our poet when he comes—our poet, who shall be nameless!'

Therefore, one Schetki, a teacher of music, was summoned to instruct Miss Graham for two hours in the week in the management of the voice and harp. So that the little room in the Potterrow echoed to sweet sounds, the twanging of long-silent strings, the deep, sweet notes of Alison's voice; while Nancy, bent with flushed cheeks over her little desk, scribbled her interminable letters—letters, alas! losing more and more of their discreet Platonic tone. The while, two little round-eyed boys would stop their play and listen to the singing; and busy Jean would pause at the door to catch the floating tune.

So passed away two or three busy and happy weeks. I daresay it would be about the Christmas time, when such things are common, that a batch of bills was delivered at the door of a certain rising young lawyer in the New Town. Among them were two—one from a certain mantle-maker of first celebrity, and one from a much respected teacher of the musical arts. They contained, severally, these interesting items:—

> ***To a Pelisse, in Crimson Paduasoy, lined*** *silk, bordered fur, ... 5 guineas.*
>
> ***To a Robe, Indian Muslin, embroidered,*** *3 guineas and 15 shillings.*

And further:—

> ***To Lessons in the Harp and Voice given at*** *Mistress Maclehose's in the Poterrow, . 2 guineas.*

But as to how these interesting and expensive disclosures were received by their victim, it would not be discreet in me, at this point in my story, to tell.

CHAPTER XVIII.

It would be in the course of these December weeks that Creighton, Herries's associate in business, formed a habit of coming, oftener than usual, to his partner's

room, for a chat before leaving the office. Herries had no objection, but he rather wondered what brought the man. There was to be noticed, certainly, at this time, an increasing feebleness in Creighton's health. He coughed frequently, and his breathing seemed to trouble him. Herries thought that perhaps he enjoyed the additional comforts of his superior's room; he would walk about in it rubbing his hands, talking, rather aimlessly, about trifles. Once he rather astonished Herries by an enquiry after the health of Mrs. Maclehose—that lady being no favourite of his.

'Your relative and her children are well, I trust?' he said, in his formal way. 'Ahem'—with a laboriously unconscious air; 'I daresay you will be seeing, now and then, the young gentlewoman who at present seems to form one of Mrs. Maclehose's circle?'

'Miss Graham? I'll be sworn I do!' said Herries, laughing. 'He would have bad eyesight who failed to see anything quite so big and strapping, up in my cousin's garret there, for all the world like a gowk in a hedge-sparrow's nest.'

'She seemed a pleasing and unassuming young woman,' said the elder man, mildly. 'She inadvertently paid me a visit in my office some time since. I have been looking up the old books, and find that the young lady's grandfather was a client of the old house, when the century was in its teens. It would be a genteel recognition of the old connection to show her some little civility on this her first visit to the capital.'

'What could you do for a girl like that?' inquired Herries, carelessly.

'Well,' said Creighton, with a nervous air, 'I did think—I was thinking that a tea-drinking—'

'A *what*?' said Herries, looking at his partner as if he thought him gone mad.

'Well, an asking of the ladies to tea one day,' said Creighton, with a look of guilt. 'But I daresay 'tis impossible—impossible,' he went on, as the look of incredulity refused to fade upon the younger man's face. 'Something else might be thought of—showing the town to the young lady, there's much in this old city instructive to a young mind. And 'tis a pity the poor thing should go back, to be buried in the country, without seeing all she can; but I'm helpless there; these streets kill me just now.' But Herries seemed to smile upon this latter suggestion as a suitable one.

'Show the lions of the city to Miss Graham?' he said. 'Well, we might see about that. 'Twould be an act of good-nature to the country-mouse. I'll oblige you if I can find the time.'

One of the genuinely kind impulses to which Herries, in spite of his apparent coldness, was often subject, whimsically seized him on this matter. He had now seen Miss Graham several times. She was his cousin's guest; after all, per-

haps he owed her a civility. So, one morning, when no business of importance was demanding personal attention, he set off for the Potterrow, with a view to suggesting a day of sight-seeing to his cousin and her friend.

Both ladies were fortunately at home, and professed themselves delighted with the idea.

'The driest thing imaginable, love, and just like him to propose it,' said Nancy, in a vivacious whisper, as the two went off to prepare themselves for a walk. 'But 'tis proper you should see all the tiresome things, and, of course, I must come as duenna, though, Lord knows, you'd be as safe with Archie in a desert as with your grannie. Not but what it is kind of him to propose this,' added the little woman, with compunction,—'kind in substantiate, but no romance: that's his character.'

Alison was taking her new pelisse out of its cherished folds, and brushing her curls into extra good order. Nancy playfully pushed her away from the one mirror of the establishment.

'No good to dress yourself up for Archie, dear,' she said, laughingly. 'Were you dressed in parchment and tied up with tape 'twould be all one to him. 'Deed, in that case, you might take his fancy, for you'd then resemble his dearly beloved law-papers that he lives by. But come now, for my gentleman hates being kept waiting.'

They were quite a merry party as they picked their way over the cobbles of the Potterrow, although it was a raw, sunless, disagreeable morning. Children played and screamed in the gutters, and hawkers yelled to the echoes, as they made their way down the High Street and the Canongate towards Holyrood Palace, which was their destination. Herries knew the city much as a rabbit knows its burrow. There was not an antiquity he did not point out, not an archway or an effigy that escaped him. So that their progress was deliberate, and Nancy had heaved a sigh or two, and stifled more than one yawn in her enormous velvet muff, before the palace gates closed upon the little party.

'Now, 'twill be all history,' groaned the little duenna to herself. 'I know Archie: not an anecdote, not an incident will he spare us. Bless the man, there he goes—Queen Mary, Darnley, Rizzio, Bothwell! Well, Ally's happy at any rate. Mercy, how the child devours him with her eyes! You'd think she'd never seen a man before, and neither she has, poor love. Now, any other young buck would be pleased, and throw a little gallantry into his manners; but not he. Oh, Lord—'

This was a smothered ejaculation as Herries, having fully expounded one suite of rooms, proceeded systematically to the next. He was entering into this business of sight-seeing with all the energy and thoroughness which characterised him in his profession. He had that passion for the mastery of detail which is essentially a masculine trait. A picturesque general impression of things would

have satisfied Alison, and come not amiss even to Nancy. But for Herries, there was nothing too minute to be examined and explained; everything must be seen, and seen thoroughly. Nancy dropped behind and neither he nor Alison noticed the fact. As for Alison, her young limbs never felt fatigue, and she followed where she was led, interested and well pleased. It would all come back to her afterwards, that happy, if hard-worked, morning: those stately rooms and stairways, once silent witnesses to the darkest pages of her country's history; those frowning portraits on dim, panelled walls; and ever, before all, the living picture of her guide—the alert figure and keen face, the slim pointing hand, the dignity, the distinction that were Herries's own, though he was neither a giant nor a god. He was so kind, too; for, to be sure, Alison thought, it must all be very stale and dull to him. Issuing from a careful and instructive examination of the chapel, they discovered Nancy, seated on a bench, half in laughter and half in tears of pure exhaustion.

'I can no more!' she exclaimed. 'Not another step, Archie, for my life. You must put me in a coach and send me home, and you two finish the sight-seeing by yourselves, for 'tis past me to look at another object, antique or modern.'

'We have not done the half that I intended,' said Herries, seriously. He had planned a day, it was now barely noon, and he liked to keep to a plan. It needed only a very little of Nancy's deft management to enforce her own suggestion. A coach was called, and she was put into it; it rumbled off, and she nodded and smiled and waved her hand to the couple whom she left standing in the palace-yard.

'There, now,' she said to herself, with a sigh of thankfulness and relief, 'what a most admirable idea! With any other man 'twould not have done, I could not have left the child; but with Archie, the very thing! He'll be quite happy schooling her for another hour and bring her home safe as a church, and she, dear innocent, will never know how dull she's been.... And now, my soul, to other thoughts!' And before Potterrow was reached, 'Clarinda's' next letter to 'Sylvander' was all aflame, written on that busy, burning little brain.

CHAPTER XIX.

'Shall we dine?' Herries said, suddenly. On leaving Holyrood they had taken a short walk in the King's Park, in order that Alison might admire the crags.

Returning to the town they had hunted amid devious ways for a certain ancient church, and here in the graveyard, among the lank, decaying grass, the slanting tombs and fallen emblems of mortality, Herries had pointed out the blackened, mouldering slab which marks the grave of Rizzio.

Then they had come up the High Street to St. Giles, and had made an exhaustive survey of that interesting edifice. And now they had climbed up the Castle-walk, and stood upon that wondrous summit, the rock that crowns the northern capital. It was here, perhaps, that the faintest shadow of a lessened alacrity had fallen across Alison's manner, when invited to scale a bastion and visit a most interesting gun there situate.

'Are you hungry?' Herries had enquired.

'Very,' said poor Alison, and then could have bitten her tongue out for making an admission at that day considered so very ungenteel. But, indeed, it was now long since breakfast time, and a sup of the boys' porridge at half-past eight, and a hunk of their bread, although a nutritive, was not a very lasting, meal. Healthy Alison was indeed hungry, and Herries's 'Shall we dine?' had a most tempting sound.

'Your cousin will be expecting me, sir,' she demurred, as in duty bound.

'Oh, Nancy dines at mid-day with the boys, I know,' said Herries, 'and that's two hours and more a-gone. 'Tis not a fashionable hour to ask a lady to take dinner. But we've deserved it—so let us dine.'

He considered a moment. He could not take his present companion to dine alone with him at any of the frequented taverns of the city. But he suddenly recalled a little place where they could go with safety and decorum. It was a resort called 'Lucky Simpson's Howff'—a couple of clean rooms kept by an old wife, and much frequented by simple folk landed from the country, in the neighbouring Grassmarket, who feared the prices and temptations of more fashionable establishments.

'Come,' said Herries, encouragingly. 'It is not more than fine minutes' walk, and Lucky has always the pot upon the fire.' And Alison seemed to have no choice but to follow.

Presently, at the corner of a close, they came upon the oddest little house in the world, whose tiny granite gable, with its crows'-steps, stood sideways to the street. They entered by means of a little outside stairway, and were soon seated in the low-ceilinged, heavily-raftered room, where Lucky Simpson dispensed her simple hospitality. The woman—a stirring old body, in striped cotton gown and snowy 'mutch'—waited upon her guests herself, and seeing that on this occasion she had 'the quality' to deal with, she spread a coarse homespun cloth upon the table, and furnished it with two-pronged forks. Lucky's accustomed guests dined off the bare boards, and 'supped their meat' with horn spoons, as a rule.

She now lamented that the day's dinner was nothing more genteel than 'sheep's head, done wi' the collops and the braincakes.' But to Herries and his hungry companion this sounded appetising enough.

They were seated one on each side of the homely little table. Alison had loosened the strings of her hood—it fell back a little from her freshened face, and the little clustering curls about her temples. She was looking about her, all unconscious of possible scrutiny, the pleasure of the situation bright upon her face. Herries looked at her—perhaps for the very first time—with real attention, and a something of her personality, its simplicity and trustfulness, its gentle candour, was borne in upon his mind.

'My God!' he said to himself—and a kind of pang assailed him—'how innocent she looks! It is a woman's body, but sure, only a child looks out of those eyes.' And he felt a sudden warm impulse of kindness and goodwill go out of him towards this grave, shy, country girl.

But the arrival of the sheep's head, steaming in a savoury manner, put an end to reflection.

'Now this is indeed a most sadly ungenteel dish, as Lucky says, to put before a lady,' Herries said. 'Miss Graham has perhaps never tasted anything so common?'

'Who—I, sir?' said Alison, simply. 'Why, don't I get my dinner off it every Monday at The Mains?'

'Every Monday?' said Herries, amused. 'Now, why on Mondays, pray?'

'Why, sure,' said Alison, shocked at the unpractical nature of the query, 'because the sheep is killed on Saturdays, and so we get the head on Mondays, by nature, sir.'

'At that rate,' said Herries, laughing, 'you must work down the animal, I suppose, and have the tail on Saturdays?' But Alison shook her head, smiling and dimpling. No; it appeared the tail came up on Thursdays 'roasted with the gigot,' and was usually the portion of 'Ferran,' the collie dog.

And so they had a good deal of conversation over that little meal, and were very friendly, and even merry. Those who knew Herries only under the frigid reserve and severe pre-occupation of his usual manner, would have been astonished to see how he unbent, how simple were the jokes he cracked with Lucky, how kind and gentle his converse with his timid guest.

Lucky brought in a steaming toddy, and Herries would have it that Alison must 'taste.' Out of his own glass—before he touched it himself—he must ladle a drop into hers, with Lucky's funny old toddy-ladle, with the worn and dented silver bowl, and spindly, long black handle. Yes, that was a pleasant hour, but, like all such, over too soon. They must go. Alison, from an inner pocket, had produced a remarkably attenuated little purse.

'I suppose, sir,' she said, 'it is now time that we should pay for our dinner?'

Herries leaned his elbows on the table, and, smiling, looked long and deep into her eyes. Well, he had looked into a woman's eyes like that before—perhaps too often. But never before had the depths of Alison's innocent being been plumbed by such a gaze. It troubled her—but with how sweet, how perilously sweet a trouble! Her eyes fell, and the colour crept to her cheeks. Herries looked away, but his voice was kind when it spoke.

'When a lady does a man the honour to dine with him,' he said, smiling, 'she is not generally asked to pay the reckoning.' Alison blushed scarlet, as one detected in some awful solecism, and huddled the little purse out of sight.

'I—I didn't know,' she stammered. 'You must excuse me, sir. I never dined out with—with a gentleman before.'

'I'll be sworn you never did!' Herries said to himself, in great amusement.

After that they rose and went out into the streets again, where the short, gloomy winter afternoon was already darkening into evening. Herries naturally escorted his charge up the town towards the Potterrow. They mounted the worn flights of steps, the steep closes and murky wynds, with the brisk step of youth refreshed—Alison the first and least fatigued. Herries felt himself admiring her for the first time.

'Now, that's a handsome jacket,' said the innocent man to himself, eyeing the red pelisse, 'and I protest, it sets a handsome figure! A fine free step the girl has, too—country-bred.' Altogether, he was very well pleased with his companion that night.

When they reached the Potterrow it was nearly dark, and the ill-trimmed flaring lantern that hung in the General's Entry was already lit.

'Will you not come up to your cousin's tea-table, sir?' asked Alison, shyly.

'I thank you, no,' Herries answered. 'Make my excuses to Nancy. I have business this evening.'

'I—I should thank you for a very pleasant day, sir,' said Alison, timidly. 'I have greatly enjoyed myself.'

'Nay,' said Herries, with a little flourish, 'the pleasure was mine! I trust we have other enjoyable days, in company, to come.' And with that they parted, and Herries walked down the town alone.

'If all pleasures were as innocent and as cheap, mistress,' he said to himself, thinking of Alison's little speech, 'men would be better and richer than they are!' And he laughed when he thought of the modest total of Lucky's bill. On his doorstep he found Creighton's terrier, Dick, shivering in the cold. 'Come in, beastie!' he said, 'and lie by the fire till your master goes.'

He was in a singularly softened mood, and in high good humour with all

the world.

CHAPTER XX.

Mrs. Maclehose, having provided her young friend with a pretty gown, was of no mind that that garment should waste its sweetness in a cupboard. It was now the height of the Edinburgh winter season, and she was full of engagements; so that the two ladies were presently immersed in quite a whirl of mild dissipation. They went to kettle-drums, sometimes night after night; to literary *soirées*, such as Nancy loved, where lions, of more or less celebrity, mildly roared; sometimes to concerts at the St. Cecilia Hall, for which Herries would send them tickets; and once or twice even to a rout in the Assembly Rooms, where Alison looked on at, but could not join, the extremely stiff and joyless dancing of the day. At nearly every entertainment they frequented, Herries would be present, for it was by virtue of his introduction that his cousin had the *entrée* everywhere, and he was widely known. He was heartily sick of the social round, but it was necessary for his professional interests that he should be seen, and he was fully aware of the fact. One pair of eyes watched the door for his coming in those days, though he did not know it. Alison, in a room full of strangers, would look longingly for the one face that she knew, and, almost unconsciously, her eyes would follow the now familiar figure. She thought that all the world watched him thus. For, surely, he had a better carriage, a finer head, a smarter coat than any other man. Herries certainly had distinction, but he was below, rather than above, middle height, and not, naturally, one to rise above a crowd.

With what a curious, new, expectant joy had Alison looked forward to meeting him for the first time after that happy day of sight-seeing! But here her ignorance of men, at any rate of this man in particular, built up a disappointment for her. Herries at Lucky Simpson's—Herries entertaining a simple country girl, whom he regarded as a child—was very different from the Herries of evening parties and the social treadmill. When next Alison saw him, and he gave her a formal five minutes of his arm in a crowded drawing-room, he was like a stranger again—cold, stiff, dressed in reserve as in a garment. It was the nature of the man, and, in time, Alison learned the difficult lesson that it set her, as one learns who loves his task. But she certainly got little aid from Nancy.

"Tis a strange being—Archie,' his cousin would say, discussing him after

some chance meeting. 'A riddle to me, Ally, who can generally read a man like a book. Many a time I wonder what is in the heart of the creature—what are the motives of his actions, the ruling passions of his life. I've known him since he was a boy, and at all the crises of my life he's been at my elbow—the adviser, the protector, the benefactor. But, I tell you, child, I know no more what he really thinks on any subject under the sun, than the child unborn! And what is more, I know no one who ever did! And yet I'd not have you think I underrate his good qualities,' she went on earnestly. 'I see his solid worth, and I respect it. But 'tis my most unlucky star has ruled it, that I must be dependent on a man I fear. I live by love, Ally—by sympathy, confidence, communion! I can forgive—I hope to be forgiven. But Herries asks no forgiveness, and he grants none. He—he drives me to subterfuge, Ally. I swear against my proper nature!'

Alison never doubted that, first in Nancy's mind, as she spoke, and first in her own, was the thought of that eternal commerce with St. James's Square. It throve apace, like some ill weed with a fair leaf, but choking roots. And now, as the weeks went on, and the poet wrote of gradual recovery from his hurt, the letters would give place to meetings, and even Alison, in her innocence and her confidence in her friend, knew instinctively that in these meetings there would be danger. If only Herries might be told of them, even though he disapproved! But on the subject of the poet he was unapproachable; he bristled with prejudice, as a porcupine with its quills. Alison's unerring judgment forced her to see that he was unreasonable and unjust.

However, at this juncture, both Alison's anxieties (in this direction) and her little gaieties received an interruption. The boy Danny fell dangerously ill, and all her pity and care went out to him. She was aroused one night to hear him moaning in the cot beside her, and she ran to waken Nancy. Both of them hung over the child, terrified to find that he knew neither of them, but wandered and cried in a high fever. The faithful Jean, roused, ran out into the windy, desolate streets at dawn to call a physician.

Alison knew well that the child had ailed. She had urged it upon Nancy; but, of late, Nancy had cared so little: she seemed, more and more, to push everything from her but the one thing, and that, alas! was not her child. The boy suffered from a running sore or abscess on the hip. It troubled him always, and now, perhaps, some knock or hurt, had aggravated it. Alison shuddered to find it so inflamed—searing, like a live cinder, the delicate flesh. When Jean returned, she had secured no one but a callow student—a timid ignoramus, who either could not, or would not, lance the sore. He sent, however, a jar of leeches. Nancy screamed at the horrid things. But Alison took them in her fingers, without a qualm, and laid them on the child's burning skin. They gave a temporary relief, and he fell into a troubled doze.

'Ally,' said Nancy, an hour or two later, 'the child must have the best physician in the town. I have heard Archie talk of taking him to Mr. Ross, one of our first surgeons. Will you, like your own sweet self, go over to George Street, and tell my cousin he must bring the man here—beg him to do it—rather, without loss of time?'

'I—go to Mr. Herries's office?' stammered Alison, overwhelmed with doubt.

'"Tis a savage morning, and I hate to send you, child,' said Nancy, coaxingly. 'But Jean's so busy, and I cannot—I *cannot* leave the child. You hear how he calls for me every minute. Perhaps we could get a messenger....'

'Nay,' said Alison quietly, 'I'll go, Nancy.'

It was not the weather that daunted her, but a new sensation—a womanly instinct that made her shrink from the idea of putting herself in Herries's way. Supposing he should think her bold? But her strong common sense told her that most probably he would not think of her at all, one way or the other; and this, certainly, was no time to let herself be hindered in helpfulness by silly, unnecessary scruples. So she put on an old, rough cloak of Jean's, wrapped a screen about her head, and cheerfully faced the storm.

Half an hour later she stood in Herries's warm, handsome room, her rosy cheeks bedewed with rain, and the drops sparkling on her curls. She told of Danny's suffering, and gave the message, simply, quietly, in fewest words.

'Why, in conscience, does my cousin send you out on such a day?' exclaimed Herries, in extreme irritation. 'Could she not put her servant on the job? It is preposterous!'

'Jean was very busy, sir. The whole house is upset since four this morning,' Alison answered, quietly. 'Your cousin could not leave her child to come herself.'

'My cousin "leaves her child" on other occasions fast enough,' said Herries, with a sneer. 'This crisis in the boy's health,' he went on, sternly, 'comes of her own neglect. 'Tis weeks since I warned her that she should call in a physician, and I gave her an introduction to Mr. Ross. However, since you are good enough to be her messenger, tell her that I will bring or send the man in the course of the day. It is no sinecure, I think you must perceive, Miss Graham, to be the self-appointed guardian of another man's children.'

He spoke with great bitterness, and Alison could not but feel that he was justified. Her message was delivered, and she could but go. So deep was Herries's annoyed preoccupation, that he barely bowed as he held the door open for her exit.

He sat down moodily to his desk again when she was gone. But presently, though some little interval of time had elapsed, his sharp ears caught the sound of her voice, downstairs it seemed. What delayed her? he wondered, irritably;

and supposed he must descend and see. What he did see, as he came downstairs into the hall, was the spectacle of his partner, Creighton, bare-headed in the rain, helping Miss Graham into a coach, while a clerk, who had apparently just fetched it, held open the door. Herries felt himself redden to the very forehead with a boyish shame. The coach rolled off, and Creighton came in, shaking the rain from his coat.

'My good sir,' said Herries, meeting him, 'our noble profession of the law is making a Diogenes of me, and I seem to have forgotten the manners of a gentleman. But you make up for my deficiencies.'

'Nay, nay,' said Creighton, in confusion, 'I but saw the child trying to open the door against the blatter, and I could not let her walk forth into the rain. That was all. I hear she brings ill news.'

'Ill enough,' said Herries. 'But what special sort of churl was I to confound her with her news? A good girl, doing far more than her duty by me and mine.'

'Ay, a fine lass, a very fine lass,' said Creighton, looking earnestly at the younger man.

'And yet, like the rest of them,' said Herries, musingly. 'She comes to a man's house as to a shop, for something useful—all 'tis good for.'

'Nay, now,' said Creighton, smiling, 'we know who it is teaches her *that* trick here. 'Tis not of her own doing, or on her own trokes. Be just, sir.'

And so it was that Alison's elderly conquest in George Street took up the cudgels on her behalf and never dropped them again as long as he had strength to hold them.

CHAPTER XXI.

The eminent surgeon came to the Potterrow immediately, and said his oracular say after the manner of his kind. Sea air he prescribed, and, even more stringently, sea water—douchings and rubbings for that piteous little limb, fast shrinking in a fell disease. Country milk he further insisted on, and a nourishing diet. Better put the child, he said, to some farm or seaside cottage, where he could get the full benefit of a country life. There were plenty decent folk along the coast, he opined, accustomed to the boarding of delicate children from the town. But that would only be when the child was fit to move—not yet. In the meantime, he lanced the sore, which operation afforded everyone in the little establishment

in Potterrow a harrowing morning. The mother—'distracted,' as she said—paced up and down the parlour, fingers in her ears; while, in the little closet-bedroom, Alison held Danny's hands, and honest Jean steadied the quivering little thigh beneath the lancet. The operation gave great relief, and in a few days Danny was convalescent—an interesting invalid, indeed, with larger and more cavernous dark eyes than ever, and laid, in high dignity, upon a couch, drawn near the parlour fire.

Herries came nearly every day to see him. He got into a comfortable habit of coming towards evening, just when Nancy's pretty tea-table was spread in the parlour, and candle-light and fire-light danced upon the panel, and the cosy, red curtains were drawn against the dreary night. It was really very pleasant, and Herries came, in these days, to dislike the empty solitude of his own house at this hour, when Creighton would be gone, and the clerks dispersed to their homes. He did not pause to ask himself why his cousin's room now seemed so vastly agreeable of an evening. He was not an analytical personage, and he still believed that it was to see Danny and watch his progress that he came. Was he not busy making arrangements for the little boy's removal to the seaside, which the doctor wished to hasten, in spite of the coldness of the season? He spoke constantly of an old nurse of his own, who was married and settled at the village of Prestonpans—a decent woman, accustomed to the charge of children. He was in treaty with her for little Danny's board, and presently the matter seemed settled.

'Tis one of your own delightful, good, sensible, charming plans, Archie,' Nancy said, comfortably. 'No one else could have devised anything half so suitable. Sure, dear cousin, you are as wise as Solomon!'

Herries did not reply, but he looked at his relative, between half-closed eyelids, with the satirical glance he always kept for her—not that it could half express the nameless exasperation which this little, cooing, wooing, winsome woman roused in his suspicious nature. Perhaps, just now, he was a little tired of being called so sensible. Aristides, though history does not say so, may have been as wearied as his neighbours of hearing himself called the just.

In the meantime, Alison was very happy—who so happy in all Edinburgh? She had Danny to take care of, and she was one of those born caretakers of the sick and weak. She carried him in and out of the parlour in her strong arms; twice daily, with unhesitating nerve and tender fingers, she would dress his sore; all day long she would play with him, sing to him, talk to him, playful yet reasonable, at once tender and firm. She did not know how a certain pair of lynx eyes watched her with the child. The owner of the lynx eyes did not himself know how narrow was their scrutiny. He was quite unconscious of the fact that all he saw, worth mentioning, in that little room was the figure of a tall girl with grey eyes, who played with a little boy. It was Nancy who remarked at this time that she had

never before known her Cousin Archie to be musical. He certainly did evince a singular interest at present in the musical progress of Miss Graham, asking questions about the thoroughness of Professor Schetki's style, the duration of his lessons, and such-like technicalities. It may be that the appearance of a certain bill in his budget at home had something to do with this sudden interest in the arts. Certainly, at this time, and nearly every night, the young lawyer had a habit of pulling a certain account—nay, two—out of a bundle in his desk. He would turn them over and over, look at them, fold them up, and then unfold them again. Sometimes his eyebrows would merely arch themselves, very high indeed; sometimes he would emit a soft, short whistle; once he smiled. That was when he put the bills away for the last time, and it is his biographer's duty to state they were discharged.

All this time, while the mere prosaic matters of everyday life went on as above, a certain high-souled correspondence, which took no note of common things, continued to unite the Potterrow with St. James's Square. Alison still took letters, weary of the job, but loyal to her friend. Sometimes she was rewarded by hearing priceless extracts from the effusions which came in return. '*I am delighted, my lovely friend, with your enthusiasm for religion,*' wrote the poet. '*'Tis also my favourite topic.*' Alison thought this sounded very nice—pious, even. Perhaps there was no harm after all, and Herries was, yes, he was too strict in his censures of a genius whom he did not, and would not, understand. Yet she sighed, and sometimes wished there was no poet in St. James's Square.

Once, near dusk, she and Nancy were walking in the New Town, and the latter took a perverse fancy to stroll into the square herself.

'But I left your note this morning, Nancy!' protested poor Alison.

'I know, I know, child,' said Nancy, whose face had an eager look. 'But I've been virtue, prudence itself, Ally, and never set foot in the sacred precincts myself. Now 'tis dusk nearly, and no one about. You know my romantic nature. I would see with my own eyes the shrine of genius. Come, love, be generous to your friend!' And they dawdled some minutes in the wretched, grimy square,—Nancy, holding her muff to her face, but peering up at the windows of the houses. Alison did not know that a foolish pen had written that morning: '*I am promised to be in your square this afternoon, and if your window be to the street, shall have the pleasure of giving you a nod.*' Nor did she hear the poet's lively rejoinder of the next day: '*You don't know the proper storey for a poet's lodging, Clarinda! Why didn't you look higher?*'

And then, coming out of the square, in the very neck of it, whom should they run against but Herries himself.

'This is an odd hour and place for you ladies to be walking alone,' said he. And Alison saw how his eyes narrowed with suspicion, and his lips set them-

selves in their most obstinate folds. But Nancy was inimitable in self-possession and unconcern; said something about a visit to a clockmaker in the square, and then talked of the weather. Alison, poor Alison, had felt the shock so, that her very heart jumped. Then followed the sickly sensation, so horribly novel to her young strength, of a feeling of faintness. She knew that her very lips grew white, as she stood there listening to Nancy's prattle. How foolish it was ... but, oh, would Nancy *never* go! At last she nodded a lively good-night to her relative, and they separated.

'La, child!' Nancy exclaimed, as they scurried home, 'that was a queer mischance! And did you see how mighty odd my gentleman looked at us? He knows, all the world knows, Burns lodges in the square. But I think I put him off the scent; he knows my big wag-at-the-wall clock comes from Jamieson's, and that's in the square too.... But, Ally, what made you turn so white? Are you not well, love? Sure I'm sorry you had a qualm; 'tis horrid, vapourish weather just now, but could anything on earth have been more opportune? For now, if Archie takes it into his head that either of us has a sentimental interest in the square, it must be you!' She laughed her little soft, thrilling laugh, and tripped gaily along beside her silent companion. 'But I don't think,' she added presently,' that he saw anything. It was too dark.'

That night Alison had a nightmare. She dreamt that she walked somewhere, but there was a chain about her feet; and ever, as she tried to hurry on, the chain tightened, bruising her ankles, cutting even into the flesh. On some height beyond her stood a figure. Its face was hidden, but she knew that it was Herries. Then Alison awoke, and found that she was crying.

CHAPTER XXII.

Herries was not greatly disturbed at the meeting in St. James's Square, after the first flash of annoyance. It was one of those incidents, little thought of at the time, which may, at a later date, loom large; a link in that chain of circumstantial evidence which sends many a culprit to his doom. He merely hoped, irritably enough, that his cousin was not playing tricks, making a fool of herself about the poet (he knew the poet's lodging perfectly), and he made a definite resolve to interfere, if this should be the case. Not only, he reflected, must Nancy walk warily on her own account, but she had, under her charge, a young and inex-

perienced girl, who must on no account be exposed to dangerous poetic wiles. Miss Graham, it struck him, bad looked pale; doubtless, she had confined herself too closely nursing Danny. He must design some little dissipation for her. As a matter of fact, he had two in view.

'Are you still of a mind to give the ladies their tea-drinking, sir?' he inquired, genially, of his partner, walking into that gentleman's room one evening.

'To be sure, to be sure,' said Mr. Creighton, concealing his amazement with creditable dexterity. 'Only, my poor rooms....'

'Oh, my dear sir,' said Herries, affably, 'consider this house at your disposal, and Lizzie at your service. She will do everything. And, now I come to think of it, my room above stairs is the more cheerful, more suited to ladies than this. What do you think?'

'I entirely agree,' answered Mr. Creighton, with the solemnity of a judge. 'My portion of the entertainment will doubtless consist in amusing the ladies when they arrive,' he added, with a kind of stiff jocularity. But Herries declined to see the joke.

'Shall I convey your invitation to my cousin and Miss Graham, and perhaps I may beg you to extend it to the boy, Willy?' he inquired, in a business-like tone.

'Assuredly,' answered his partner. 'And if you can manage gracefully to convey to Miss Graham the idea that this little civility on my part is a compliment to our ancient connection with her family, I shall feel that the genteel thing has been done.' It must be admitted that Mr. Creighton, in spite of his age and profession, could enter, with wonderful spirit, into a little game. When his partner had gone, he rubbed his hands together with a delighted air.

'It is working!' he said to himself. 'Who would have thought it, so soon? But he needs tender handling, the lad. I must take care.'

Herries had no difficulty in arranging a day with the ladies of the Potterrow, when they should enjoy the hospitalities of Mr. Creighton. It was to be on a Thursday, and the matter was fixed. However, when the morning came, Nancy, with great finality, announced her intention of keeping the house all day.

'But, but,' cried Alison, in dismay, 'we *promised*, Nancy!'

'So we did, dear,' said Nancy, with provoking coolness, 'and we'll keep our promise, that is, you shall, you and Willy. But as for me, to take tea with those two, with that old mummy of a writer, that hates me like poison, and good, dull Archie, that we've had such a dose of, of late,—my dear, 'twould choke me, and that's a fact! Now, don't look so shocked. Besides,' she added, lowering her voice, 'to be strictly honest, and you know I am so with *you*, my love, and tell you everything—I've other fish to fry. Ally, my poet is free to-day, for the first time! For the very first time, he goes out. All sorts of tiresome engagements bind him this day, he says, that he dare not neglect. But there's a chance, Ally, a little,

little chance, like the faintest star in the firmament, that he may visit his friend. Think of it, and you'll see that not for a kingdom would I risk his not finding me here. Far more likely 'twill be to-morrow or Saturday ... but ... oh, Ally, it might be to-day!'

'But for me,'—said Alison, troubled at heart, 'can I possibly go to the house of these gentlemen alone?'

'Oh, lud, child, with Willy, yes, of course!' exclaimed Nancy, impatiently. 'Why, now,' she went on, with a titter, 'were it a question of taking tea with old Creighton alone, your duenna might hesitate, but with Archie there, why, every element of propriety is present. Don't you know him yet, child? As safe as a church, haven't I told you a thousand times, and about as lively. There, run away now, and get your things out. I'm sure I wish you had a gayer spark than Archie to dress up for.'

'I think Mr. Herries is very kind to—to us,' said Alison, with her head in the air.

'Kind?' said Nancy, 'kind as a grandfather, dear. Who ever doubted it?'

When the hour arrived, Alison in her fine pelisse and hood, and Willy, wriggling in the agonies of his 'Sunday suit,' were prepared to start. There was a look of beaming pleasure on Alison's face, but it clouded over when she saw that Nancy drew from her desk the inevitable letter, shut and sealed for delivery.

'Ah, love,' Nancy cried, in her softest voice, 'you'll leave this for me on the way home, won't you? 'Tis on your road coming by the bridge, and won't take a minute.'

'Must I—*must* I take it?' said poor Alison, looking very blank. 'I—I thought you expected Mr. Burns to-day....'

'The merest chance, child,' cried Nancy, impatiently. 'And this note is *most particular*, Ally, for it tells him all my movements for the next few days, so that there may be no chance of our missing. 'Tis not like my Ally to refuse me a little favour like this,' she added, reproachfully.

'I'll take it, Nancy,' said Alison, sadly. Refuse Nancy a favour? How could she? But the letter in her pocket seemed to burn her. To leave it meant a moment of degradation always. But to leave it—going straight from Herries's house—hiding it from him all the time—hurt her honour, hurt her very heart.

In the meantime, in Herries's fine room, the feast was spread, and Mr. Creighton hovered round it, fascinated. He had made a reckless expenditure in sweet cakes; there were enough to feed a multitude. Herries had had enough to do coercing the savage Lizzie into unearthing the best china, and the beautiful silver tea-service—a family heirloom. Now, he regarded the preparations with a contented eye. The room was one of those exceedingly handsome ones for which the larger Edinburgh mansions are justly famous. Three long windows looked

out into George Street: round the cornice ran a delicate frieze, one of the masterpieces of Adams; and the high mantel was decorated with medallions—white upon green—from the same hand. In the slim classicality, the severe grace of these moulded figures, an observant eye might have traced a resemblance to the young host, especially trim this afternoon in fresh powder and a new coat. He was reflecting that this was, properly speaking, the drawing-room of his house. If he ever married, he must shift his business quarters elsewhere, and this house must become his private residence. The entrance of Mr. Creighton's guests broke in upon his reverie.

It was a very pleasant tea-party, indeed, in spite of the absence of Mrs. Maclehose, which was regretted with due politeness. Mr. Creighton devoted himself grimly to the entertainment of Willy, who, perched precariously upon the edge of a high chair, regarded his overtures much as he might those of a well-intentioned ogre. Mr. Creighton 'pressed' the cakes—boys, he reflected, could eat a limitless quantity. Willy was too frightened to refuse; he ate, until the powers of mastication were all but paralysed, and then rolled helpless eyes of repletion towards Alison, silently imploring succour.

But Alison, it is to be feared, was not paying that attention to her young charge, which was customary with her. She had been requested to make the tea—an absorbing process always; and then, Herries was helping her, kind, 'as a grandfather,' of course. How pretty was the china and the silver! The goodly spread made her think of gala days at The Mains, with a touch, an ache, of home. The conversation was all that a grandfather, at his best, could have attained.

'You must tell my cousin,' Herries was saying, 'that I have arranged to take Danny down to Prestonpans on Saturday. 'Tis sudden, but Ross presses the change, while this clearer spell of weather lasts. I'll have a comfortable coach at the Grassmarket—the boy will travel in warmth and comfort. Nancy will come with him, doubtless. And you—I trust you will honour us, Miss Graham? 'Tis a fine drive, and there's much of interest to be seen at Prestonpans.' Alison said it would be delightful. Then she rose to go, for it grew late.

"Tis a fine clear evening to take the air,' said Herries, 'and if Miss Graham walks, may I have the honour to escort her to the Potterrow?' His glance was searching hers. His escort ... through the grim streets, under these rosy skies of the winter twilight? Her eyes shone acquiescence. And then—and then she

remembered Nancy's letter, and the willing answer died on her lips.

CHAPTER XXIII.

Herries was waiting for her to speak; his quick eye caught, first, the eager, answering look, then the cloud, the hesitation, the confusion.

'I could not trouble you to come with me, sir,' said Alison, in a low voice, her eyes on the ground. 'Willy and I know the way well.' There was the unmistakable note of refusal in her speech.

Herries raised his eyebrows; his irritable pride was at once in arms. 'Very well,' he said coldly; 'then I will have a coach called. At this New Year season you cannot be permitted to walk in the streets at this hour, with no protection but Willy.'

'I wish to walk, sir,' said Alison, miserably. She was, indeed, a poor actress; inventions and excuses came never a one to her aid. Mr. Creighton advanced unexpectedly to her rescue.

'These coaches,' he said, 'are a terrible expense, the drivers extortionate, indeed, especially going up the town. There is the lass, Mysie, sir,'—to Herries,—'could she not be spared to accompany Miss Graham?'

'She is big enough to do the dragon, certainly,' said Herries, with a short laugh. 'Mysie be it, then; I'll have her told.' He left the room, with an air of offence, to give the order.

"Tis a pity you could not let Mr. Herries go with you,' Mr. Creighton said softly to Alison. 'The walk would have done him good; he sits too confined to his work.'

Alison raised her grey eyes to the old man's face; they were dimmed with her vexation, her shame. But she had no time to speak, for Herries returned to say, curtly, that Mysie waited below for her charges, and presently both gentlemen saw their guests to the door.

When Herries returned to his room, followed by his partner, he kicked at the fine fire in his grate, a way he had when annoyed.

'Madam was up to some little trick, there,' he said sharply.

'Tut! tut!' said Creighton. 'Why jump to ill conclusions, sir? We men of the law are too apt to be suspicious. It does not do with women; they have ways with them that seem little and secret to us, but are quite innocent.'

'I like no such ways,' said Herries, dourly. 'What has she to hide? Why could she not let me go with her?'

'For the very reason, lad,' cried his partner, in desperation, 'that there comes a time when a lass will not do, for proper pride, the very thing that her heart longs for most. 'Tis near on thirty years since I had to do with a woman in kindness, but I remember that. Man, did you not see the colour on her cheek and the glint in her eye, when you first spoke?'

'A man that is not fool and puppy does not see such things,' said Herries, virtuously.

But he was mollified.

Alison, meanwhile, was by no means enjoying her walk home. Her heart was hot and sore within her. It was hard to have missed that pleasant escort, to have been obliged to offend so kind a friend. Would he forgive her? These melancholy thoughts were interrupted by Willy, who, generally an active child, was lagging in a tiresome way.

'Ally,' he said at last, with the dire directness of childhood, 'I am feeling *that* sick....'

'You have had too much cake,' said Alison, sternly.

"Twasn't my fault, then,' cried Willy, resentfully, "twas that old man that made me.' And ruefully he put a hand just where the 'Sunday suit' fastened with most unpleasant tightness over Mr. Creighton's too liberal hospitality. But no terrible results ensued, and Alison had soon forgotten Willy's woes in wonder at the strangeness of the escort which Herries had substituted for his own.

Mysie was certainly an odd figure. What a queer young woman for a servant, Alison thought, and with what very strange manners! Mysie, in a draggled cotton gown, and screen by no means modestly covering her charms, was no sooner out of sight of her master's windows, than she began to stalk along as though the town belonged to her, swinging her arms, occasionally casting a sly, sideward glance at her companions, but more often leering at a passer-by. It was the New Year time, and the streets were full of half-drunken loafers of both sexes. Mysie soon attracted all the attention that she wanted; shouts of laughter began to follow her, and soon a sorry jest or two. Her bold manner grew bolder, her step more free; yet, in the abandonment of her air, there would have been apparent, to an experienced eye, rather recklessness and despair than any genuine flaunting. There was, too, a peculiarity in her gait which Alison was too young to note, or to understand, had she noted it. Only the odd behaviour of the woman struck her. It was very disagreeable. She tightened her clasp of Willy's hand, and quickened her pace.

But at the end of Princess Street she had to stop. There was that odious letter to be delivered, and delivered secretly, as Alison well understood. 'Mysie,'

she said, with what courage she could summon, 'I wish to turn up here on a message. Wait here, if you please, with the young gentleman, until I return.'

'Na, I'll no wait,' retorted Mysie, with a cunning look. 'I'm for comin' wi' ye.'

Alison knew not what to do; resistance, she felt, would only make a scene.

'I am only going to leave a letter in the square,' she said quietly; 'you can come if you choose.'

'Whatna square?' enquired Mysie.

Alison did not answer, but hurried on. When St. James's Square opened up before them, she felt a hand upon her arm.

'What's the like o' you doin' here?' Mysie asked, in a fierce whisper. But when they came to the accustomed door, and Alison stopped, the woman released her hold, and burst into a peal of laughter. 'Here,' she cried, '*Here*! Eh, lass, but this dings a'! You anither o' them, and you in silks and satins! Eh, but he's a braw lad!' She held her sides with laughter, arms akimbo, and stared at Alison with her strange, wild eyes. Alison was now certain she was demented.

'Come away, come away,' she said soothingly; she had hurriedly slipped the letter in between the door and its lintel. But Mysie would not be cajoled.

'Anither o' his jo's!' she ejaculated, and then she bent to Alison's ear, 'Whar is't ye meet him, lass? And what is't ye pit intil the letter? I canna write him ma'sel', or I would—I would—my certes, yes!' Alison tried to shake her off.

'I don't know what you are talking of,' she said, 'and neither do you. The letter is neither your business nor mine.'

'Ah, ye needna be tellin' me that!' said Mysie. 'But I'se no trament ye, lass,' she added, with a sudden change of tone. 'We maun be movin', too.' The unhappy creature sighed; her mood of excitement seemed over, and she walked along quietly and dejectedly, her step dragging on the stones. Suddenly she paused, seizing Alison's arm. 'Lass,' she whispered, 'ye—ye ken him? Think ye he'll be guid to Mysie in her trouble?'

'Who? What trouble?' asked Alison, startled, and suddenly moved to a kind of shrinking pity for the woman. But Mysie did not explain, only gave her a strange look and heaved a convulsive sigh. To Alison, the disagreeable idea presented itself that her companion might babble among Herries's servants of the leaving of the letter. Well, where you desired silence you gave a fee. Nancy had taught her that. She felt in her pocket for her purse; there was only a crown in it, which seemed a great deal, but it must be given.

'This is for your trouble, Mysie,' she said, when they had reached the General's Entry, but the words suggesting discretion which she had meant to utter, literally stuck in her throat. They were unnecessary.

'I'se no tell on ye, lass,' said Mysie, with a cunning look, as her dirty fingers

closed upon the coin. Alison shuddered, but dismissed her quietly.

The incident had disturbed her a good deal, and when she entered the parlour, she had a rather pale face and frightened eyes.

'Bless the child,' cried Nancy, who, with a litter of paper round her, was scribbling verses by the cosy hearth. 'What ails you? Has old Creighton's tea given you the indigestion? Be sure, love, if there was poison in the cup, 'twas meant for me! But, Ally, you look scared: what is it, love?'

"Twas—'twas nothing much,' said Alison, struggling to rid herself of the disagreeable impressions of her walk. 'Only, Mr. Herries has such a strange servant-lass that he sent across the town with us; she behaved so—so odd.' Nancy laughed.

'Was that all?' she said flippantly. 'Gentlemen have often "strange servant lasses," dear, and I dare say Archie, for all his prim ways, is no better than his neighbours.'

Alison's cheeks suddenly flamed scarlet, and her eyes blazed, as she caught the innuendo.

'That—that was a *wicked* thought, Nancy,' she said.

'La—Innocence, don't look so scandalised,' laughed Nancy. 'What a spitfire it is! But take my word for it, Ally, men are men, love, and not old maids!' which was an undeniable truth; and not a surprising one, perhaps, on the lips of the confidential friend of Mr. Burns, the poet.

CHAPTER XXIV.

The Bard had not visited the Potterrow on that evening, as Alison was not slow to discover. But Nancy was in a mood so gay, so full of sparkle, that her friend presumed that the famous visit was a pleasure only for a very little time deferred.

'Nancy,' Alison said, venturing on a subject which she felt was too mundane to find favour at the moment, 'Mr. Herries says that he takes Danny down to the seaside on Saturday.'

'Does he, love?' said Nancy, coolly. 'Well, 'tis vastly good of him, I'm sure. But if he expects dutiful maternal attendance from me on that day, he can't get it; for I'm most particularly engaged at home.'

'He—he begged of us both to come,' said Alison, in rather a low voice.

'Well, dear, 'twill be a nice jaunt for you,' said Nancy, cheerfully. 'And with

you there to take care of Danny, the less need for me. 'Twas exactly so I planned it, in my own mind. Child, Ally, of what use you are to me! What did I do before I had you?' She came over to Alison's side of the hearth, patted the girl's cheek and playfully pulled a curl. But Alison's heart was troubled.

'Nancy,' she said, timidly, 'don't you think 'twill seem a little—a little odd to Mr. Herries that you do not go with poor Danny?'

'It may seem as odd as it pleases, love,' answered Nancy; 'I am not going.'

Alison looked at her friend in sore perplexity. There was—there had been for some time—a change working in the little woman, a hardening process, it seemed. It was a hiding process, too, for it seemed to raise a barrier between her and Alison, between her and the children, between her and the common, wholesome, pleasant things of every-day life. She let the girl, the children, the household,—the rest of the world, for that matter,—go their own ways; while she, absorbed, intent, wrapt in some dream, seemed to breathe a separate air. A kind of hard eagerness was taking the place of her old bright gaiety; a certain determined selfishness seemed to conquer the keen, if perhaps rather shallow, sympathy, that made her personality so winning in its normal phases. Wistfully, across the boundless levels of her girlish inexperience, Alison looked at her little friend. What ailed her? How could she help? One tremendous, one unswerving resolution formed itself gradually in the girl's mind at this time; she was there to help Nancy, to stand beside her through thick and thin. Nancy had helped her, had saved her from an abyss of life-long misery. She would be Nancy's friend to the last limits of undeviating loyalty.

But in the meantime, Alison being young, looked forward to Saturday; with rather a fearful joy, perhaps, for how was one to meet an offended—so justly offended—a friend as Mr. Herries, after the offence? She half-feared some message would arrive, coldly declining the pleasure of her society on Saturday's expedition. Was it not quite possible—probable, even? But Saturday arrived, bringing no such cruel message, however richly deserved; and Alison, from her little northern window, saw the Rose of Day blush and quiver through the cloudless winter sky, and knew that another glorious frost-bound day was granted for Danny's safe removal to the sea.

They made quite a triumphal procession going down to the Grassmarket. First went Jean, bearing in her stout arms the little invalid, almost lost in shawls; then came Alison, with his bundle and his box of toys; Willy capered in the rear; and Nancy, Nancy herself, armed with her own inimitable, charming, dazzling impudence, tripped down with them to see them off. She met her cousin with an unabashed front.

'I am not coming, Archie,' she said, in a plaintive tone, and with a melting glance. 'My mother's tact tells me 'tis better to have the parting with my poor

Danny now, and here, whilst the child is excited with the start and the pleasure of his drive. Were I to come, and then leave him in a strange place, there'd be a sad scene, most detrimental to his health, and shattering to my poor nerves.' Herries simply raised his eyebrows; but he presently drew his cousin aside, while the others were busy setting Danny and his belongings in the coach.

'I am rather doubtful,' he said, with an unusual air of indecision, 'doubtful of the propriety of my—ahem—taking Miss Graham upon this excursion alone.'

'Doubtful of a fiddlestick, Archie,' retorted his cousin with vivacity. 'La, cousin, who could the poor child go with if not with you? Ain't you safe as a convent? and then with the two little fellows and all— You're joking, surely? You'd never disappoint the girl of her jaunt for such a silly reason?'

Herries said no more, but he looked rather spitefully at his cousin. Perhaps he was not flattered at being told he was 'as safe as a convent.'

In the meantime, the coach was ready for its start. Herries had selected a fine roomy vehicle, with a glass front, and had ordered three horses. Danny was in a seventh heaven of delight, and so forgot the pain of parting. There was a cracking of whips, a tremendous clatter of hoofs on the cobbles, a cheer from the little crowd that had collected to see the start. Nancy, from the causeway, fluttered a dainty pocket-handkerchief, and Jean waved her work-worn hand. Hers were the only tears that watered this farewell; one or two fell on her coarse apron as she trudged home behind her mistress.

'Yon poor bairn will never come back,' she said to herself, and drew the back of her hand across her eyes.

The village of Prestonpans lies, as all men know, about ten miles east of Edinburgh, on the shores of the Firth of Forth, as it widens to the sea. It is a fine drive down there, by the Portobello and the Musselburgh roads, for you perceive that there widens out before you one of the great waterways of the world—the ocean-path to this cold northern country of our love. Perhaps only the trading vessels and the fishing boats go there now, but it was the galleons of old that cleaved that mighty swirl, half river and half sea, and the sailing ships that brought Queen Mary to her fateful kingdom, curtseyed to that tawny tide. The instructive Herries was not slow to point out these matters to his young companions. There was no cloud upon his august brow, and so Alison became very happy. They were busy with the little boys all the way down, curbing the frantic excitement of Willy, who had been promised an hour on the sands, and encouraging Danny, whose spirit flagged, and who asked plaintive and difficult questions about his mother's absence. It was high noon when they rattled into Prestonpans, and Alison stepped out into the village street, where the queer, little, secretive-looking white houses shouldered each other on to the road, and the growl of the sea could be heard at their backs.

The woman who was to have the charge of Danny lived in a little house to which you climbed by a wooden outside stair. She was a most cheerful person, whom Herries addressed as 'Isabella,' and who, in her turn, patted him on the shoulders, and called him 'Master Archie.' She bustled them all into the warm, clean, homely cottage, and showed off with pride her preparations for Danny's sojourn—his little bed covered with a patch-work quilt, his chair with a cushion on it, the very kitten to play with 'when he wearied.' She lugged out of some recess a curious old battered tin vessel, bearing some faint resemblance to the modern hip bath.

'Ye see,' she said, 'I'm well acquaint wi' they delicut bairns. It's a while sin' syne, but I had ane wi' me—the brawest bairn ever ye saw—but he had the one leg shorter than the t'ither, and ay the somethin' wrong wi' the one foot; an' it was the sea watter for him too. Here's his bit bath—I hae ay keepit it. One Walter Scott they ca'd him,' she added, 'a writer's son; a gran' strappin' callant now, though he hirples yet; but he's mindfu' o' an auld body, and comes to see me whiles.' And her listeners of that benighted generation heard that wonder-working name, and knew it not for a magician's!

Then it was arranged that Alison and her escort should take Willy to the sands while the day was at its best, and when they came back Isabella would give them a 'sup o' broth and a tattie,' she said, 'to warm them up before the long drive home.'

CHAPTER XXV.

It was one of those days when the land lies under the spell of a long and sunny frost; the ground rang iron to the foot, but the sea smiled and sparkled to the sun, and the Lomonds of Fife, beyond the Firth, were clear against the winter sky. Herries and his companions walked briskly down the village and along the links. Away to their right stretched the fields, where, not a generation since, the blood of a great battle had been spilt, but where now the peaceful stubble grew over the scattered implements of war and over the bones of men,—and quiet cottages smoked to tranquil skies.

'Shouldn't you like to be a soldier, Willy?' Alison asked the little boy, who pranced beside her, tugging at her arm.

'Yes,' said Willy, 'I'd like to be a soldier. But I shouldn't like to be shot,' he

added, cautiously.

'Tis a fancy of all boys,' said Herries. 'They don't all qualify it, like Willy here. It was more than a fancy with me, God knows!'

'With you, sir?' asked Alison, in surprise.

'I dreamed of soldiering,' said Herries, bitterly, 'till I waked to find myself tied to a desk.'

'Was—was it a great disappointment, sir?' asked Alison, timidly.

'One of those disappointments that mark a man for life, I think,' said Herries, tersely. 'Nearly all my family in the past bore arms, and the love of it is in my blood. 'Tis the gentleman's profession, to my mind. But I was a sickly boy, and held unfit to apply for His Majesty's commission, so behold me, a poor scrivener, at your service!'

Alison stole a look at the speaker. Could it be the fine, the successful, the apparently self-sufficient Mr. Herries who spoke thus feelingly of disappointment? To Alison, it seemed that such a man must always have,—must always have had,—all that he wanted. But, evidently, this was not so.

'I'll not be so afraid of him now,' thought Alison.

They had come to another little village, just of fishermen's huts, that seem to cling to the very rocks of the sea. Here there was a harbour, and the delicate tracery of masts and rigging rose against the sky. As they stood watching, a little fleet of fishing boats—catching a faint breath of the freezing wind—unfurled their tanned brown sails, and put to sea.

'Ah, Willy, see the bonny boats!' cried Alison; and catching the boy by the hand, she ran with him away down the little street, and out upon the sandy links beyond.

Herries followed at his leisure, his hands behind him, and his head bent. The few words-that, he had spoken of himself to Alison had disturbed his serenity; such words, however commonplace, when spoken of the inner self by a man so wrapt in reserve as Herries, are apt to affect the speaker thus, for their utterance is the breaking of the rule and habit of a life. He stood, and looked absently seawards. A schooner, under full sail, was beating up the firth. How slow, how infinitely tedious, was her tacking course! It seemed to Herries, just then, to typify his own life, for ever beating up against the wind of his tastes and inclinations, in the uncongenial profession of his adoption. Had anyone asked Herries the ruling motive of his existence at this time, he would have answered, drearily enough, and with no thought of taking credit to himself, 'A sense of duty.' Sober, in an age of drunkenness, and constitutionally fastidious where the manners of the times permitted, and even sanctioned, an extreme of licence—Herries had something of the melancholy in him, which dogs a man who is born before his time. Neither boon companions had he, nor social pleasures, nor tender

friendships; all these he seemed to have outgrown. Life, at the very springs of it, seemed to have gone dry. And yet he was a man with all the appurtenances of success, who commanded the respect of other men, and held his head above the crowd. Duty—success—respect.... How laudable it sounded! And yet there was something wanting, greater than all these.

He strolled on along the links, while Alison and Willy ran races on the sands. Evidently the races were warm work, for Alison had dropped her pelisse, and left it on the grassy ledge where the links break into the shore. Herries sat down beside it, in the sun. He slipped a half-frozen hand beneath its folds; it was still warm from her wearing, and a curious emotion thrilled him at the contact, as though his blood ran warmer. Presently Alison came herself to where he sat, glowing from her run—panting, rosy, happy. Heavens! what a breath of life—young life—the creature brought along with her. Her curls were blown about by the wind; her eyes were bright—they had the wide-open, innocent look of a child's. Herries looked at her, and a terrible ache of longing took hold of him—whether it was for her, or just for what she stood for, of all that was lacking in his own life—he could not tell. It is very difficult to say when, to a nature of Herries's reserve, his critical hesitancy and profound fastidiousness—the divine moment comes, and the proud man's approval first melts into the tenderness of passion. But with Herries, I rather think it was then—on that sunny morning on the sandy links—when Alison stood before him, with the sea behind her, and the ribbon falling from her loosened curls. True, all that he said was, pointing with an instructive arm,—

'That is the Berwick road, Miss Graham. And over there, that odd-shaped hill you see—that is North Berwick Law.' But there, again, was the nature of the man; once a feeling had him, it then became too inward for common recognition, and far too sacred for speech.

After that, they retraced their steps, and Herries, who felt somehow that he had been erring on the side of sentimentality, instituted a thorough and improving examination of the antiquities of Prestonpans. Willy, it is true, showed symptoms of rebellion, but Alison, though rather cold and hungry, followed, ready and smiling, with that infinite patience for the foibles of a man, as for the gambols of a child, which comes as naturally to some women—well, as naturally as love itself.

They had a very pleasant hour in Isabella's cottage, as a subsequent reward. They supped broth at the fireside, and got warmed through and through. There was a grand platter of potatoes, boiled in their jackets, so hot that nobody could touch them.

'You'd be astonished how long they keep their heat, too,' Herries said to Alison. 'We'll put one in your muff, and you'll see how 'twill keep your hands

warm all the way home.' And he popped the biggest into Alison's muff, and was very 'jokey' with Isabella, and Isabella with him, and so the time went very pleasantly. But, alas! as the end drew near, and Danny heard the horses' feet upon the street, and knew he was to be left behind, he began to cry, not with the robust roar of healthy childhood, but with silent tears, that overflowed his piteous dark eyes, and wet his small pale face. Alison gathered him in her arms, and cuddled him against her shoulder. She spoke to him of the coming summer—of the time when he would be well again and able to run about, and Willy should come down and play with him on the sands. And Danny—who would never see another summer, or run about again, or play with his little brother more—looked up in her kind face, and was comforted.

The afternoon had settled to a piercing cold, as they drove home. For a mile, the horses, maddened with the frost, and fresh from their long rest, ran away, and the coach swayed from side to side, Willy shrieking with delight. Alison felt a strange excitement in the air; the evening was so lovely—earth and sky and sea wore those strange, gem-like tints which are part of the magic accompaniment of a great frost. There rose, to their left, out of the ruddy haze—the craggy mass of Arthur's Seat; and tower and crown, and citadel and spire rose, one by one, and the great rock-built city wore all its classic air—a smoky fane, spread to the cold gods of the north. Herries was very silent; in the dark of the coach, silhouetted against the window, Alison could see the fine, cold profile, the severe, set mouth. She was very silent too, and presently Willy fell asleep, and lay against her knee in a tired heap.

When they got out at the Grassmarket it was in the gloaming, and Herries said he would see his charges to their door. A slip of the new moon swam in the limpid sky; every now and then she looked down at them between the high houses. Alison was turning over in her mind the pretty speech that she must make to Mr. Herries for this pleasant day. Ah, how to say enough, and not too much! The very thought of it made her heart beat—with sheer nervousness, was it? Or was it that Herries's extreme silence was burdened with a meaning which made itself felt, in the strange way of such things?

When they got to the General's Entry, Willy clattered up the stair. The lamp flared, and in its doubtful light Herries stood waiting. And then, because, perhaps, being of a masterful mind, he meant to wait no longer for what he wanted; or just because what he wanted was so near, so sweet, so terribly desirable,—his arm crept to Alison's waist, and he kissed her, and the ice of his life seemed broken, all the sweet springs of summer to gush in his heart.

'Ally, Ally,' he whispered—and why his first words were jealous ones he could not have told you—'Ally, tell me, did a man ever kiss you before?'

'Never in all my life!' said Alison, staring straight out before her into the

dark, with wonder-struck eyes. And lo! that which had been a reproach at The Mains became the crowning glory of her life, and at that Pygmalion-like touch of a lover's lips, the soul of Alison awoke to passion, as the marble awoke to life.

But—such is the relentlessness of the prose of life—Jean must choose this interesting moment in which to open the door above them and let a light down the shaft of the stair. The pair started asunder, Herries stammered good-night, and Alison walked up the dirty steps of that Edinburgh common stair as though they were the rungs of a golden ladder leading straight to heaven.

CHAPTER XXVI.

It might generally be supposed that one great emotion of the mastering kind possesses the soul to the temporary exclusion of all others. But this is not the case; for it is, rather, when the soul is awake—quivering to the touch of some novel experience—that its sensitiveness to new impressions is the greatest, and its capacity for seeing all things and understanding all things is at the fullest stretch. Thus, when Alison walked into Nancy's room that night, full of her own bliss, her heart gave only one bounding throb the more when she found a stranger there, and realised that at last she beheld the longed-for visitor, stood in the presence of genius, and touched the hand of Robert Burns.

The familiar room wore its cosiest and most seductive aspect—the curtains drawn, and fire- and candle-light shining on the wall. The figure, which, at Nancy's motion, rose to meet Alison, seemed to her almost colossal; but only so, because her mind's-eye was filled with the slenderer proportions of a very different figure. The man was indeed of peasant build, of a goodly height, but heavy and thick-set, dressed decently and yeoman-wise, 'like a farmer to dine with the laird.' As he bent towards her the full-blooded, warm-hued, powerful face, she became conscious of his eyes, black as night, with their fringe of shadow-casting lashes—commanding and compelling eyes, almost surcharged with brilliance. Nancy was speaking, lightly, gracefully.

'I told you of my song-bird,' said she to the poet; 'here she is. She'll warble your lays with the very "wood-note wild" you are always asking for. Ally, love, welcome home! We were waiting for you. Run, child, and take off your things, and come and sing. Must she not, Sylvander?'

The poet bowed. It could not be said that his gestures were clumsy, for the

man had ever a natural dignity; but they had the air of indifferently controlled strength, which spoke the peasant struggling with the conventions of the parlour. His great, black glance covered Alison; half-wondering and half-shrinking, she felt it search her.

'If Miss Graham,' he said, with a low bow, 'will honour me with a song, she will make a poor poet the richer. I find no inspiration in the world like the lilt of a bonny voice in a bonny tune.'

Alison smiled to herself as she went to put off her hood and pelisse and smooth her curls. The deep, flattering voice rang oddly in her ears, for they were full of the curt speech and clear, incisive utterance of her lover—who was certainly no poet.

In her absence, the Bard leaned against the mantel-piece and glowered down with his dark look upon his hostess. She—flushed, radiant, passionate, fluttered like a bird in the big hand of the fowler, but a willing bird.

'Are all our interviews, madam,' began the Bard rather moodily, 'to be held in the presence of a third person? Are Clarinda and Sylvander never to be alone?'

'Nay, but our third person—such a sweet, interesting girl,' said Nancy, persuasively. 'The companion of my dreary solitude—think of it! 'Twill not be always possible to dispense with her society,' she added, pensively, 'nor—nor desirable, perhaps.'

A warm look shot from the poet's eye.

'Has *she* no kindred soul compelling her society when we wish mutually to enjoy each other's?' demanded he, harping on the unexpected intruder.

'Nay, never a one!' said Nancy, laughing archly. 'And 'tis a girl I promised to find a swain for, too. Can Sylvander's romantic ingenuity not help me here?'

'Sylvander has the kettle on the other hob, I'm thinking!' said the poet with a short, meaning laugh. His manner varied from the rather stilted politeness into which he had schooled it, sometimes to a racy reversion to his native ways of speech and gesture, sometimes, when an opening offered, to an uncontrollable and not always inoffensive familiarity. Sundry mistakes in such matters had cost him more than one friendship in the feminine great world—a cruel but perfectly inevitable injustice. Here, however, and with his present hostess, he was but too little likely to offend. Nancy was constitutionally lenient to the stronger sex in its warm moments. She had that curious insensitiveness to encroachment—that lack of resentment to the taking of small liberties—which may be sometimes seen in perfectly-refined and gently-nurtured women. It did not offend her now, for instance, that the poet—seen only for the second time in her life—should bend so closely over her, covering her with ardent, covetous eyes ... and then abruptly straighten himself as Alison came in.

'Come along, child,' she cried, 'and sing! No, not with the harp—alone.' She

blew out two candles that were guttering low, so that the room was in firelight only. Alison sat down, and with her hands folded in her lap and her grave eyes fixed upon the fire, sang—sang, I think, as she had never sung before, because, at last, there had come to her a full understanding of the song. She chose one or two of the simpler and older ballads, love-songs of a peasant people long ago.

Then might one who watched have seen a singular transfiguration come over the poet's face. The heavy sensuality of its lines seemed to melt away, and leave in its place a sort of splendid, weighty thoughtfulness. Leaning his elbow on his knee, his chin upon his clenched hand, the whole soul of the man seemed once more concentrated in his eyes, but they were no longer the eyes of the satyr, but of the poet; and they were looking at Alison, not as at the woman, but as at the singer, whose sweet singing roused inspiration at its source. Even now his lips moved, for the lyrical impulse stirred within him, and the thronging words and the tingling lines leapt into unison in his throbbing brain. You could see the massive features quiver, the passionate veins upon the temples swell, the eye blaze beneath the furrowed brow. Nancy watched and worshipped him as a fanatic before a shrine, and even literal Alison, as she felt herself wrapt in that consuming presence, knew herself, with a singular uplifting of the spirit, to be, for the moment, the privileged hand-maid of genius. When the last sounds died away, the man would move, would slap his giant thigh, with something like a shout of pure delight, and call for more, broad as the peasant that he was, and with the passion and insistence of a boy. In these fine, natural moments, Alison liked him well, and when he fell to discussing the ballad or the air—thoughtful, intelligent, shrewd—she would like him even better, and feel that even Herries might approve her liking. Ah! had this been all, and these little *symposia* that were to take place so often in the cosy little room, been all as innocent as they seemed, what a fitting, what a grand impression of Scotland's poet would Alison have carried away with her! But, alas! 'Sylvander' all too soon would don the cap and bells, and then Alison would wonder, with a shudder, how Nancy could bear to have him sit so close, and bend so near to hers that changed face, with the bold eyes and sensual lips. Intellectual attraction—fascination even—the man had for the girl, must have had, indeed, for all who came under the sway of his tremendous personality and his genius, but it warred in her, sometimes, with a physical repulsion, so strong that she could scarcely conceal it.

This first evening, Willy called to her from his bed, for the story she was in the habit of telling him before he went to sleep. So 'Sylvander' and 'Clarinda' snatched a few precious moments of communion alone.

'Well,' Nancy said, 'was not that a fit song for a poet's ear? Has not the child the sweetest voice?'

'Ay,' said the poet, stretching great arms above his head, his dark eyes glow-

ing, and his bronzed cheek flushed. 'Ay, a sweet voice! My heart leaps, and my blood sallies at its sweetness. I am a slave to such sounds. But miss will not sing often for the poor bard. I can see,' he added in a different tone, "tis a fine lady—not a congenial, not a sympathetic soul....'

'What? Poor Ally?' said Nancy, in unfeigned surprise. 'Why, 'tis the simplest, the most unquestioning child! Sure, there's no thought of criticism in her heart towards anyone.' The poet shrugged his shoulders incredulously. He had the quick, morbid sensitiveness of the poet tribe, and already he had noted the almost intangible shrinking of Alison from his person—the hardly perceptible drawing of herself up when he pressed too near, or spoke gallantly. He put it down to the feeling of class, which he was always so suspiciously ready to detect and to resent—the shrinking of a proud miss from the peasant.

'You see, Sylvander,' Nancy went on, 'the child may be of such great service in our friendship. Her very presence is a pretext for the visits of a certain bard. Young, fair, a songstress, might not she—rather than poor Clarinda's fading charms—be thought to constitute his attraction?'

'Provided the deception hurts no one,' said the Bard rather uneasily. He had that sense of fairness which is too exclusively, it is to be feared, a masculine quality. An untethered rover in the fields of love, he never yet willingly poached, or spoiled another's sport. 'I would not hurt miss with the world,' he added.

'Take care you do not the rather hurt Clarinda with the world!' cried Nancy, shaking an admonitory finger. Passion and prudence alternately swayed the little woman at this time; her warm temperament and growing passion drove her within the sphere of danger; her love of the world and its countenance, a terror of losing caste, as a young and pretty woman in a delicate situation, held her back.

Now, as the poet rose to depart, she loaded him with cautions as to his future coming and going. She begged of him not to employ the town's messengers: they were so shifty, and getting to know her house too well; not to come, if he could avoid it, in a chair—chairs were so unusual in that poor part of the town that they caused remark; not to trouble Jean too often at the door: 'twere better he should have the key.

'See how I honour, how I trust, my Sylvander!' she said, softly. The poet pocketed the key, with, it must be admitted, a rollicking eye for so romantic a personage. He did his best, however, to look only impassioned, and not also entertained. And such apt deceivers are men, that he perfectly succeeded.

When he was gone, Alison and Nancy sat a while together by the fire, but they had singularly little to say to each other. Nancy asked a few evidently forced questions about her boy, and the expedition to Prestonpans; but her thoughts were elsewhere, and she was silent and restless.

'Thank Heaven!' she exclaimed suddenly, 'now Danny's away, Herries will not be poking his solemn face in so often as of late. 'Twould be most consumedly awkward if he did.'

And then Alison realised, with a very strange feeling of aloofness from her friend, and a peculiar sense of the unnaturalness of the situation, that she could never—no, not imaginably ever, she thought—speak to Nancy of her love, and of her lover, Herries!

So that wondrous day ended for Alison, and she was alone at last, with no tangible memento of it, saving, indeed, a large cold potato in her muff. A certain intangible memento, it is true, burned upon her cheek, so that she was glad to bury it in the cool sheets. One never knows how long it may be since a reader was in love, and so it were better, perhaps, not to tell how a silly girl, that night, went to bed with a cold potato under her pillow. It might be so very long ago—that silly season with the reader—that he may well have forgotten that, though the sense of humour is a mighty great thing, there is a time with us all when it is nought.

CHAPTER XXVII.

Ordinary mortals, from the schoolboy upward, are familiar with the disagreeableness of what may be called the Monday mornings of life—those after-holiday mornings which come as a cold *douche* after a pleasant outing. Herries tasted the full amenities of this experience on first buckling to his work after the excursion to Prestonpans. On Sunday—a *dies non* in the Edinburgh of those days, when most decent persons went to church and stayed there—nothing could be done. On Monday morning he descended to his office in his grimmest business mood, very unlike a young man who had kissed a girl under the lantern in the General's Entry, late on Saturday evening. Indeed, anyone less like kissing, or being kissed, never was seen.

He found a disagreeable accumulation of business; and a certain fact that had lately, from time to time, been hinting its existence—the fact, namely, that his partner's working capacities were on the wane—was this morning, for the first time, fully borne in upon his mind. In regard to the rather important affairs of a client, there was confusion, and, in respect to the preparation of certain deeds and papers, delay; neither, a few weeks ago, would have been possible, under

Creighton's inexorable *régime*. Herries felt that probably he must shortly face—of all things the most worrying to a business-man, whose affairs have long run in a smooth, appointed groove—a change of partnership. It was the more difficult as Creighton gave no hint of his retirement, and the idea that such a hint might have to originate with his partner, was exceedingly repugnant to the younger man. Herries was aware that his associate's health was very delicate, but like all those in daily contact with a failing man, he had no idea how great and how rapid was the decline. It certainly never struck him that Creighton omitted to speak of his retirement from business, simply because he believed the last retirement of all to be imminent, and death about to set his partner free.

When Herries had made some headway with his morning's work, lost his temper with his clerk, and otherwise expressed his consciousness of the untowardness of things in general, he made the pleasing discovery, that a moral earthquake was heaving in the domestic department of his house. His room was ill-swept, his fire ill-tended; he summoned Lizzie, who appeared in even more than her usual condition of dishevelment, and telling her to send Mysie with some wood, was met with the baffling information: 'There's nae Mysie here!' delivered with a war-like snort.

'No Mysie!' exclaimed Herries. 'Why, what's come to the girl?'

'There's that come to her,' said Lizzie, succinctly, 'that it ill becomes a decent body to hae the tellin' o'....'

'What!' said Herries, repressing a strong inclination to laugh. 'Has the poor wench gone wrong?'

The ferocity of Lizzie's expression was answer enough.

'So homely looks are no safeguard after all, Lizzie?' said Herries, when he had been enlightened. 'And all your trouble in choosing a discreet helpmate was thrown away!' He could not help tormenting his dependent, whose temper afforded him amusement at times, as well as inconvenience. 'How and when did you get rid of the girl?' he enquired.

'Rid o' her—the dirty besom!' said Lizzie, reverting to the idiom of the fray. 'I put her to the door, and to the street—and her skirling like a scraggit hen! I'se warrant ye, I got rid o' her!'

'Well, I hope you gave her her wages up to date,' said Herries, turning away, 'and did not put the poor wretch penniless on the pavement, in her condition, and in this weather.'

'Oo, she had siller, I'm thinking,' said the old woman, with a sly look; 'there was a croon i' the pocket o' her—and ane no' honestly come by, neither.'

'Bless me!' said Herries, 'you paint your relative very black, Lizzie! Did she steal the crown?'

'Na,' said Lizzie, with unpleasant meaning in her tone; she had a tongue that

would always hurt someone, if it could,—'she got given the croon right enough! 'Twas frae that braw leddy i' the red coat ye had to her tea here; she wad hae Mysie haud her tongue aboot some cantrip o' her ane, up the toon there, leaving a letter, or sic-like trash; but Mysie, ye ken, was simple, and aye blabbed everything she saw. O, they're a' the same, gentle and simple,' added Lizzie, who hated her own sex with inexplicable malice.

'You may go,' said Herries, curtly. He felt as though he had got a slap across the face—and from a dirty hand.

Pressure of work at first allowed him no time for unprofitable musing. He had to go down to his partner's room on business. The office, as usual, was heated to suffocation, and he found Creighton—a most singular state of things—half asleep, or rather in a condition of a sort of semi-torpor, crouching over the fire. He, however, roused himself, and attended to the business in hand with almost his usual perspicacity. But Herries perceived that his energy was but a spurt; it flagged almost instantly.

'You don't look well, sir,' he said to the elder man.

'I am not well, Herries,' Creighton answered heavily, but he said no more, for his breath seemed to catch.

'I must beg of you to excuse my further attendance to-day,' he gasped out. 'I must—I must go out into the air. I burn—my chest seems weighted. The fresh air would relieve me.'

'It is very cold, sir,' said Herries, alarmed by his partner's symptoms. 'Let me come with you.'

'Will you?' said Creighton, wistfully. Herries helped the old man—he seemed suddenly to have become a very old man—into his great-coat. He hardly believed him fit to walk, but the going out seemed to relieve him, as he expected. He drew one or two deep breaths of the icy air, and then walked on, though with a feeble step.

'Take my arm,' said Herries, kindly. 'We'll have a turn in the sun, below the castle.'

They proceeded for some way in silence. One subject tormented Herries's thoughts; he was impelled—unlike himself, somehow—to give it utterance.

'I was right, and you wrong, about a trifle, the other night, Creighton,' he said. 'A young lady of our acquaintance, who refused my escort up the town, did so because she had something to hide.'

'Who told you?' asked Creighton, sharply.

'Lizzie,' said Herries. 'The lass Mysie told tales when she got home. She was heavily fee'd to hold her tongue about some letter secretly left.'

'And you tell me,' exclaimed Creighton, with unexpected energy, 'that you listen to the gossip of servants on such a subject! Fie, for shame, sir! Besides, are

you the Grand Turk, or a Catholic Inquisitor, that a girl may not leave a letter on a friend? Just as likely it was not her own letter, but your cousin's; and as to the feeing, why, 'twas the New Year time, and she would have to fee the lass for her trouble.'

'A crown is a heavy fee from a girl's slender purse to a scullion,' said Herries, moodily. 'I have an inkling,' he went on, frowning, 'where the letter was left—St. James's Square, I dare be sworn! We know who lodges there, and the women can no more keep off him than flies from honey.'

'Bless me!' said Creighton. 'Are you blaming our poor Rob? Nay, sir, but what a strange, far-fetched idea. I had hardly realised the Bard was known to your cousin, though I think you told me they met some weeks ago.'

'By this time, I daresay, he frequents my cousin's house,' said Herries, quietly, 'for that's his way in such matters. A scoundrel in manners,' went on the young lawyer, angrily; 'the seducer of women—I know him! I'd sooner trust the lamb with the wolf, than a young, inexperienced girl with such a man. The glamour of his genius hides the corruption of his mind. The thought of that danger is sickening.'

'Wheesht, wheest!' said Creighton. 'I don't gainsay that he is warm—too warm, poor Rob! But believe me, sir, 'tis not the young and noble and innocent—like our fair friend who shall be nameless—that such a man seeks. 'Tis the more experienced women—ripe for dalliance—versed in such ardours—'

'Oh, you think of my cousin,' said Herries, coolly. 'But she dare not try these tricks; she understands too well the delicacy and instability of her present situation, she knows to a hair's-breadth what she can, and what she cannot, risk. I can trust Nancy with herself, but with—with a charge I cannot trust her. She's no fit guide for a young girl.'

'Oh, be at rest, sir, be at rest!' said Creighton, smiling. 'She that we talk of needs no guidance from your cousin. If there is guiding to be done, her own will be the hand that guides; and whomsoever she guides she will guide to a blessing. Take my word for that; I have looked her through and through.... And now that we talk of angels, we begin to hear their wings, I perceive.'

Herries looked up, and saw in the distance Alison and the child Willy coming towards them.

'They—they sometimes walk here of a morning,' he said.

'Ah, you knew that!' cried Creighton, well pleased.

'It may be that I did,' said Herries.

His partner's words had poured balm upon his irritation. There was a calmness and a strength about Creighton's common sense, that made it very convincing. He could certainly influence Herries to a degree that was possible with no one else. And now Alison herself was coming, and the young man felt a sudden

and uncontrollable tumult in his blood. She passed them at the full distance of the broad walk, and only bowed, but it was near enough for them to see the sudden colour in her half-averted face, to note the quickened step and fluttered air. Creighton slipped his arm from that of his friend.

'Run, man, run!' he said; 'you are due elsewhere. Don't you see the signals held out for your welcome?'

'I—I see them,' stammered Herries, himself red as a boy. 'But you, sir? Can you get home?'

'What matters an old man like me?' cried Creighton, impatiently. 'My race is run. Be off—be off! She'll give you the slip yet; she's nearly out of sight.'

Herries hesitated a moment; his cold eyes were alight as they looked after the vanishing figure in the red pelisse.

'I'll take your advice, sir,' he said. And then he followed.

Creighton toiled up the steep ascent to his lodgings alone.

'All's well—for this time!' he was saying to himself. 'But how will it be when I am not at his elbow to allay suspicion, to soothe pride? They're ingrained in the nature of the lad. Will they lose him his happiness as they did me mine? It's likely—it's likely yet, if I know men.' He had barely breath to get up the long stone stair to his rooms, and cast himself into a chair beside the neglected hearth. He looked round the room with dull apathy of sickness, and wiped the sheer sweat from his forehead with a shaking hand.

'She—she shall have all I have to leave in this world,' he muttered. 'For the lad's sake, and for the sake of one of her sex—dead this thirty years. And for her own sake, too—a fine, a fair creature, a bonny lass!' He made as though he would reach a desk that stood near upon a table, but fell back weakly in his chair.

'Time enough yet for that, I daresay,' he said, closing his eyes.

There is often 'time enough' for the making of those wills, and yet the future finds them—unmade.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

Down in the fields, near where, nowadays, Ainslie and Moray Places rear their respectable family mansions—fields white that morning with the thick, wintry rime—Archibald Herries and Alison Graham walked side by side. He was bareheaded in the cold, for assuredly a man does not talk easily of love with his hat

on his head. He held it in a hand behind him; the other arm had Alison's hand between it and his heart. This girl was his. Had he needed to ask? There are some things craved and received without question and answer. Suspicion and mistrust seemed to have vanished away; no man could harbour either while he looked in Alison's eyes.

'Whom shall we tell first, Ally?' he was asking.

'Need we tell anyone, sir—just yet?' said Alison, wistfully. 'Isn't it too new and too—too good to be told?'

The words were too strictly an echo from his own nature for him to find fault with them.

'But my cousin might have to be told,' he suggested.

'Nancy? Oh, no, no!' said Alison, impulsively.

'Why?' said Herries, laughing. 'I thought you were such dear friends, and had no secrets from each other?'

'So we are—dear friends, sir,' said Alison, though not quite with the enthusiasm she might have felt a month ago. 'But—I could not tell her of this. 'Tis different to everything else in the world.'

'That's true,' Herries answered. 'Ally,' he said, suddenly, 'are you prepared to find me but a poor lover? For 'tis that I'm likely to prove, I fear. I am but a dry stick. Pretty speeches come so shyly to my lips, and as to love-letters, I never put pen to paper but in the way of business. Weeks might pass and I might never say, "I love you."'

'Sure,' said Alison slowly, as though she were thinking out some abstruse and difficult problem, 'sure, 'tis the people that love each other most that never do say "I love you." All my life long I've loved my father and my sisters and little Jacky when he came, but I never thought to say "I love you" to one of them. If you know a thing in your heart, the less need to have it on your lips. Don't you think so, sir?'

'True, very true, Ally,' said Herries, thinking to himself what a pearl of sweet sense he had found, and how she suited him; 'only—only—'

'Only what?' asked Alison, innocently.

'Only I would it were the General's Entry, dear,' whispered Herries, at her ear, 'with walls and nothing but a dim old lamp....'

'Ah, but it's not, sir!' cried Alison, pulling away from him, scarlet with blushes; "tis the open field, and there comes Willy!'

'Plague take the child—so he does!' said Herries.

He had given the boy a shilling to spend at a booth in the suburb, and it seemed to him hardly a shilling's-worth of absence that had been granted. Willy came racing towards them, vociferous, flying a newly-purchased kite above his head.

'So we must go, I suppose, sir?' said Alison, wistfully.

"Tis getting mighty cold, though we haven't noticed it,' Herries observed, as they walked townwards across the fields. 'I think I smell the snow.'

A thin, yellowish film had gathered over the bright sun, which, day after day, had made the long, strong frost endurable. The cold, indeed, became perceptibly greater, and a slight, shivering wind set in from the north.

'Haste you home, child,' said Herries, 'and be in before the storm. You may guess whether I come soon to the Potterrow or not.'

'N—not too often, sir,' whispered Alison. The whisper might have stood for the mere coyness of a girl, and so Herries translated it. But in Alison's mind was the troubled knowledge of how little welcome her lover was just now, in the little room which his own liberality helped to make so cosy and so home-like. It was very hard, she thought, but time would doubtless show a way out of the difficulty, if one were only patient.

Alison, indeed, was very grave as she walked home that day, after parting from her lover. She was very happy. Her feeling for Herries had become—as such feelings will with such natures—a part and parcel of herself—the very heart of her. It was a wondrous thing, a miracle, that the one man she had ever known should also be the one man in the world most worthy of love and honour. But then, to reverent and simple minds, the miracle brings awe as well as joy, and Alison was a little afraid of her own happiness, as though it could hardly be meant for such as she. Not for nothing was she the daughter of those bucolic, hard-lived ancestors of hers, who, generation after generation, in the dull obscurity of The Mains, had dragged through joyless and prosaic lives, ignorant of the world beyond the boundaries of their home. Something of a want of buoyancy was Alison's, and it came from that old home source. But she loved,—and the tingle of the new sensation ran through her veins like wine, though it left her sober.

Herries, in the meantime, reached his house in a mood of elation so very singular for him that, had he been like many of his countrymen of that day, superstitious, he would have called it 'fey'—uncanny. Everything seemed to be working together for his good; the stars in their courses fought his battles. Through the least likely source in the world—his cousin—he had found what promised to be the happiness of his life. Approval and passion—how seldom they combine!—met in his tenderness for Alison Graham. There might be other girls more beautiful and more accomplished, but surely there was no other in the world so formed to please him. How sensible she was! Would any other girl have condoned, nay, actually have proposed, a courtship so shorn of the nonsense which by long custom must needs beset all conventional affairs of the kind? Herries reflected, with easy complacency, how exceedingly well it suited him, at this juncture, that his betrothal should be kept a secret. Creighton, he was certain, was either ill, or

about to be ill, and during his illness the affair of a new partnership would naturally be in a decent abeyance. The strain of double work and double anxiety must fall upon him, Herries, very severely in the immediate future, and how inexpressibly inconvenient, at such a time, would have been the fuss and the worry of a declared engagement. But there was to be no such foolish demand upon his time and energy, no nonsense of a daily correspondence, or lover-like dancing of attendance on his charmer. He was even bidden not to go too often to the Potterrow! How infinitely to his taste, how admirably suitable, it all was!

Yet, for a young man so perfectly pleased with a wise and sober arrangement of things, that evening in his rooms seemed to pass with extraordinary slowness,—in very truth, with the most appalling tedium. He was restless; he could neither write nor read. He spent the lonely hours lolling now in one chair, now in another, his handsome head thrown back, his eyes beset with dreams. What he dreamed of was a room, so much meaner than his own, a little room, ruddy with fire and candlelight and cosy curtains, where there was a grey-eyed girl, the tinkle of a harp, the notes of a song. He went furtively to a window and looked out, with a certain thought in the back of his mind. But the night was one of whirling snow, dark and wild, for the storm had come.

"Twould be madness to go; they'd think me crazy,' was the thought in his mind. A clock struck, and he laughed. 'Why, they'll be away to their beds!' he said. Certain strings, which appeared to be attached in the neighbourhood of his heart, were pulling him, pulling him to the Potterrow. But this time he withstood their wrenching, and taking a law book from the shelf, set himself to read like a really sensible man.

CHAPTER XXIX.

The lion and the jackal are figures coupled by the natural historian as a matter of course, so that one may presume that every lion has his jackal, to howl before him and to polish the bones which his lionship leaves behind. In human life the same phenomenon appears, and every lion, who is a lion worth mentioning, may have his satellite in a meaner kind of creature, to prepare the way before him and do his dirty work.

The poet Burns was well furnished with one of these necessary adjuncts to a lion's *suite*, in his friend Nicol, a personage who, after sundry vicissitudes

in life, had managed to secure for himself the outwardly respectable post of a teacher in the High School. The chances of tavern life had brought the two together, and flattery, no doubt sincere if fulsome, on the one side, and on the other that necessity to be admired and followed which is the curse of the poetic temperament, sealed their friendship. Yet it is difficult to imagine how Burns, with whom men of a far higher stamp than Nicol, would still gladly have associated, could content himself with the society of one so palpably inferior to himself in all ways. Nicol was a coarse, blustering, unwashen brute, with a violent and jealous temper that the partial poet chose euphuistically to dub 'a confounded strong in-knee'd sort of a soul.' He had, on more than one occasion, ruined the Bard's chances of favour in high quarters, by his ill-bred intrusions and unmannered insolence. He was not a comfortable kind of jackal at all, and yet Burns stuck to him, actuated, no doubt, partly by the kind of sturdy loyalty of which he was capable towards the humble friends of his own sex, and partly by obstinacy. The man hindered him at every turn, but there was no doubting his devotion. And then, he was that kind of coarse instrument which a man is not afraid to use to the most doubtful ends. And the poet, it is likely, had uses only too many for such a tool.

Nicol, during these weeks of which we write, had been having a hard time of it. To be jackal to a lion-poet, with an injured knee-pan and inflamed passions, is no sinecure. Not for weeks had the unfortunate man had a moment to be called his own. When he was not carrying messages or delivering letters—waiting for answers, or receiving them at the door—he was listening to the anathemas of the afflicted poet, who, maddened by confinement, spent his time in cursing fate, and in the writing of those letters which he pestered his adherent, in season and out of season, to carry for him. The inclement weather which had now set in, added very much to Nicol's hardships. On a certain morning, with the snowdrifts piled high against the doors, he struggled forth to see his friend, but armed with a grim resolution that, on such a day, he would do no more.

He found the poet, with his injured leg upon a stool, scribbling for dear life. The dingy, ill-kept room was close, with a closeness strongly flavoured with last night's potations. The Bard, as he wrote to his Clarinda, was 'pretty hearty, after a bowl busily plyed last night from dinner-time to bed-time.' He folded and fastened this precious missive as Nicol entered.

'Eh, Nicol, man,' he began, cheerfully, 'you are just in good time to be Cupid's messenger once more. Here's the note ready.'

'I carry notes this day,' said Nicol, loudly and assertively, 'to no sluts whatsoever! 'Tis no day for a dog to be out, not to say a human being.'

'Hoots, man,' said the poet, fleechingly. 'What's a bit blaw o' snow? The storm's by wi'. Were it not for this d——d leg, which I did over exercise in the

walking yesterday, I would be out and away mysel'.'

'Well, you can be out and away, leg and all,' said Nicol, unmoved, 'for ye'll no get me to do none o' your deil's trokes this day.'

'Man, Willie,' said the poet, with a seriously alarmed air, 'but the letter must go, ye ken that! She, my present charmer (sure you know it to your own cost as well as mine), has an epistolary aptitude that surpasses all. 'Tis the devil and all with these high-flown little dears.... Now, a simple lass will be content with words and kisses, and so a man whiles gets a moment's peace. But pen and ink must serve her betters. God wot, it is no easy job to fill a daily sheet! But gin she doesna get it, she'll have six here, and then you'll have to carry six answers instead of one.... You'll never fail me at this gait, surely?'

'Is it to that thrice-accursed stair up the town you'd have me go?' demanded Nicol, savagely. He hated, with some reason, every step of the steep way to the Potterrow. 'But I needna ask,' he continued. 'You're none so anxious wi' messages in the other quarter now....' The words conveyed a sting, and the poet flushed, with the sheepish air of a boy caught in some peccadillo.

'Wheesht! wheesht!' he said, uneasily. Nicol shrugged his shoulders; the countless and complicated amours of his friend wearied him excessively, for he heard of little else. Those of the lower kind he would condone; they served for a coarse jest now and again, and he would rally the poet—as others had often done—on the extraordinary unattractiveness of some of his humbler Dulcineas. But for the more ambitious intrigues, he had scant patience, and the vulgarian's restless jealousy of the class above him made him, on this score, especially intractable and suspicious.

'I would ye had the giving and taking yersel' o' your precious letters to your fine, flummery madams,' he said, ill-temperedly. 'Och, there's ane o' them I would I had a hand o'! The jad', she thinks an honest man the dirt beneath her feet, and rubs her fingers on her hanky—curse her airs!—if they chance to touch her hand.' The poet looked puzzled.

'Sure, you can't mean my Clarinda?' he said. 'She has a soft eye for all men, and there's no d——d airs whatsoever about her.'

'"Tis a strappin', great, wallopin' hizzy, the one I'm meaning,' said Nicol, carelessly. He cherished a spite against the tall, grey-eyed girl, with her unmistakable, fastidious air of ladyhood, who so often gave letters into his hands, and he was glad to vent it in words.

'Ah—I take you now!' said Burns, nodding his head, 'and I am rather with you there, I think. A cold, haughty miss! A feather in Society's cap, no doubt; while the likes of us are but hob-nails in its shoes. But she has a voice—a voice that—'

'Here—gie's the letter!' said Nicol, rudely interrupting what promised to

become a rhapsody. 'When is it that you leave the town for the south country?' he suddenly asked, turning at the door.

'Never speir at me, lad,' answered the poet, whimsically. 'Ask the star of love that governs my destiny!'

'Tuts—havers!' retorted Nicol, irritably; he was in no mood for trifling, and the poet's most persuasive airs (he could coax like a child) were lost upon him. 'I tell you this, once for all,' he went on, 'you must sort your private matters for yourself before ye go. There must be none of your baggages, gentle or simple, skirling round this door when you're away. For I'll not have it!'

'Sure, Willie, man, there's something up with you the day,' murmured the poet, wheedlingly. 'Was it last night's bowl? 'Od, we kept it up late, and 'twas a winking brew. My own headpiece dirls yet!' But his friend did not deign a reply. He had gone off to find a shovel and broom, proceeding therewith to sourly sweep the snow from the doorstep of genius; which humble task performed, he set off to the Potterrow with the very worst grace in the world.

The Bard, left to himself, twirled absently in his fingers Clarinda's last effusion, while he lost himself in meditation. To the ingenious reader it will be clear that 'Sylvander' wearied of the correspondence. It may be doubted whether a man can keep the Platonic ball a-rolling beyond a certain number of weeks with any satisfaction. A woman wearies of this specious form of humbug less easily, perhaps,—she has more to lose by its abandonment. 'Clarinda's' letters grew longer day by day, while 'Sylvander's' dwindled, and became irregular. Frequent interviews, indeed, now took the place of letters, and of these the poet was by no means tired. They had a special flavour—exquisite even to the blunted palate of Don Juan. Here was an intrigue, and yet not an intrigue, with a little woman who combined a thousand fascinations in her dainty person: the intellectual bias, the ardent temperament, quick passions, and yet a tantalising prudence which armed her with tormenting scruples exquisitely provocative to this tempter, who, with the full force of his genius and his overpowering personality, lured her from safety. Poor Nancy! she had thought to dally with a giant, and hold him in the delicate chains of her influence; but the giant had her in his tremendous hands, and they were like to brush the bloom from her butterfly-like being. Nevertheless did the giant curse himself, because he could not leave her, and could not, though business, honour, and duty pressed him on all sides, forego the delicacies of this stolen love-feast. Day after day he postponed his departure, already so long delayed by his accident. He was long overdue in Dumfriesshire, where he was in treaty for certain farm lands, which were to be the making of his future (or so he hoped). The affair of his appointment in the Excise hung in the balance, and required the pushing of his interest at every turn. His genteel and powerful acquaintance, Mrs. Dunlop of Dunlop, pressed for his attendance at her house

of Dunlop in Ayrshire, in letters quite as long and almost as oppressively affectionate as Clarinda's. And then, at Mauchline, his partial and all-too-prolific Jean had just presented him, and for the second time, with twins. True, in timely and most considerate fashion, these had died; but still, the matter seemed to press for a little personal superintendence. Was ever poet so beset? And yet, he lingered, and the Devil led him to the Potterrow.

CHAPTER XXX.

For some two or three weeks Herries adhered with wonderful strictness to the sober and sensible terms of courtship laid down between him and Alison. They never wrote to each other, and they very rarely met. The latter contingency, however, arose rather from the sheer pressure of circumstances than from inclination. Mr. Creighton continued to be confined to his rooms by severe illness, and Herries found himself in consequence overwhelmed with business. Not only was the office work doubly heavy in the absence of his partner, but it was constantly interrupted by the necessity of reference to the absent man, as long as he was able in any measure to give his mind to the affairs of his profession. Latterly, this had almost ceased to be the case, for the invalid grew worse rather than better, and Herries's visits quickly changed from those of business to those merely of inquiry. Mr. Creighton lay day after day in that dreary room of his, uncomplaining, somewhat ill-attended, and always lonely, facing, with grim stoicism, the approaching end. His dog, Dick, lay on the bed at his feet, with melting eyes fixed ever on his master's face—uncomprehending, but full of a wise beast's yearning sympathy.

But all this time, at his heart—that newly-discovered organ—Herries longed for Alison. Sometimes he could snatch a brief hour to go to the Potterrow, but, naturally, he hardly ever found Alison alone. These visits of his drove Nancy nearly wild with impatience and with fear—the fear being, of course, that they would clash with those of the poet.

'What in the universe brings the man now?' she would petulantly exclaim. 'Can he not let us be?'

Her *naïve* conviction that a man who had always been adamant to her own charms must necessarily remain so to those of everyone else continued perfectly unshaken. Whether, under any circumstances, she could have believed Herries

capable of being in love is very doubtful. But at present the distorting veil of her own half-guilty passion was drawn across her eyes, and she saw nothing.

'Are you never alone?' Herries said fretfully to Alison once, after a singularly irksome visit shared with Nancy and Willy.

'Not very often, sir,' said Alison; and then she added, with a little hesitation, shyly, 'There are Tuesday and Thursday evenings, now, when Nancy goes to hear Mr. Kemp lecture on a missionary project, and I—I do not go, because 'tis Willy's history nights, and I help him with his lessons.'

'Then I'll come those nights, of course!' cried Herries. 'But then, drat him, there will always be the boy!'

'I can sometimes put him to Jean in the kitchen with his book,' said Alison, demurely, and a dimple suddenly showed in one cheek, which Herries had never noticed before.

Jean, in these days, was a great ally of Alison's, and if she saw more than she was meant to see in Herries's visits, she kept her honest counsel.

So Herries came always on these evenings when the exemplary Nancy, who was in her own peculiar fashion extremely pious, attended the lucubrations of her favourite divine. Those were sweet hours to the harassed man, and I do not say they were the less sweet for being stolen. He could lay aside for a brief space the stern responsibilities of the life he took so hardly—let his brain rest, and his heart speak. The little parlour would be, in the twilight of the lengthening evenings, lit only by the firelight and the dying day. If Herries called himself a cold or backward lover, not so, in those dear hours, did Alison find him.

'Ally,' he said one night, 'this secrecy cannot go on for ever, though just now it is conformable enough to my affairs. When shall it end?'

'When I go home, sir, perhaps,' said Alison, timidly.

'Then, when you go home, I come too,' said Herries, softly, 'and make formal propositions to the laird of The Mains for the hand of his eldest daughter?'

'Yes, sir,' said Alison, with shining eyes. They shone because they saw so fair a vision—her happy self returning to her old home, and with her, this true, this gallant lover. She saw the low, old house—the dear, humble rooms of her childhood—her father's face—her sisters crowding round her. Oh! proud the moment when she should show this 'braw wooer' of her own to the mother who would have had her tie herself to Mr. Cheape! Our good Alison was all a woman here, and sweet was the foretaste of a woman's triumph.

'Let it be very soon,' Herries whispered, his lips among the curls at her ear; 'whenever this accursed press of business is over, the sooner the better for me.'

'Whenever Nancy can spare me, sir,' said Alison.

'Why, what can bind you to my cousin, child?' asked Herries; '—I mean as to a particular period of time?'

'I—I am bound, sir,' said Alison, a little unhappily. 'As long as Nancy wants me, I must stay.' The shadow of a hidden thing seemed to fall across her joy. She moved away from her lover.

'Well, I can see no "must" about it,' said Herries. 'You are a strange pair of friends, I often think, you and Nancy! Two creatures more unlike never lived, I believe.'

'I would—I would you could think differently of Nancy,' said Alison, impulsively.

'I do what I can for her in the best way that I am able,' Herries answered, a little curtly, perhaps.

'You do everything in the world for her, sir,' cried Alison, eagerly, 'except—except understand her, I think.'

'What should there be to understand about the little jade?' said Herries, lightly. 'But, nay, I daresay there is too much, and I don't like women who need such a vast deal of understanding. She that I love must be clear as the day to my eyes—no obscurities, no subterfuges, no explanations—and she *is*!'

'But, sir,' said Alison, very much in earnest on this point, 'I would have you understand all that Nancy is to me now—all that she must ever be, whatever happens. I—we both—owe her our happiness, do we not, Archie? But for Nancy, I'd never have come to Edinburgh, nor have seen you.'

'But for Nancy,' cried Herries, gaily, 'you'd be Mrs. Cheape of Kincarley, in the cosy county of Fife! Here's to Nancy, who stole a wife from the laird, and brought one to Archibald Herries, the poor writer of George Street!' And he lifted high a little cup from the mantel, and pretended to drink to the absent mistress of the house. So light-hearted on these happy evenings was Alison's lover.

Then there came the evening—but memorable, alas! for more than this—when Herries brought her his mother's ring. He had found time, and it had taken him many hours after his busy days, to hunt for it in the recesses of his house among the piles of boxes, desks and cases crammed with the relics of the parents he had never known. At last he had got it—a beautiful, clear-set emerald, slipped thirty years ago from a dead woman's hand by the despairing man who had loved her.

The lovers bent over it at the little window, and it gleamed at them in the fading evening light.

'How beautiful,' whispered awestruck Alison, who had never owned a ring in her life. '"Tis much too grand for me, sir, and I—I can give you nothing back.'

'Give me a curl,' said Herries, half in jest. 'The true lover's gift.'

'Would you really like one?' cried Alison, and with characteristic absence of vanity she seized upon one of her finest, and caught up a pair of scissors for the sacrifice.

'Nay, now, not that one,' Herries laughed, forcibly intervening. 'You'd spoil the bonny bunch! She here, a baby one that hides behind your ear—you'd never miss it.' Alison snipped off the 'baby one,' tied it up with a thread of silk from Nancy's basket, and twisted it in a piece of paper, all with her own matter-of-fact and literal air, that made Herries laugh again, and love her more.

'There, sir,' she said. 'I would 'twere a handsomer gift. You know,' she added, 'they say 'tis unlucky to give hair—it means "farewell."'

'Ah, but we're so prosaic a pair, love,' said Herries, half-mocking. 'There's no romantic ill-luck in store for us, be sure. We leave that to the high-flyers.'

Then they went to the window again and bent their heads over the ring. It is hardly fair to spy upon a rising and respectable young lawyer in his softer moments. But if, in the old days at The Mains, Kirsty, the dairy-maid, had had a lover who put an arm around her waist, Alison, as her own good mother might have put it, was 'upsides with her' now.

She and Herries, indeed, were so absorbed in the ring and in each other's company that they heard no sounds outside the little room. Their backs were towards the door, which had an awkward trick of sometimes swinging open unnoticed, when not securely latched. It had swung open now to some movement of the crazy old tenement, and all unknown to the lovers, a figure stood motionless on the threshold. It was a towering figure, but it had a canny step, to which additional stealthiness had been imparted by the simple expedient of removing the stout shoes from the heavy feet. Too often had Robbie Burns crept to clandestine meetings not to know that 'tis pity on such occasions to disturb the neighbours with unseemly clatter on the stairs.

He could see well into the room, for the fire had blazed up brightly, and he perceived perfectly the two figures and their attitude—recognising one.

'Eh, ma lassie,' he ejaculated to himself, 'kissin' and kitlin' like the rest o' us, for all your prudish airs!' And he executed, behind the unconscious pair, a short and silent war-dance on his stocking-soles, brandishing his shoes above his head in the mischievous glee of a schoolboy. But he made no sign. Diving behind the door, he deftly reassumed his foot-gear, and then, with a due and decent rattling of the latch, he made known his presence, and entered the little room.

Alison turned, with a great and visible start, when she heard and saw him. She felt herself grow pale, for she knew that an awkward, and even terrible, moment had come, and that the meeting, which Nancy had schemed for weeks to avoid, must now, by some unforeseen coincidence, take place. But she took her courage in both her hands, and with it there came to her a certain definite sense of relief. At last, she felt, there would be an end to deception.

'This is Mr. Burns, the poet, sir,' she said, in her quiet voice, and turned to

Herries.

CHAPTER XXXI.

Herries, whose eyes had narrowed and whose lips were set, held his hands behind him and made an inclination so haughty and so slight that it was barely perceptible. Jean brought in the lights.

'We have met ere this, sir, I think,' said Burns, not unpleasantly. He knew Herries perfectly by sight, and had no reason to suppose he would resent the imputation of being seen at some of the first houses in Edinburgh.

'I was hitherto unaware of the honour,' said Herries, with appalling frigidity, and it would have needed no very acute observer to have seen the hot and sensitive blood rush to the poet's face. He, however, contained himself with dignity enough. Alison's fingers, cold with fright, were twisted together with nervousness. She certainly did not improve matters by saying to the poet,—

'Mrs. Maclehose was not expecting you just now, I think, sir?'

'Why, no, madam,' said the Bard; 'but I could not come at a later hour, and I swear the strings of your harp so drew me that I could not forego coming now rather than not at all. We must finish "Lassie wi' the Lint White Locks," and to that grand tune "The Rothiemurchus Rant," or I will go clean *wud*,[*] I think. It rings i' the head o' me half right, and yet not right. Tantalus himself could not endure it.' The poet had set back his shoulders and spoke out freely and boldly, as though by the divine right of his genius the little room and all it held, including Alison, were his. He ignored Herries. As to Herries, Alison could see him without looking at him, could tell the very tilt his fine and scornful brows were set at, could feel, through her very back, the coldness of his stare. And yet her courage rose. Oh, he would be angry—sore displeased! But better by far he should be angry for a little while than any longer deceived.

[*] Mad.

It was fortunate for all concerned that Nancy returned at this critical juncture. She took in the state of matters in an instant, and with ready wit and supple tact did all that one little woman could do to save the situation. She bustled about, she chattered, she rallied the poet on the rareness of his visits (he had been there the previous night), she pulled a chair up to the hearth for Herries, and almost pushed him into it.

'Now, cousin,' she said coolly, 'you'll witness one of our own little symposiums, and hear how marvellously Ally is improving on the harp.' She ardently hoped—though she did not expect—that Herries would go. But this he had no intention of doing. Alison had left the room, and the boy Willy was shouting for Herries from an inner chamber, where he slept, and Herries went to him. Nancy's whole aspect, voice, and manner, changed in his absence.

'For God's sake, Sylvander,' she said, clasping the poet's arm, 'behave yourself this night! Yonder is my most revered, particular, Puritanical cousin and guardian, the lawyer Archibald Herries. A pragmatical creature—no soul, no sympathy—but if he's offended, poor Clarinda is undone! He is all her shield against the cruel world—all the worldly hope of her poor, deserted babes. I implore you have a care not to offend him by your manners to your poor friend.'

'My bare existence offends him,' said the poet, shrewdly enough. 'What right,' he continued bitterly, 'has the poor ploughman to breathe the same air with so fine a gentleman as Mr. Herries?'

'Oh, heavens!' cried Nancy, half beside herself. 'Never heed him. Are you not worth a hundred of such poor dried sticks as he? Only think of your poor Clarinda and be careful! 'Twould indeed be almost better could you go.'

'I thank you, madam,' said the Bard, grimly; 'but I think I'll stand my ground, unless you put me to the door.'

'Then, for God's sake, give all your heed to Ally,' cried Nancy; 'not a look, not a word, but of merest civility to Clarinda!'

The poet cocked his eye. He was about to tell what he had seen that evening on first entering the room, but he checked himself: telling tales was not his weakness. And then the idea of a little dalliance with Alison, under the supercilious nose of her lover, by no means came amiss. Here was a little diverting vengeance ready to his hand; he would never carry it too far, he reflected, for, with all his faults, he was generous and good-natured. So he chuckled, and nodded knowingly to Nancy.

In the dark little outer lobby, Alison and Herries had met for a brief moment.

'Archie!' whispered Alison, with an outstretched hand. But he turned upon her a look of offence so cold, that she was silenced, and her arm fell to her side.

'I did not know,' he said icily, 'of Miss Graham's intimate acquaintance with the poet Burns!' And he brushed past her into the parlour. Alison, feeling as though she had been struck, followed him. It had been easy to bear his anger in advance; but oh! she had not known how hard it would be—how hard to meet that changed look in his face, that coldness in his voice. The wave of courage that had risen so high within her, receded; but she forced it back. Better he should be angry than deceived. She did not realise as yet the intricate, net-like nature of

deception, so loth to set one free.

The evening passed. To all outward appearances it was a musical evening of undeniable edification to all concerned, when a great poet might have been seen unbending himself, and honouring, with much gallant attention, the accomplished young lady who helped him with her harp and song. Nancy sat in her accustomed place, wreathed in smiles, and dispensing sugared words and glances. Herries, indeed, was totally silent, but it might have been the silence of appreciation. Alison and her harp, the poet seated near her, made a central and striking group in the little room. How fair—how singularly fair—she looked that night! So, at least, it seemed to her lover, watching her from under lowered lids, with anger—the anger of love and longing—at his heart. The poet, too, looked well: strong, manly, massive. Herries, as he watched him bend over Alison that fine frame and splendid head, hated him at that moment, not, I fear, for his vices, but for his thews and sinews, his sun-browned comeliness and daring eye. Like many men, slenderly moulded, and of delicate constitution, Herries had a passionate and jealous admiration of manly beauty hardened and developed by all out-door and vigorous pursuits. Necessity had doomed him to a sedentary life, but it was against every taste and inclination, every instinct of his being. He felt now, angrily, that this creature—this ploughman—belittled him. Certainly the contrast between them was sufficiently striking; it was the contrast between porcelain and bronze. Yet never had the peculiar grace of Herries, the marked refinement, the purity of his chiselled face, shone more by contrast. So, at least, it seemed to one who saw him, whenever she dared steal a glance upon her angry Jove.

They could not make much headway with the song that night, probably because Alison's wits were wandering. Burns was working up, after his usual methods, the 'Lassie wi' the Lint White Locks,' some fag-end of an old, forgotten country catch, which he set in the jewels of his own deathless words, and sought to match to some old tune. Alison had found the air; over and over again she played it, and sang the words as the poet said, them at her ear. The little room seemed full of the air, of the words, of the spirit of song:—

'Lassie wi' the lint white locks,
Bonnie lassie, artless lassie!
Wilt thou wi' me tend the flocks?
Wilt thou be my dearie, O?'

Over and over and over again—the little fleering, jeering, heartless tune, with yet its sub-note of pathos and of pain, the tinkle of the harp, the girlish voice

singing, the poet's deeper tones in speech. Herries had no ear for music or for verse, yet that air and those words stayed with him all his life. He could never hear a boy whistle the one, or a lass lilt the other at her work, without an unbearable stab of pain.

When the singing was over, it became apparent to the astute hostess of the Potterrow that each of her guests meant to outstay the other. Herries made no move. The poet, glowering somewhat, now that the mood of inspiration had left him, chafed visibly under the other's sneering silence and marked aloofness. In spite of his natural manliness and independence, he was agonisingly sensitive to a social slight, and helpless under it. Yet neither would he give in. It grew late. The poet, it transpired, contemplated an early start the following morning, when he was to ride to Ayrshire, returning in a fortnight or so to town. This forced him, at last, to make a move, for he had affairs to attend to. With a formal adieu to the ladies, and a black look at Herries, which he could not, for the life of him, decide to make into a bow or not, he took his departure.

He was hardly out of the room, when Herries walked to the window and set it open.

'Pah!' he said, 'there's too much of your poet in here!' Then he fell silent, for words wanted him. In olden days he would have rated his cousin in no measured terms. But now the woman he wanted to rate was not his cousin, but another, and his lips were sealed to her in the presence of a third person. Besides, he was not only angry, when it is easy to speak; but he was sore, when it is almost impossible for a proud and sensitive man to find words. And, as yet, he did not know what words to use.

'I'll reserve my criticism on your "symposium" for another occasion, Nancy,' he said. "Twill be so very full and appreciative a one that 'twill require more time than is left us this evening,' he added significantly. He said good-night to his cousin. To Alison he bowed coldly as he left the room.

'My lord is fine and angry,' said Nancy, as she shut the door on him, 'but that's of course. On the whole, the matter has passed off better than I could have expected, though Lord only knows what is to come. 'Twas at *your* feet the poet sat, Ally, no doubt about that!' And she tittered, well pleased.

'Oh, Nancy, Nancy!' cried Alison; she knew not what she was about to say, but the impulse seemed to be on her to be out with it all.

'Hush, child!' said Nancy, sharply. 'Listen!' There was a bounding step upon the stair, and she ran to the door, laughing, and flung it wide. The poet had tricked the lawyer prettily. He had simply hidden himself in a dark niche of the stair until he saw his enemy depart, and here he was again, bursting with successful mischief.

'Did Clarinda fancy her Sylvander would leave her with a formal, cold

farewell?' he asked, with a fine rolling eye.

Alison ran to her room, and shut herself up in it in a passion of just anger—just, but helpless.

So Clarinda and her Sylvander had a long and tender parting, and felt that they took a well-deserved, as well as most enjoyable, revenge upon her disagreeable relative.

CHAPTER XXXII.

Alison's struggles that night were like those of a bird that is caught in a net. The bird cannot free itself, not altogether for want of strength, but because it does not understand the nature of nets. And thus it was with Alison. The meshes, not of her own will or seeking, were all round and about her; so slight, so thread-like they seemed, yet they had entangled her, and the more she strove to cast them off the more they clung. Her lover was offended—justly offended. Alison's straight inward eye saw that at once. She had deceived him, though bitterly against her will. She had connived, and still connived, at his deception by another. That other was her friend and benefactress whose bread she ate, who had loaded her with kindness. She could not unravel the deception. She could not seek forgiveness from her lover by confession without betraying Nancy.

'I see that it is wrong ever to hide anything,' was one of her thoughts that night. "Twould have been far better to have told Nancy at once that we loved each other.' And yet that deception, if, indeed, it could be called one, had seemed so innocent. It had arisen, not from ideas of expediency, but from sheer strength of feeling—the feeling of reserved and silent natures that longed for privacy in a sacred moment. Had they not a perfect right to keep their happiness to themselves—a happiness that injured or robbed no one—that concerned no one but their two selves? That night it had been in her to tell Nancy, but what would she have gained by such a telling? Was it conceivable that Nancy, even though knowing all, would put matters straight by a full confession to Herries, exposing herself, her passion, her duplicity, and then, renouncing all her misdeeds, sit calmly down to a benignant contemplation of Herries's happiness? Alison almost laughed as she thought of it. No, that was not conceivable. It seemed to her—and Alison was very clear-headed—that a full knowledge of the facts—of the facts that bound her and Herries together—would merely drive Nancy into further and

fiercer deceit. She would simply regard them both as enemies leagued together against her, and deceive both, whereas, as yet, she deceived only the one. Not only was there no help, but there might be danger in telling Nancy now.

And then the thought—the temptation—came to Alison: she might go home! She might cut the strings that bound her—never heeding that they bound another, too—and be free and fly away to that dear, that safe old home, where there were no deceptions, where everybody spoke the truth with disagreeable plainness, if need be, but always the unvarnished truth. Herries would have her do this. He might bid her do it yet. But ah! Alison knew she could not—might not—dared not do it, for heart and conscience both said no. What—and she hardly dared ask herself the question—what would come to Nancy if she were left alone? Alison had learned many things of late, and her girlish eyes had been opened to much—to so much that was not fit for them to see, but that they saw because they were clear-sighted eyes that always read the truth. What would become of Nancy now if the one barrier—the restraining presence of a companion of her own sex—were taken away, and she were left an absolutely unprotected prey to that overpowering influence that shadowed all she did and all she thought? The face of the man rose before Alison—the masterful, sensual face, the riveting eyes—and she heard the stealing steps that now too often and too late—far, far too late into the night—would come creeping up the stair. Jean would be long since safely bedded in her attic—but, at least until now, Alison had always been at hand, with the certain safety of her presence, though fully conscious how angrily that presence was resented by one of the pair, if not indeed by both. Alison was innocent, as the pure are innocent, but she was not stupid, and she was not blind. She knew enough to know that even if Nancy were yet guiltless, her good name was fearfully at stake; it hung by a thread, and one end of that thread was in Alison's hands. And it was Nancy—the dear, dainty, sweet Nancy—that had so twined herself round the simple affections of the country girl! It was the Nancy that had saved Alison from Mr. Cheape, and that had brought her to Archibald Herries. No, Nancy should never be deserted in her peril. Even if Alison's early love for her were gone, there was yet loyalty, and Alison would be unswervingly loyal. She must bide her time and wait. She trusted Herries with a passion of trust. Whatever he did, that must be right, and she would abide by it.

In the meantime, Alison's lover had gone home, far more deeply perturbed than she, because totally in the dark, and because he had not, as had the woman he loved, the solid ground beneath his feet of a nature that could trust. Suspicion and mistrust had dogged the beginning of his love for Alison, but then Creighton had been at his elbow to fight each doubt as it arose; and after that his own love had grown strong, so strong that it grappled with the enemies of his nature, and overthrew them for a time. But now they sprang upon him from

their old ambush, and how alive, how terribly alive, they were! The angry blood rushed to his brow as he thought himself deceived. Had she really tricked him? He recalled the ugly little circumstances of the early winter—the meeting in St. James's Square—the fee to Mysie; and then—and then, could it be that Alison had begged for secrecy in their engagement, had deprecated the frequency of his visits to the Potterrow, bidden him come on certain evenings and at certain hours only, because she played a double game, and fooled him in it? But no, this was monstrous, and he did not believe it in his soul—not yet at least. Only, in his bitterness, he said to himself that all women were the same; they all deceived, prevaricated, lied and hid, and this seeming-true, fair creature that he had taken to his heart was only a woman after all. Ah, but he loved her! Not till now had he known the strength of his love, not till his heart pained him as it did this night, with its abominable aching. There was nothing for it but that he must write to her before he slept, and he did so.

He made his accusation in plain terms. 'You have deceived me,' he wrote, 'in regard to an intimacy, which you have hidden, with a man whom you knew well that I abhorred. I did suspect at one time that Burns might possibly frequent my cousin's house, because of her foolish craze for literary lions and the like. But the suspicion left me utterly, because I did not believe that such a matter would be kept from my knowledge by you. But now I suddenly find you intimate with this man, singing to him, and having in common with him, apparently, the memory of countless meetings. What am I to think? To this intimacy—at anyrate in my cousin's household—it is my resolution and my duty to put an instant termination, and I shall know what measures to take to that end. If I have any claim on you—and you yourself only can decide whether I have or not—I forbid you to see or have speech with this man again. He is a profligate. I have reasons, believe me, that make me urge your obedience in this matter. I am harsh with you—I was harsh to-night—but I would not be too harsh, Alison. I know not yet how far you may have acted under influence,—perhaps my cousin's. I have often felt she was no safe guardian for a young girl. Have you found out yet that you left my mother's ring—the ring of our betrothal—in my hands? You started so, when that accursed poet came into the room, and were so visibly taken aback that you forgot my gift! I desire and hope to God you may yet wear it—and wear it worthily. But I will keep it for a little while. You will not see me for some days. I learn that Mr. Creighton's illness is become dangerous, and every hour that I can spare must be spent at his bedside.'

When Alison got this letter, a strange feeling of exaltation moved her. Severe? But then, how just! Plain? But how she loved his plainness! Dear—dearer than his very kisses—to this girl, with her own straight, undeviating nature, was the man's unerring, if narrow, rectitude, his clean, cold uprightness, his hatred

of all false ways. He would not give her the ring? She almost laughed; he might slay her—but she would love the slaying from his hands; it would be a noble pain!

Unluckily for himself and all concerned, Herries did not stay his hand that night, after he had written to Alison. He wrote another letter, and this time he wrote neither so wisely nor so well. It ran:—

'Mr. Herries presents his compliments to Mr. Robert Burns, and begs to inform him that he is under the necessity of preventing and forbidding the visits of Mr. Burns to the house of Mrs. Maclehose in the Potterrow. The unhappy circumstances which have deprived Mrs. Maclehose of the protection of a husband, make it indispensable that her relatives and friends should exercise a supervision over her acquaintance, and should guard her from the intimacy of persons not of her own station, or known to her immediate circle.'

This was all—but it was all wrong, and Herries, as a lawyer, if not as a sensible and prudent man, should certainly have known that it was so. That he should forbid Alison the intimacy of such-and-such a man was possibly within his province. That he should advise, cajole or influence his cousin to close her doors against an objectionable visitor might certainly be his duty. But that he should forbid, or, with a high hand, prevent Mr. Burns the poet—a free agent in a free country—from visiting any house where he was welcomed by the inmates (except it were his—Herries's own) was an absurdity so glaring, that the only marvel was it did not strike his vision from the paper as he wrote. It can only be said for him that he was at the moment a sorely harassed man—over-worked, in the first instance, and now set upon by jealousy and suspicion. Hot under these influences, it is perhaps no wonder that he sat down to commit the one thoroughly ill-judged action of his life.

He was aware that the poet left town next day for a fortnight, but he directed the letter to his lodgings in St. James's Square, believing that it would be forwarded by the next mail. As a matter of fact, the letter lay in town until the poet's return.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

The fortnight which now began to pass—the period of the poet's absence from town—was a very unhappy one in the Potterrow. Alison had, indeed, her lover's letter, but she would not, or could not, answer it. The truth she could not write,

therefore it seemed to her better not to write at all. Hard as it was, it seemed she must be silent under his reproach. Some way out of the mystery might show itself, but it appeared to Alison that she was bound hand and foot, and could not move to clear herself. And in these days, though she had a brave heart, she began to be afraid.

But now the sight of Nancy's wretchedness—no longer to be concealed or disguised—began, even more than her own uneasiness, to affect her. The recklessness, the headstrong wilfulness of the little woman when the object of her passion had been near her, and she could either see him or hear from him day by day, had been hard enough to cope with, but now that he was absent, and the constant excitement of the letters and the meetings was suspended, her state was piteous. She would neither eat nor sleep, neither rest nor yet employ herself; the irritation of her temper—sweet turned to bitter under the alchemy of passion—was almost insupportable. She would still write, by the hour, by day and night, her feverish, passionate letters, which followed the poet by mail and post-gig, and must prettily have punctuated his progress as he went. He, from Glasgow, had scratched her a line as he waited for the Paisley carrier, promising future and full epistles. But these did not follow with absolute regularity, and the unreasoning little creature maddened under his silence. She finally fretted herself into a fever, real enough, and Alison had the doctor in; and a febrifuge and also a sleeping-draught prescribed, gave the household a little peace at night at anyrate.

At last a merciful morning brought a substantial packet from the errant Bard, handsomely franked by some important personage, for he wrote from a fine country house in Ayrshire, where he rested on his way from Mauchline to Dumfriesshire. For hours did Nancy pore over these precious sheets, reading out now and again laughing extracts to Alison. This had always been her wont, and not by any means always edifying had been the nature of these extracts, for Sylvander was a correspondent of amazing frankness, and hid from his Clarinda none of his peccadillos, past or present. Nancy, in these matters, had grown curiously hardened, and probably hardly realised the essence of her revelations to the shocked ears of a girl.

'Why,' she cried, on this occasion, 'here will be a little excursion for you, love! My Sylvander begs a favour of me; 'tis to take five shillings, as from him, to a poor necessitous creature in the Wabster's Close. Will you do it, dear? You know how miserably unfit your poor Nancy is to face the streets!' Now, the poet's message ran:—'There is a poor lass in the Wabster's Close of whom I get a tale of distress that makes my very heart weep blood. For some part of her trouble I am (with contrition, I own it) responsible. I will trust that your goodness will apologise to your delicacy for me, when I beg you, for heaven's sake, to send the

poor woman five shillings in my name, and let the wench leave a line for me—you know where—and I shall see her, and try what is to be done for her relief.' Nancy, even, had felt the necessity of editing this passage, but she dwelt upon the poet's kindliness of nature with unction.

'He's said to me often and often, Ally,' she took this occasion to remark, '"I would have all men and women happy! I'd wipe the tears from all eyes if I could!" He has the tenderest, the most sensitive heart!' So, would Alison go upon this charitable quest? Of course she would—thankful to be sent on any quest that did not lead in the direction of St. James's Square.

Now, it will be said that, in these pages, our poor Alison has run too many messages, and, indeed, she has. But the reader, of his own experience, probably knows that there is in this world a certain class of little, dainty, clinging, tender women whose messages are all run for them as a matter of course. To this class did Nancy Maclehose belong. There was a kind of understanding that rough walks in dirty streets, and in all kinds of weather, were not her portion. Nor did she exact this consideration from her friends; it came to her as a sort of right, a kind of tacit acknowledgment of her power—that power to which all bowed down who came in contact with her—the willing Alison, the sturdy Jean, her own devoted little boys—even Herries himself, though he, indeed, was a rebellious slave. So Alison set out, quite willingly, in all good faith that she went upon a charitable mission.

It was mid-February now, and there was an extraordinary mildness in the air. The frost and snow, the bitter north winds were gone. A tender sky, sweet with the very tints of spring, swam above the stern old town, and a westerly wind, soft as a kiss, touched Alison's cheek as she walked. She was acquainted with her destination, the Wabster's Close—a most malodorous and unpleasing quarter; but Alison was not afraid of such places now, and merely picked her way with added caution over the foul causeway and slippery cobbles. She had nothing but a name, Clow, as uncommon as it was hideous to go by, and by inquiry she discovered the tenement or 'land,' where a family thus named was said to live. It was up a stair of an agglomerated and indescribable filth—the worst that Alison had yet seen. No wonder, she thought, that a person living in such a place needed a charitable dole.

She paused at a door, behind which there seemed to rise a perfect Babel of sound—a Babel, yet curiously subdued, as though many people spoke, and spoke at once, yet in hushed voices. She knocked, and a woman opened, who, with a curious, indescribable air of excitement, plucked her by the sleeve, whispering hoarsely,—'Come in by—come ben!'

Alison felt impelled to enter, but shrank involuntarily, as the close air of the darksome and overcrowded chamber, with some nameless horror in it, assailed

her senses. The woman, however, who had admitted her, now closed the door behind her. Alison noticed that her hands were shaking, piteously, uncontrollably, and that she was very pale. The room seemed full—full to overflowing—of women who whispered with bent heads, gesticulating, raising hands to heaven, and who now turned curious eyes on Alison.

She stood still in the middle of the wretched place, awed and terrified, she knew not why, yet instinctively conscious of the nearness of some tragedy.

'I was sent here,' she whispered to the woman near her, 'with five shillings for a girl, Clow, said to be in want or sickness.'

A murmur ran round the room. At her words, as if by common consent, the crowd of women drew aside, and through the clearance thus made Alison perceived a bed; and on the bed, its dismal occupant, the newly-dead, as yet untended, the staring eyes unclosed, the pallid hand clenched on the disordered covering. A woman, standing at the bed's head, still held to the parted lips the undimmed mirror.

Alison's vision swam; she sickened, but she saw—saw, upturned among the blankets, the gaunt, grey, sightless face; saw it—and knew it.

'Mysie!' she cried, shrinking back in utmost horror.

'Eh?' ejaculated several astonished voices; 'ye kent poor Mysie?'

But Alison felt the clammy sweat of faintness break out upon her flesh.

'Oh, let me go—let me out!' she gasped. 'I will speak to you upon the stair.'

The women crowded round her, questioning, muttering, explaining she knew not what. She got forth from the room at last, and found herself standing with the one woman upon the outer landing. The poor creature seemed decent enough. By some trick of likeness, she might have been, probably was, the dead woman's sister. She eyed Alison, not resentfully, but curiously.

'Are ye—are ye from *him*?' she asked.

'From whom?' said Alison, yet trembling, because she knew.

'Mysie was in trouble, ye ken,' the woman said, with a kind of weary dispassionateness. 'I thought that mebbe—' She paused, lifting her lustreless eyes to the fresh, unworn face of the girl before her, as though wondering how far she would be understood.

But ah! Alison understood. She remembered the walk with Mysie only too well—the scene before the house in St. James's Square—the poor creature's then mysterious words. What had, even so short a while ago, been hidden to Alison's innocence, was plain to her now. Knowledge of the wrong, and the passion, and the sin of the world was breaking over her heart like the dawn of a grey day. But it was a true woman's heart—full of pity and of strength to meet the sorrowful enlightenment.

'He—he has sent money,' she said, crimsoning with shame, and she slipped

the coins into the other's hand. The woman weighed them in her palm an instant, with a bitter smile.

'He's sent it, has he?' she said. 'Mebbe a wee thing late! Weel, he didna grudge it likely. They're tellin' me he was never the lad to grudge, and Mysie had but tae speir and he wad help her. But na, she wudna! She was a queer body, Mysie. She had a place, and she lost it (anent her trouble, ye see); and then she got the cauld trailin' the streets to get a sicht o' her jo, and she dwined and dwined.... Ay, it's a queer warld: and as you cam' chappin' at the door yonder, wi' his money in yer hand, the last breath had just but newly left her mooth.'

Alison, as she listened, was pale; her pulses fluttered to her deeply-moved, indignant sympathy. Inexperienced in sorrow, she knew not what to say, but her eyes filled, and the woman saw them, and drew her hand across her own eyes, dim with long watching.

'Ye will excuse us,' she said, with unconscious dignity. 'It wasna decent that ye sud see what ye saw. But I wasna mysel', and I thocht it was a neebor that chappit—a skilly woman we were waitin' on. I wudna have ye think,' she went on, wistfully, 'that we didna do the best we could for poor Mysie.'

'I know, I know,' whispered Alison, eagerly. 'And, oh! will you take this from me?' She pressed into the woman's hand her own little hoard.

'I thank ye, mem; I canna refuse it,' the poor creature said simply. 'For we'll be sair put to it for a decent burial.'

Alison turned to go, her eyes burning, her heart hot within her.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

One mastering thought gave Alison's feet wings as she neared the Potterrow on her return from the Wabster's Close. She would tell Nancy of this heart-moving, this pitiful, sad scene she had witnessed, and make it plain to her at whose door the greater guilt of it all lay. Then Nancy must see reason, must lift the veil from her eyes, acknowledge the wrong-doing of the man who could cause suffering so infinite, and see her own danger in submitting to his influence. Alison, in spite of much recently-acquired experience, was still, as the perspicacious reader will perceive, very simple.

Nancy was sitting writing when her messenger returned.

'Well, child,' she said, 'and did you find the wench and deliver our friend's

bounty?'

'Bounty!' cried Alison, throwing out her hands. 'She—she needs no bounty, Nancy. She's dead!'

Nancy started, then tapped her foot upon the floor impatiently.

'La, child,' she exclaimed, pettishly, 'how you frighten one!'

But Alison was in no mood to be put off with petulance or callousness. In quick words, faltering and broken—for her eyes were wet, and her quiet, reticent nature stirred to the rare point of passionate utterance—she told what she had seen of Mysie's end.

'And, oh, Nancy,' she whispered at last, on her knees at her friend's side, 'it was *his* doing. She was in trouble; it was *his* fault. She's dead—dead! and but for him she might have been alive and happy—honest at the least.'

But Nancy looked down at her face unmoved, with a little, hard smile.

'Accidents will happen,' she said coolly. 'We must all die, surely. Men will be men. To talk as you do is sheer hysterics. You are a child.'

'I am a woman!' cried Alison, 'and I see with a woman's eyes.'

'You ought to concede,' Nancy continued, unmoved, 'that our friend has acted by the lass as handsomely as anyone could expect. He sent money. I've reason to know he would have acknowledged her child had the silly wench but given him the chance. He's all generosity, kindness, warmth. Didn't I give you his very words this morning—"I'd wipe the tears from all eyes if I could"?'

'"Twould be far better, I think,' cried Alison, 'that he should try first to cause no tears to flow. I see no beauty, Nancy, in beautiful words when cruel, heedless acts go with them.'

Nancy shrugged her shoulders.

'You've no understanding of a poet, Ally,' she said, with a superior and pitying air. But Alison rose to her feet, feeling a sudden courage to say that which had long burned upon her tongue.

'Oh! Nancy, Nancy,' she cried, 'is it for *this* man that you—'

'That I *what*?' said Nancy, turning fiercely upon her friend.

'That you forget,' whispered Alison, stammeringly, 'forget that you are Willy and Danny's mother, and—and—a wife, Nancy!' From cheek to brow, from her neck to her very ears, Nancy turned scarlet at the words, and her eyes blazed with anger.

'How *dare* you, Alison Graham,' she said, 'how dare you say such words to me? *I* forget myself—I, who remember hourly that I am bound—bound by an iron chain to an odious fate? Ah, were I free!'—she clenched her little hands, and her whole tiny frame was shaken with the vehemence of her passion, 'were I free, should I be here?—and he—he, as he is—left to the machinations of the vulgar, and driven to demean himself with filthy peasants?' She had risen, and stood

over Alison, blazing with jealousy as well as rage—not jealousy of the luckless dead victim of the poet's passions, but, as it happened, of Jean Armour, of whose ascendency over the Bard she was mortally suspicious. But now she turned all the vials of her wrath on Alison.

'You, to misunderstand me!' she cried. 'You, whom I have trusted, to turn again and rend me! But you are like the rest of the world—evil-minded! You read wickedness when there is only the innocence and true nobility of great minds. You are incapable of understanding friendship. I despise and rise above your mean suspicions—they are unworthy of my thoughts. But if the viper I had cherished and nursed to warmth in my bosom had turned and stung me, I could not have been more pained!' Saying which, with a toss of her head and a fine rustle of petticoats, Nancy flounced out of the room, slamming the door behind her.

Poor Alison remained alone to chew the cud of this new development in her friend's mood as best she might. That Nancy should thus mount the virtuous high-horse took her inexperience totally by surprise. She conceived the figment of the 'friendship' to have long since been cast aside; but she was evidently wrong, it died a lingering death. The girl was hopelessly at sea; she began to doubt herself. Was she really evil-minded? Did she actually suspect evil where no evil was? Presently Nancy came back, her fit of anger gone, replaced by one of virtuous resignation. She kissed Alison sweetly on the cheek.

'I forgive you, Ally!' she said, with the most perfect air of injured innocence. 'You are young, you do not understand! You are influenced by the cruel world! I declare I think you've been too much with Herries lately in all these tiresome visits of his, and are become infected with his horrid narrow manner of thought. Ah! be my own sweet Ally again, and we shall not quarrel.' Alison submitted to the kiss and to the reconciliation in meek bewilderment, hardly now capable of aught else.

These were very sad days for Alison, for evidently Herries held himself aloof. What else, under her incriminating silence, could he do? She asked herself this, and found no answer. Yet she would listen for his footsteps on the stair, and scan the empty streets for his familiar figure—empty to her because she never met or saw him all these dreary days. One afternoon she sat alone in the little parlour—for Nancy, after a bad night, was lying down in her room. She was so deep in thought, sitting away by the little window, her hands idle over the work in her lap, that she heard nothing, and it was only when she suddenly turned round that she found her thoughts had taken visible form. Herries himself stood in the doorway.

For him, too, it was a supreme moment, because he put out his whole strength against his love, and for once love conquered. He had told himself he had not come to seek Alison, and had given himself the shallow pretext of bring-

ing his cousin's monthly money allowance. But now ... he closed the door, and in a minute his arms held Alison, and with a touch, half rough, half tender, he was pushing the darling curls from her white temples and kissing them. Yet even now they heard Nancy moving in her room, and knew they had not a moment.

'Alison,' whispered Herries, hoarsely, 'I wish to God you would go home. Go home, and I will say not another word, but come and ask you from your parents.' ... But Alison pushed him from her with her arms—him, and the terrible temptation of his words.

'I can't go home!' she said, and ran from the room, meeting Nancy, who entered.

'Well, cousin,' the latter exclaimed, with her own undaunted sprightliness, 'here's an unexpected honour! 'Tis some time since you visited this humble roof.' But Herries turned a moody look upon his relative.

'We have not come to an understanding yet on the subjects of my last visit,' he said grimly. 'But I daresay you know me too well to believe that I have been inactive in the matter. I have taken measures to prevent the visits of a certain unsuitable person to your house.'

'Indeed!' said Nancy, meekly, gathering up her forces for the fray, and rapidly coming to the conclusion that meekness would suit her best; if feeble as a weapon, it would at least be baffling to her adversary. Herries continued—

'If you have no sense of what is fitting or unfitting for a young woman in your peculiarly delicate circumstances, others must exercise it for you. That such a man as Burns should visit your house as an intimate is worse than unfitting—it is a slur upon your reputation. He is openly a profligate, and his *bonnes fortunes* with women everywhere are become a bye-word. If you cannot protect yourself against the danger of his society, you must be protected.' Nancy had cast down her eyes and looked the image of innocence.

'You are too much the master here, Archie,' she meekly said, 'and I and my poor infants are too directly dependent on your bounty for your word to be questioned. No doubt you are wise. If you have forbidden Mr. Burns my house, of course he will be forbidden.' Herries looked suspiciously at the smooth, downcast face of his cousin. He did not believe a word she said—he never did. But she baffled him.

'Have you no conscience,' he said angrily, 'that you have subjected to the influence of Mr. Burns a girl like that one yonder—your guest—an inexperienced young creature committed to your charge, and for whom you are responsible? Has no thought of her ever troubled you?' Nancy assumed a little troubled air of guilt, fidgeting with the fringes of her apron.

'La, Archie,' she said, 'poor Alison! Well, 'tis her sweet voice that has attracted the poet here, I may tell you that. And if she is—may be, for I've no

certain knowledge of it, mind you—a little smit, what harm? Girls love these soft sensations—'tis their life. But lud, Archie! fancy talking of such things to you,' and she gave a little amused laugh. Herries looked at her with a helpless dislike. His eyes were full of a dumb and angry pain that could not get itself spoken. He had always despised this little woman—an error of judgment, for such little women are full of power, and have swayed kingdoms in their day. Now, with callous little hands, she turned the dagger in his heart. Heavens! how she made him suffer—unconsciously, it was true, but he had a bitter feeling that the will was there.

'Is Miss Graham gone out?' he asked uneasily.

'La! cousin, I can't tell you,' said Nancy, carelessly. 'I daresay—she's often out. I can't keep a constant dragon's eye on a great girl like that. I'm no tyrant, and she has her liberties.' Herries turned away impatiently; there was nothing to be gained in remaining with his cousin but added uneasiness. He left her house a bitterly dissatisfied and anxious man.

CHAPTER XXXV.

Herries's homeward way led him past the house where his partner, Creighton, lay, now in the last stages of consumptive illness. He had been there very often of late, and, more than one night, had watched beside the sick-bed until morning. During the early stages of his illness, Mr. Creighton had always asked each day for Alison, and been well satisfied with the answers which Herries gave him. But latterly these kind and eager questionings had ceased, and in increasing fever and weakness the man was gradually losing touch with the things of this life. Yet there had been a rally only that morning and the day before. A forlorn hope sprang up in Herries's heart that his partner's sagacity might help him once again. He would tell him his trouble—he would unburden himself. Creighton was a long-headed, a shrewd man, and as secret as the grave towards which he was hastening.

Herries quickened his steps, and when he came to the stair he mounted it with a renewed energy in his gait. Before he reached the sick man's door he heard his voice—speaking out much more strongly than of late—and his hopes arose. Mr. Creighton was sitting up in bed, unimaginably gaunt and pale; a thin red colour made a patch on either sunk and waxen cheek, and his eyes were very

bright. But, alas! when they were turned on Herries there was no recognition in them, and his loud, eager talk was the mere babble of delirium. The names upon his lips were names that Herries had never heard; they were doubtless those of the man's home and youth so resolutely put behind him, so hopelessly divided from him by the yawning gulf of some bitter, early quarrel. A woman's name he uttered so often, and with such poignant meaning, that Herries, bending over him, asked again and yet again if she were not one who could be sent for. He could not know that the earth had covered her for thirty years in that parish graveyard, away among the Pentlands, where Creighton, one evening not long since, had craved his partner to see him buried. Now his unmeaning voice went on and on, monotonous, painful, terribly sad. Herries turned away at last in bitterest silence. Creighton's dog, that crouched upon the bed, half starved, growled at his footsteps as he crossed the floor.

Herries went out into the exquisite spring evening, but it brought him neither peace nor comfort. What to him were the crocus tints behind the looming castle masses? what to him the evening star that swam and shone there? In his heart were love, bitterness, and battle. Battle—for presently his enemy must return, might even now be returning, and then the tussle must begin. Herries was perfectly conscious that his letter to Robert Burns was a sheer challenge. How was he to enforce the order he had given? With what weapons could he fight a peasant? The duel would have been his remedy—easy and obvious—with an equal, but in those days men did not fight with churls. What combat of the kind was possible with a man who had never touched a sword or lifted a firearm in his life? Herries was full of fight—sharp-set, determined, coldly eager for the fray. You could see it in the steel-blue glitter of his eye, the scornful lift of eyebrow and dilation of the fine carved nostril. A game terrier, wiry with pluck, and bristling with defiance, matched against a mastiff. Such might have seemed to a sporting onlooker the chances of the fight. Alison, meanwhile, woman-like, had no excitement of a coming battle to make her forget her pain. She, too, thought of the enemy's return, but with a cold terror, feeble and helpless. In her little closet, all alone, she would lie and think, forcing the tears back into her heart.

And even then he was coming—he had come—that common enemy, riding up the crowded streets upon his borrowed nag in the broad light of the lengthening day. He had ridden all the way from Dumfries by easy stages, jolly stages, most rollickingly punctuated by the flowing bowl and much good company. Thus he came in by the town gate, riding boldly for all men to see, loose rein and roving eye, king of all hearts, commander of the blood of men. The people turned to look at him, and laughed for pleasure; some called aloud, 'Guid e'en t'ye, Robbie!' while others walked at his pony's shaggy shoulder and stretched eager hands upward for his grip. So, with half the town to welcome him, came Robert Burns back

to the Auld Reekie of his songs and sins.

Certainly Alison's lucky star was on the wane, for Mr. Creighton died that night, and died intestate. And so she had missed a fortune and lost a friend.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

Burns, on this occasion, had returned to Edinburgh in what was, for him, really rather a chastened mood. His absence had been on important business, and that business had progressed to such a degree that he felt himself on the verge of a great crisis in his life, and was well minded that it should be a crisis for good and not for evil. He had surveyed the farmlands in the exquisite valley of the Nith, and had made 'a poet's, not a farmer's choice' of Elliesland, where he intended to settle forthwith and turn farmer in serious earnest. Furthermore, an appointment in the Excise had been insured to him by the interest of powerful friends, and that was another practical, sensible, wage-earning feather in his cap. Of certain interesting domestic complications at Mauchline it hardly does to speak with any degree of knowledge or understanding, but there can be little question that, at this time, there loomed large in the poet's mind some idea of an arrangement with the patient, twin-bearing Jean, which should do some tardy justice to that long-suffering female.

It is fairly plain, in any case, that during his absence in the south, Sylvander had cooled considerably to his Clarinda. Not that he did not adore her still, in a proper poet's way, but he had begun to adore someone else, with practical ends in view. So matters with his fascinating little friend in the Potterrow must be brought to a pleasant conclusion. It would cause him more than a pang, but still, there must be an end to all things—the best of friends must part. He meant to remain in Edinburgh for a few days only, merely to wind up business matters with his publisher and pay a few visits of farewell. Then he would turn his back upon the capital of his triumphs and his disappointments, and turn over a new leaf in life and love.

This might have happened without further hindrance, and things have settled themselves comfortably to everybody's satisfaction (except, perhaps, Clarinda's), had it not been for Herries's most unlucky and misguided letter. This awaited the poet at his lodging, under a pile of correspondence accumulated for him by his henchman Nicol. This admiring attendant of genius also awaited the

arrival of Burns in his rooms, and the two spent a convivial evening of reunion. The Bard was already elevated enough in his spirits, owing to the festive nature of his journey, but it was with that kind of elevation which turns to querulousness at very slight provocation.

'Here's letters enough to last a body a lifetime,' he grumbled, turning over a pile of papers, where several missives of Clarinda's lay, still unopened, it is sad to state. 'Here's a packet from some unknown,' he added; 'thick paper, and a fine crest upon the seal.' He broke it open. As he read the few lines in Herries's upright, clear-cut writing, the blood rushed in purple to his face, and he started to his feet.

'Now, by all that's damnable, this is too much!' he shouted, his very eyes becoming bloodshot.

'Canny, lad, canny,' said Nicol, soothingly, accustomed to the poet in his cups. 'What's up now?'

But it was no mere vinous rage that held the Bard. He was touched in his tenderest and sorest points—his independence and his sense of social inferiority.

'Up?' he cried, 'up? Why, here's a miserable hound of a pettifogging lawyer—a wretched, thin-blooded, whey-faced whipper-snapper that I could crush to the wall wi' the one hand o' me—has the damned impudence to infringe upon my liberties and tell me that he forbids me Mrs. Maclehose's house!' He tossed the letter to his friend, who read it with a kindling eye. Unluckily, it was couched in terms precisely those to enrage Nicol also, not merely as a partisan, but because he acridly resented the tone and attitude of a superior.

'"Persons not of her station, or known to her immediate circle,"' he quoted with a sneer. 'And who is Master Herries that he writes so fine?'

'Am I not telling you?' cried Burns, irritably. 'A damned, pettifogging George Street writer, some cousin or guardian of my Clarinda, who, because he contributes a few paltry pence to the maintenance of her bairns, satisfies the miserable, half-inch soul of an unfeeling, cold-blooded, pitiful bigot by standing censor to everything she does that is above his dungeon bosom and foggy head! I've seen him but the once, but *I* know him! Ay, and I'll know him to some purpose now, be damned to him! Here, out of my light, man! Let me go—' He had seized a cudgel from a corner of the room and apparently meditated an instant adjournment to the lawyer's premises, so armed. But Nicol interceded.

'Wheesht, lad!' he urged. 'Steady a wee thing, now! Wait a bittie and see if we cannot forge some prettier mischief to Master Herries than a mere thrashing. That's like to be more of a scandal to you than to him. Trust him to have half-a-dozen lacqueys at his beck and call that would put you to the door or ever you could win by to the man. They know better, these lily-livered, dirty, skunking lawyer-bodies, than not to guard themselves well against honest men's anger.'

Burns paused. Nicol's counsels had generally some weight with him, more especially when, as at the present moment, after a merry afternoon, he was not perfectly certain of his actions.

'How'll I win at him? How will I touch him?' he said, flinging down the stick and frowning heavily.

'You've a full right to a pretty revenge,' said his friend; 'and surely you can't want of opportunity. The gate's open to you that gives you entry to the man's very hearth.'

'Ay, that's true,' said Burns, with a grin, as he thought of the cosy fireside in the Potterrow.

'Can't you make the fellow jealous?' said Nicol.

'If he had the passions of a buck-rabbit, weel could I!' said Burns, vindictively. 'For there's his lass—I caught him with her in the dark—and then, under his very nose, I had to pay her some particularity of attention in order to put him off the scent with my Clarinda. 'Tis that muckle lass you have some grudge against yourself.'

'Why, then,' cried Nicol, warming to congenial mischief, 'if we cannot brew a fine broth out of this bonny concatenation, the devil take us for silly, shiftless bodies! I'm none so loth, I can tell you, to have a fling at miss for all her haughty airs. You shall pretend to love her. Write to Master Lawyer; tell him you never dreamed to lift presumptuous eyes to his worship's exquisite relative, but are contented with her governante—or whatsoever the lass is. I'm thinking that will do our trick.'

'Eh?' said the poet, doubtfully. He was dazed with wine, and hardly understood the nature of that which was proposed to him. Nicol got the ink-pot, a sheet of paper, and a pen, which he thrust into his friend's somewhat unsteady hand.

'Write, now,' he began eagerly—'something in this style: "Honoured sir"—(letters in the third person are so damnably difficult to put, I can't away with them!)—"Honoured sir: I am in due receipt of your late favour, which hath awaited me at my lodging this long time in my absence on a journey. I crave your pardon for this delay in answering the same. I also crave your patience for offence given in the matter of my visits to the house of your honourable cousin, Mistress Maclehose. But sure, sir, you were not so mistaken, on the one occasion that we met there, as to confuse the object of my attention with any other. It was most assuredly not—as, sir, you might have seen—your honour's relative, who, in truth, is far above my sphere, but the young female abiding with her at this time. And I would humbly beg of your kindness not to interrupt this little affair of an honourable affection, which is like to be in a fair way to become reciprocal....'"

'"Reciprocal"!' said Burns, pausing, with a confused laugh. 'Man, but that's

a muckle lee! The lass hates me, sure's death—I know not why.'

'Then serve her right the more,' said Nicol, now bent upon mischief. He had a peculiar leaning to the coarse, practical joke, and was entirely callous to the sufferings of his victims in such cases, even had they done nothing to provoke his spite. The Bard looked yet a little doubtful, and bungled over the letter. Had he been perfectly sober, it is unlikely that he would have lent himself to a device so mean and cowardly. Actions of this kind were not natural to him by any means, for, at anyrate, where men were concerned, he was honest and straightforward in his dealings. But Nicol poured a stream of specious arguments into his buzzing ears; all was fair in love and war—and this was both—and all that his letter, at the worst, would lead to was a lover's quarrel, which would doubtless be patched up far sooner than the delinquents at all deserved. Thus cajoled, the poet finished and folded up the letter, and consented to its dispatch.

Then he fell to brooding over Herries's note again, and over that clearness came to him on one point at anyrate. For to this hot-blooded son of Adam the high-handed prohibition it contained was fuel added to his flame. He had all but virtuously resolved to cut matters short with his Clarinda; but now that resolution went to the four winds, and a very different one sprang into determination in its place. He scrawled a letter to the Potterrow, to which both wine and passion lent a warmth he had hardly yet dared to express. And Nicol sallied forth with both epistles—this time, in spite of the lateness of the hour, with no complaints.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

Mrs. Maclehose, on the following evening, stood in the window of her little room, lost in agitating thought. The poet's impassioned letter was in the bosom of her dress, and seemed to burn her, but with a delicious pain. At almost any other juncture of her commerce with the man it would have frightened her; for the little woman, in spite of her impetuosity, had some obscure element of the national caution in her nature. But now she was in a state when caution must give way to the fiercer and more primitive passions. For nearly three weeks now she had suffered a frenzy of jealous love, and during the absence of her friend, as she called him, was not only tortured with a longing for the sight of him, but also with horrible fears of his infidelity. She had pictured him as returned within the sphere of the influence of Jean Armour—a person she insisted upon regarding as

a low-minded, artful hussy with designs upon the Bard. License to almost any degree she would allow the man, whose nature she made allowances for with an amazing liberality; it was the idea of matrimony she dreaded with an anguish of jealous dread. But the poet's letter had brought ample reassurance: he was returned to his Clarinda, more in love with her—more impassioned, than when he went away. He implored for an interview that night, but it must be private. He had matters to discuss of the utmost importance, but they were for her ear alone. He conjured her, by all that was most sacred in love and friendship, to let no third person intrude upon the happiness of their first reunion. Well ... she would not tell Alison that he came, and Alison would go to bed: that was all. But then, the girl slept so light, and had an ear so sensitive ... she must, in that confined space, hear voices...? Nancy knit her soft brows, and behind them, her busy, tortuous little brain made plans.

Alison had been out of doors with Willy that afternoon, and returned somewhat late. It was a blustering spring evening, with a shrewd edge to the wind, and when the girl came into the parlour at the late tea-time there was an unquestionable redness about her eyelids. Alas! it was not the wind that smirched her fair good looks, but tears. For poor Alison, in these days, would cry a little, uncomforted, in her closet, choking back the tears.

'Why, Ally, you have got the cold!' said Nancy. 'I can see it in your eyes.' Alison turned quickly from the light.

'I never get the cold,' she said. But Nancy insisted, and harped upon the ailment—she was convinced that Alison had an influenza coming.

'When you go to bed, which I'd have you do early, love,' she said purringly, 'I'll give you something that will check the horrid thing. A few drops of *aqua vitæ* in water are infallible at an early stage.' Healthy Alison, who took no medicine stuff, would stoutly have rebelled at any other time, but now she was anxious to divert attention from her red eyes, and promised to take the remedy. When bedtime came, Nancy bade her undress and get into her bed and she would bring her the dose with her own hands.

She was away some little time in her own room, and Alison heard the clink of glass against glass as she prepared the decoction. Water had gone into it, and a few drops of the *aqua vitæ*, which turned the water into an opaque whiteness. And then Nancy had paused and looked round her with a guilty look. She took another bottle from the shelf beside her bed, and measured a portion of its contents into the half-full wine glass. It was her own sleeping draught—a half dose.

It must not for an instant be supposed that there was anything of the villain in Nancy's composition, or that she intended to do her friend the smallest injury. She well knew that the sleeping draught was of the mildest order—a perfectly harmless drug, as the physician had positively assured her. And she put in only

the half dose. Nevertheless, as she carried it into the girl's room, and gave it to her, it was with an averted look. She could not bear to meet Alison's eyes, and her little hand so shook that a part of the liquid was spilt upon the sheet. Then she hurriedly kissed her friend, put out the light, and left her.

Alison lay awake some time, for, upon perfectly healthy nerves, a sleeping draught will occasionally have the reverse of its intended effect. She seemed to get a headache and to become restless. She heard Nancy's movements in her room with peculiar distinctness, and supposed that her friend was preparing for bed. In reality, the deluded little woman was changing her dress from a common to a dainty one—adding, in every ribbon and coaxed trick of curl, to the danger that awaited her—moving furtively, with many a pause, to listen if Alison stirred, or Jean in the attic above. Then a kind of buzzing drowsiness came over Alison—disagreeable, because she seemed to want to fight against it. But it overcame her; and then for some hours she did certainly sleep, and much more heavily than was her wont.

When she awoke, it was with a confused, unpleasant feeling, and the sound of voices in her ears. The room was dark, but a line of light showed under the door. Alison sat up and listened. A curious, nightmare-like sense of danger was upon her, indefinably oppressive. Her ears were acute. She heard Nancy's voice, and a man's voice, unmistakably. Clearness came to her, though her temples throbbed and the drug she had been given buzzed in her head. She slipped to the floor, searched for, but could not find her shoes, groped for her wrapper, and threw it over her shoulders. She crept to the door and lifted the latch noiselessly.

The passage lamp was out, but the parlour was in a glow of brightness. The door had swung open with its old trick, and a stream of light came from it. In brilliant relief the little room and all it held stood out. And, in the circle of light, unconscious of all save each other, they stood—the tempter and the tempted. And behind Alison the big wag-at-the-wall clock, with a guilty twang, struck one.

One of Robert Burns's great labouring hands was clenched, and he leaned heavily on the table with it. Alison could see the veins in it throb and swell with the hot, ungovernable blood. His other arm held Nancy—Nancy, whose little trembling hands covered her face—and who turned, as Alison watched her, to hide it against the man's powerful shoulder. The poet's face was in shadow, for it was bent over the woman. He spoke, but his voice was low and thick; Alison could not catch the words.

She only looked at them a moment, just till the clock struck. Then they moved with a start, and she also moved forward, until she too stood in the circle of light. Petrified, the lovers saw her both at once,—staring, chapfallen, as though they beheld a spirit: only a girl, indeed, with bare feet, and in her nightgown, sleep still in her wide eyes and curls scattered on her shoulders, but hedged about

with the immutable dignity of innocence, and strong with the strength of right. She walked straight up to Nancy, and with a little jerk of effort took her into her own arms from the man's embrace, facing him boldly.

'It is too late for visitors here, sir,' she said simply. 'Mrs. Maclehose would have you go.'

The poet's arms dropped to his side and his jaw fell. His sun-browned face had become quite pale, and the words which stammered on his lips would not get themselves spoken. When he moved it was to fumble for his hat. Then he made for the door, without a look or word for those he left; and it might be said that he slunk, then and there, from the room and from the house.

Nancy had slipped from Alison's arms and lay on the floor in a little huddled heap, moaning. Alison tried to raise her, but she would not rise.

'Come, Nancy, come to bed,' whispered the girl. 'You are cold—you are shaking.' She lifted her, and then Nancy stood up, staring round her with miserable, unseeing eyes—deadly pale, and utterly dishevelled.

'I—I slipped,' she said, in a curious dazed way. 'I—slipped—and nearly fell, Ally.'

'Here's my hand,' said Alison. And then, half leading and half carrying her, the girl took the wretched little woman to her bed.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

Alison watched all night long beside her friend. Nancy never let go her hand, but lay holding it, at first in a kind of wretched stupor, staring straight before her, with dry, miserable eyes; then in a sort of palsy of convulsive shivering, and at last in a fit of hysterical weeping, so violent that it seemed to tear her little frame to pieces. Alison soothed and comforted her as best she could, but at first neither peace nor comfort came. The girl's own thoughts were full of bewilderment. Here, in truth, was love—a creature shaken by it through all the innermost places of her being. Alison, too, loved—but then, how differently! Was it the same passion—this, that destroyed her friend, and that which raised her own soul to heights never dreamed of before she had known Herries? Presently Nancy fell into the light doze of sheer exhaustion, and Alison was able to go and dress herself.

But her troubles were by no means over, for Nancy awoke to a plight most

piteous—a mental condition almost impossible to cope with. Like one, who, saved from some horrible fate by accident or misadventure, is haunted by phantasmal death in every form, so Nancy, with the tremendous recoil of every natural womanly feeling, beheld herself, again and yet again, on the verge of the great and terrible abyss from which she had been so narrowly and so barely saved. Her mind clung now, with the painful obstinacy and insistence of hysteria, to every symbol and outward sign of safety. Could these stumbling steps of hers be hid? Could she resume, before the men and women of her world, the steady gait of blameless womanhood? With words that harrowed Alison's very soul, she protested her actual innocence, while she bemoaned the folly that had made her risk her reputation. Oh, she had been mad—blind—headstrong! She saw it all now.

'All my life, Ally,' she said, her sweet voice roughened with long crying—'all my life I've been guided by the impulse of the moment. My passion has done what it will with me, and now it has undone me utterly.' Then she fell to harping on the theme of secrecy. Was there anyone who would betray her? How much did Jean know, and did she gossip? And Alison—Alison, who knew all—oh, was she sure of herself? Would she never—never by word, or look, or sign—betray her friend?

'Will you swear to me, Ally, that you'll never tell?' cried Nancy, raising herself in bed. 'I'd be easier if you'd swear upon the Bible never to betray me!'

'Nay,' said Alison, proudly, 'I'll not swear. Have I ever lied to you that you should ask an oath? But I'll promise you, Nancy, by all you've been to me, and done for me, that no word of mine shall ever tell your secret to any human being.' Nancy sank back among her pillows with a sigh of relief.

'Then I'm safe,' she said, 'for *he* will never betray me; to kiss and tell is not his nature. He is all the noblest generosity! Don't think my love is dead, Ally,' she added in something of her old tones. 'It lives, and it will live, purified. I'll tear the earthly part of it from my heart, and live in hopes that we may meet in heaven!' Soothed by this interesting and sanguine reflection, Nancy grew calmer. She took a little of her sleeping medicine, and Alison was just beginning to look forward to an hour of peace, when she awoke with a scream. 'Oh, God!' she cried aloud, 'my key!'

'Hush, Nancy; Jean will hear you,' said Alison, patiently. 'What key?'

'My key,' reiterated Nancy, working herself up into a passion of terror; 'my house key. Oh! fool that I was! I gave it to him in all innocence: it was before your own eyes, Alison, and only to save Jean when she was throng. It has an ivory label to it, with my name and the street's name, and if it is found with him I am undone—undone!' She twined her fingers in her hair and would have torn it but that Alison held her hands. Alison herself looked blank enough; the

matter of the key struck her as a bad business, incriminating evidence enough in the hands of such a man as Burns—careless, if he was not malicious, and, like all men, leaving things about. 'Ally, as you love me, you must go and get it from him!' said Nancy; 'I'll not trust the matter upon paper. I must have a messenger, and that messenger must be you.'

'Nay, but that's too much!' cried Alison, turning white.

'Too much?' said Nancy, piteously. 'Too much to save your friend whom you have promised to save? Oh, Ally, pity me—pity me—and go!' She put up her trembling arms and caught Alison about the neck, clinging to her.

'If I go,' said poor Alison, desperately, 'will you promise me one thing, Nancy—never, never to send me on another message to this man?'

'Never! I swear!' cried Nancy. 'Oh, Ally, I've been wrong to do it so often, most hideously selfish and wrong so to have used your good-nature. But you'll forgive me, for I knew not what I did!'

Alison met the inevitable with a kind of cold, white calm. Her very flesh shrank from the thought of meeting Burns, of being near him and breathing the same air. Now she must not only go to his house, but in all probability enter it, doing that which, to anyone not acquainted with the intricacies of the affair and her own obscure part in it, was, on the face of it, open to the gravest misconstruction. Should Herries know of it—what then? But a kind of despair had come to Alison on this point. She must do what she had to do; it was all a ghastly mistake, a growing and intolerable injustice, but she must blunder on with it now. She was the same Alison, and in the same mood, who had desperately promised in Jacky's twilight nursery, weeks ago, to marry Mr. Cheape because duty drove her to it, and she saw no other way.

It was agreed that she should wait till nearly dusk before setting out, and it was, perhaps, five or six o'clock before she left the house. She hurried through the familiar streets, choosing the obscurer ones, and keeping in the shadow—haunted by a sense of the guilt which was not hers. She stood at last before the odiously familiar door in St. James's Square, and knocked. It was opened to her by Nicol, and Alison's flesh crept, for she loathed the man, and feared him now—she knew not why.

'Is Mr. Burns within?' she asked in a low voice. Nicol looked her up and down with an indescribable insolence.

'No, mistress,' he said, 'he's not.'

'Will he be in soon?' Alison forced herself to ask.

'Are you that anxious to see him?' said Nicol, with a leer. Alison drew herself up, with a passionate scorn, though she trembled in every limb.

'I have important business with Mr. Burns,' she faltered, 'and desire an interview.'

'Ay, oh, ay, I understand!' said Nicol. 'Well, mistress, come in and wait. Rob's door is never closed to bonny lasses.' He held the door wide. Behind his uncouth figure opened a vista of dingy passage, ending in a stair. Alison hesitated, half drew back; to cross that threshold was horrible to her; it seemed to put her in the power of men—of bad men. She held her hand to her heart—it fluttered so—and cast a longing look down the empty street. Oh, for some help! But no help came.

'If there is some room where I could wait—alone' ... she began, with an unlucky inflection on the last word, which Nicol's ear caught, and bitterly resented.

'Oh, ay, there's a room where you can be private,' answered Nicol, with suspicious blandness. 'Come up the stair.' He led the way, and Alison followed in the close, malodorous darkness.

Burns occupied two rooms on the first floor of the house, a parlour and sleeping-closet communicating. It was into the former of these that Nicol ushered Alison—a disorderly and ill-kept room, with a bottle and glasses on the table, and articles of a man's wearing apparel strewn about upon the chairs and floor.

'"Tis no room for a fine miss like you,' said Nicol, with dangerous politeness. 'I'll take it upon myself to usher you into our sanctum sanctorum—'tis more genteel.'

'But if this is the parlour,' said Alison, looking round her nervously, and perhaps beginning a little to lose her head, 'if this is the parlour, had I not better remain here?'

'No, no,' said Nicol, speciously, 'we have the other—much more private. Here anyone may come at any moment, you see, and if your business is private—' It was a touch of devilish cunning, for terror seized Alison at the thought of an intrusion.

'If, then, you think it wiser—' she said, looking about her with startled eyes.

'Ay, come away—much wiser'—said Nicol. 'See here!' He held open the door of the inner room—its only entrance—and Alison walked in. The moment her feet were over the threshold, Nicol slammed-to the door upon her, and locked it with a loud report.

'There, my bonny bird!' he called, his grinning mouth to the panel; 'we've got you safe and sound! Are ye "alone" enough in there for your taste? 'Od, it's there you'll bide till Rob comes hame and lets ye out!' He exploded in a fit of laughter; here was a piece of horse-play after his own heart.

Stunned and stupid, Alison had tottered a few steps into the inner room. A bed in the corner, unmade since the morning, showed that it was the poet's

sleeping chamber. And she was trapped beyond all possibility of escape.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

The letter which Nicol had conveyed from Burns to Herries lay unopened at the office of the latter for a matter of about, perhaps, thirty-six hours. Delivered very late in the evening, it was not conveyed to Herries that night, because he had already retired. In the early morning hours he was summoned to the death-bed of his partner, and he only returned from that melancholy scene in order, after a hurried meal, to set off to a remote village in the Pentlands, where, under an engagement with the dead man, he must make arrangements for the funeral. Returning at night, dog-tired, after many hours spent in the saddle (for it had been necessary to go on horseback), he had not then attempted to examine his correspondence. But the first letter that he opened in the morning was that from St. James's Square.

He sat still after its perusal—stunned. The morning sun streamed in through the three long windows of his fine room, and found him, perhaps on hour later, still sitting motionless, the letter in his hand. The anguish of surprise was not his, for, after all, the letter contained mere confirmation of long-latent suspicion. But it came as a fearful blow nevertheless. Here was a man who had expected little of men and women, but he had got less than he expected after all. He had believed that he had cherished no illusions, and dreamed no dreams; but the modest hopes that he had allowed himself to entertain of faith in one human being, whom he loved, were dashed. The cynic's disgust, as well as the man's heart-wrung sorrow, was his portion.

Yet Herries was a lawyer, keen of vision, and trained in the detection of deceit, and to him that letter actually did smack false at the first reading, and afterwards also. He had heard much, as was inevitable, of the sturdy independence of the peasant poet; certainly this letter was not the letter of such a man. It was a suspiciously subservient, an actually cringing letter, and in every line rang false. Yet Herries knew, and recognised at once, the poet's handwriting; for Burns's letters at that day were often handed round the town as curiosities, and the young lawyer had seen at least a score. A certain wearied languor had come over Herries, numbing his faculties, so that in this matter they had almost ceased to serve him. He told himself that his love was dead—nipped by this long

frost of cold suspicion, and ruined forever by this base association with men and ways unclean and devious. Yet he was a just man, and he would not condemn Alison unheard. He had already given her the chance of explanation and defence; he would give it her again. He would seek her out, and he would confront her with the letter—ask her if it were true or false. He would make her speak; and those grave lips that he had kissed so often: those candid eyes—that indescribably childlike wide innocence of brow that had been Alison's charm, rather than and (to him) beyond all beauty—well, he should learn once for all if they lied, and were only the fair outer covering of deceit and blackness. It was impossible that he could be absent again during office hours, for the previous day had been a blank one, and the pressure of the accumulated work of the past weeks was becoming daily more unendurable. But in the evening he would go to the Potterrow, and put an end to the mysteries that destroyed his peace.

He set out, accordingly, after he had dined. It was a damp, windy night, with heavy rain-clouds hurrying from the west. Hardly an hour before him Alison had trod those pavements, her face set to the New Town, trying to hide herself as she went. Herries walked with his head held high, conning over the stringent things that he should say in the coming interview, yet striving also that he should be just and calm. Jean opened to him with a glum face. Well did the honest servant know that things were going wrong. Her sympathies were all with Alison.

'I have business with Miss Graham,' said Herries. 'Can I see her?'

'I doot no, sir,' said Jean. 'The young leddy is from home, and the mistress ill in her bed.'

'I will come in and wait,' said Herries; 'but do not you disturb your mistress—it is not necessary.' He felt a repugnance to seeing his cousin; more lies, he told himself, and impotent anger on his own part, would be the only result.

He walked into the parlour. The little room had an ominously neglected and inhospitable air; the fire was nearly out, and the hard, lingering light of the spring evening showed up all the shabbinesses of the little nest, so kindly hid in the cosy winter hours. Herries threw himself into a chair, prepared to wait. Half-an-hour dragged by and no one came. The demon of restlessness got him, and he began to pace the room. He thought he would see Nancy after all, and called Jean.

'Ask my cousin if she can see me,' he said, and at the same moment Nancy's voice called to him faintly from her room. He entered it.

The invalid lay against a pile of pillows, in her pink wrapper, looking, indeed, merely the ghost of herself. Her cheeks were pallid, her dark eyes ringed, the lines upon her face were visibly deepened.

'Why, Nancy, I find you an invalid!' said Herries, in astonishment. 'I fear I intrude; but my business is with Miss Graham to-night, and if you can tell me where she is gone, or when she is likely to return, I will not disturb you a moment longer.'

Nancy trembled, for all the terrors of discovery beset her. The courage to answer her cousin coherently was not in her; her quivering lips would hardly form her words.

'Ally is—is gone out,' she murmured. 'She did not tell me where. A walk with Willy is her custom at this hour, and—'

'It is past seven o'clock,' said Herries, impatiently, 'and Willy is in the kitchen with his books.' He frowned, and his eyes, full of freshly-roused suspicion, searched Nancy's face. But a man cannot bully a sick woman in her bed.

'I shall wait for Miss Graham,' he said shortly, as he turned on his heel, 'if need be, till midnight.' He returned to the parlour, where Jean had lit a candle, and continued his watch. Nancy, on her bed, tossed to and fro, a prey to perfect agony of mind. It was more than two hours since Alison had left the house. What had become of her? Here was Herries on the trail of some discovery. The wretched little woman saw herself upon the brink of ruin. She rolled over on her face, biting the sheet between her chattering teeth, stiff and cold, and in a kind of rigour.

In a rage of obstinacy, Herries waited on. The wag-at-the-wall clock struck eight—the half-hour—then nine. He started up, and went to the servant in her kitchen.

'Jean,' he said, and his voice had a curiously unnatural sound, 'I cannot get from your mistress where Miss Graham is gone. Can you tell me?' The woman hesitated, and then spoke out, bursting, indeed, with a sense of Alison's wrongs, though about, alas! only to add to them.

'Gone?' she said. 'Weel ken I whar she's gone! Just where she's been too often, sir, though I say it that am but a sairvant—'

'Take care what you do say,' said Herries, sternly. 'I have ears for no idle gossip. Where did she go?'

'To Burns's lodging, sir,' said Jean, setting fire to a long trail, 'and, sir—'

'That's enough,' said Herries. His voice was quiet, but his action was like lightning, and, before the slow-moving Scotchwoman could put out a hand to stop him, or utter another word, he was out upon the stair and in the street, making for St. James's Square as though the devil were after him.

His haste undid him. Had he waited but a moment more, the flood-gates of Jean's confidence would have been opened wide, and from the honest creature's lips he would have learnt, if not the whole truth, yet enough to light him to the

rest. But that was not to be.

CHAPTER XL.

There is no ground for supposing that during his Edinburgh sojourn, Robert Burns succumbed to those habits of intemperance which afterwards destroyed him. It was an age of drink, and he no doubt drank, as did nearly all his contemporaries, immoderately at times. But there is much to show that in these days he was sober in his habits, for the most part, and no record whatever that he disgraced himself by conspicuous over-indulgence. The end of his visit, however, was inevitably a time of trial in this respect. There were farewell visits to be paid to many a roystering character and tavern companion; and the nature of such farewells can easily be imagined, along with their result. On the day succeeding his last visit to the Potterrow, Burns drank heavily, impelled thereto by impulses less agreeable than those of mere good-fellowship. When he turned into his lodging, which he did only a few minutes before Herries reached the door, he was very drunk indeed.

He stumbled upstairs to the parlour. Nicol was there, and made him some excited communication, pointing to the inner door. But the festive condition of the Bard made him hopelessly dense to oral instruction. He had not a notion what his excited friend was talking about.

'Man, pull yourself together,' cried Nicol, eagerly, hearing a knock from below, and running to the window. 'As I'm alive, here's our cock o' the walk seeking his bonny hen.'

'Who?' said the poet, confusedly.

'Herries, man, Herries!' shouted Nicol, slapping his thigh. 'The little lawyer body ye were to lick. Wheesht! here he comes.'

'My enemy!' said the Bard, grandiloquently, with a dim feeling that a great occasion was upon him. He half-sat, half-propped himself upon the corner of the table, with arms folded across his chest. He was ruddy with wine; his jet black hair was spread upon his brow; in the fine blue and buff of his best suit, with his magnificent shoulders, his grand head and lowering eye—it was impossible to deny, drunken though he was, the splendour of his presence. To him, thus, and to Nicol, was ushered Herries, white with anger, and a terrible vital excitement.

Herries walked straight to the figure on the table.

'Where—where is she?' he said, but he was hardly audible, for his throat was parched. The poet lurched a little, but steadied himself with an inimitable air of tipsy gravity.

'Speak up, ma billy!' he said. 'I'm dull the day.'

'I ask you—and you know it—where is Miss Graham?' said Herries, with clenching hands.

The poet cocked an eyebrow.

'Nae man speirs at me for glaikit lasses,' he observed virtuously; 'you are come to the wrong shop.'

Nicol burst into a coarse guffaw.

'Nay, sir,' he said, 'you are come right enough, though Rob, here, is too modest to admit it. We hae your bonny bird safe and sound.... Here, mistress, come out now! there's ain to fetch you—' He flung open the bedroom door, close to which he had stood, with his hand upon the lock, since Herries's entry. And out of the dark room into the light one walked Alison Graham.

Her face, her neck, her very hands, were white: they were drenched with whiteness, so that she seemed more dead than alive; and the lines of her face were drawn so deep, that it had suddenly lost the roundness and the air of youth. Her wild eyes went from face to face with a hunted look; the light hurt them, and she raised her hand, but it fell powerless, while her look riveted itself at last on her lover.

'Alison!' said Herries. 'How ... how ...' But he could not speak. Yet justice should be hers—that thought printed itself in fiery letters on his reeling brain. Here—no matter that it was before these men, before them or before the world—he would ask her why she stood there, and let her clear herself if she could.

'Alison,' he said, going close up to her, 'whose shame is this—yours or another's?'

Alison's eyes looked round the room in a vain search for help. They fell on Nicol, who, crassly ignorant of the real circumstances of her case, could hardly have helped her, and certainly would not if he could. They fell on Burns, but Burns was drunk, and had he been sober, must sooner have protected the woman he had nearly ruined than helpless Alison. Alison's eyes fell to the ground, and all the long struggle of the past weeks concentrated itself in the anguish of one moment's swift decision. Her happiness, or Nancy's honour—which?

Her chin sank upon her breast: she seemed to shrink—the image of shame.

'I ... I have deceived you, sir,' she stammered, with lips that scarcely moved.

It was the truth, but so little of it, and so hopelessly perverted! Alison raised her eyes to her lover's face, and he should have read the real truth in them, but he was blind.

'That's enough,' was all he said. 'I have asked and you have answered. On

your own head be it!'

For a few seconds no one moved in the dead silence. The poet, half asleep, with his chin upon his chest, lurched and swayed, now one way, and now another. Herries's eyes flamed, as they looked at him, with the cold flame of disgust and hate.

'Your host is drunk,' he said to Alison, almost cavalierly. He had become icily cool, and the crisp tones of his business manner came to him, as though he stood in his own orderly office with a client in front of him. 'I cannot leave you here, you understand,' he continued, addressing her; 'you are in my relative's care, and I am her representative. You must leave this house—for the present, at least—and leave it with me.' He went to the door, and opened it, with a gesture that seemed to command rather than to solicit her exit. No one interfered, not even Nicol moved or spoke. With bowed head, Alison walked slowly from the room. And as she did so, the swaying figure of Burns, supine, fell prostrate on the table in a drunken sleep.

Out of doors it was raining, pouring with rain out of the black night sky. Neither Alison nor her companion could shelter themselves, and the gusty wind blew in their bent faces as they struggled along. A link-boy's torch flashed at the corner of the square, and at the end of Princes Street there was a pack of chairmen sheltering under a wall, for it was an Assembly night.

'I will see you under shelter and in safety,' said Herries, speaking for the first time. 'But after that I can never willingly see your face again. Do you understand?' He had to raise his voice against the wind and the hiss and patter of the rain.

'I understand,' said Alison; 'I expected nothing else,' she added proudly. Yet the pride was for him, not herself. *He* take that which was smirched and spoiled? Not a fair one, but the fairest of all, must be his, and how could she ever be fairest again—even though Herries should know all—stained to the soul as she felt, after those destroying, those damning hours in the squalid chamber of a libertine? It would be a relief, she thought, to part. Oh, let him go! let him go!

He called a chair and handed her into it, punctiliously instructing and paying the chairman. How it stabbed Alison that he should do this now. How often, in the happy dealings of a man with a girlish guest, he had paid such little sums on her behalf. But all that was over and done with. And in the pelting rain, and in the dark, wordless they parted.

Alison felt in her pocket for Nancy's key. At least she had that and her friend should be safe. She had seen it among a lot of untidy litter on a table in her prison, and had had the sense and courage to take it. That must be her reward.

* * * * *

At midnight, a white figure stood at Nancy's bedside. It was Alison, with a light in her hand. After a brief and curiously dry account of her adventure on her return home, she had gone to her room, but it was not to sleep.

'Nancy,' she now said, 'I'm going home!' Nancy sat up in her bed.

'Home, child?' she cried. 'What do you mean? Oh—no—no! You'd never leave me in my misery! You are frightened and upset. 'Twas an odious adventure—some trick of that beast Nicol. But to-morrow you'll be yourself again, Ally—my strength and comfort—my only one!'

'I got you the key,' said Alison, doggedly. 'I—I have done what I could. But now I'm going home, and you must not prevent me.'

Nancy burst into tears.

'Oh—Ally!' she sobbed, 'there's something between us!'

'Yes,' said Alison, dully, 'there's something between me and all the world from to-day. But I'll go home and hide myself—and forget. You'll not rise, Nancy,' she went on, 'for I've been to Jean and she will help me away. The coach goes at five—to-morrow is the day for it, you know, and I could not wait another week. I'll come in and say good-bye before I go.' Nancy turned her face to the wall, and sobbed and wept. But Alison's eyes were dry.

A few hours later she stood in Nancy's room again, in the grey dawn, hooded and cloaked for her journey. But her little friend had drugged herself into a deep sleep, and Alison did not wake her. In one of her tiny hands—the hand that had loaded Alison with easy kindness and covered her with a blame and shame not hers—was clasped the unlucky key. She breathed deeply and peacefully with parted lips—those lips made for laughter and for love—the swollen eyelids fringed and closed, the dark hair scattered on the pillow. Alison stood and looked at her long, without resentment, without love, without feeling of any kind, for feeling was numb with her now. Then she turned away, and went and kissed Willy in his sleep. And there were no other farewells.

'I doubt you are leaving us in trouble, Miss Ally!' said kindly Jean. She stood at the coach door—the March wind scattering the scanty locks upon her rough, broad forehead—loth to part from the young lady she had liked and served through all these winter weeks.

'Yes, Jean,' said Alison, sadly,' good-bye.'

'But, oo—it'll a' win richt i' the end?' said the cheerful woman, tentatively.

'No—never!' answered Alison, with the tremendous finality of youth.

The horn sounded, the whip cracked, and the lumbering vehicle lurched

on its way. And so Alison went back to The Mains.

CHAPTER XLI.

It might have been about eight o'clock the next morning when Lizzie, the old housekeeper in George Street, thrust her head in at her master's door.

'Maircy me!' she exclaimed, and there was some cause for her wonder in the sight, at that hour, of candles burning in the broad day, and Herries at his desk, where, indeed, he had been all night.

Sleep had left him and thought had become intolerable. With an effort almost superhuman he had determined to lose himself in the technicalities of his work, and he had done it. But he now looked, with bloodshot eyes, his tumbled linen and disordered hair, the living image of dissipation rather than business. Lizzie eyed him most suspiciously. He never drank, but the censorious old woman believed he had been drinking.

'The Lord be gude to us!' she ejaculated, 'what's wrang? Wastin' waxen candles this gait!' And she blew them out, and snuffed them with her fingers. 'You're wanted,' she went on. 'There's a lad frae Creighton's wi' a message express. Ye maun gang there at aince anent the dog.'

'What about the dog?' said Herries.

'Weel,' said Lizzie, 'as far as I can get it frae the lad, the tyke is turned upon them all, and aye he sits girning by the corp, and they canna get it coffined. They're for you to gang and fleech him awa', or somethin' that gait.'

'I will come,' said Herries.

Creighton's unfortunate canine companion had given some trouble already, which Herries had not grudged. Within the hour of his master's death, when it was necessary that the last offices should be done, Herries had coaxed the poor starving brute from his post upon the bed, tempting him with a piece of meat. But no sooner was the morsel swallowed than the creature ran back to the room of death, and scratching at the door, pushed in and leapt upon the bed. Nothing had since dislodged him, and Herries had ordered him to be left in peace—a solitary mourner. It had been a mistaken kindness, for thirst had probably now turned the beast rabid. Herries took a pistol out of its case, and primed and loaded it. For Dick there could only be the kindly ultimatum of a bullet.

He went straight to Mr. Creighton's lodgings. It was the same March morn-

ing, windy, but now fair, which was seeing Alison on her sad way home. The wind cut him like a knife, though it was not really cold. He had eaten nothing for many hours, and a wretchedness of spirit was upon him, beyond anything that he had deemed it possible he could know.

In Creighton's room the coffin stood upon its trestles, and stiff and still, beneath the sheet upon the bed, lay its belated occupant. At the starkly upturned feet crouched the terrier, his red eyes glowing like cinders, at every slightest sound or movement drawing his lips back from his teeth in a rabid snarl. Herries approached him, with a half hope the dog would know him and be pacified, but the brute would have sprung at him in a moment. He drew back sufficiently far to take a deliberate and steady aim.

The shot rang out with terrific reverberation within the narrow, echoing limits of the empty room, which filled instantly with a blue and pungent smoke. When that cleared off, Herries perceived the dog had hardly moved, arrested in his crouching attitude by swift death. Presently a single scarlet trickle from behind his ear stained the whiteness of his master's shroud, his fierce eye dimmed and glazed, and his bristling body stiffened as it lay.

Herries, the smoking pistol in his hand, stood still a moment—in his disordered dress, and with his pale, set face and bloodshot eyes, a singularly haunting image of the suicide. But just as some men, too strong to swoon, must bear a physical agony to its last limit, so to Herries, with the accurately-balanced character of his intellect and his temper, the impulse of self-destruction could never come. He must bear, he would overcome: the iron will survived; the brain, active and restless, keen and clear, worked on—a finely-regulated mechanism. But his heart was empty, and from that moment he closed its portals on the world.

* * * * *

CHAPTER XLII.

Time, who is the great healer, does his work with admirable celerity for some. By the spring of that year, though there came to her in the early weeks of April the astounding news of Burns's marriage to Jean Armour, Mrs. Maclehose had resumed the peaceful tenor of her blameless existence as a cruelly deserted wife and anxious mother. This little vessel, so lightly rigged, so fairy-like, with sails and

pennants spread for none but summer breezes, had encountered rough weather, but had survived with wonderfully little hurt. Helmsman and pilot, perchance, had suffered, and an honest seaman or so gone by the board; but the spirit of the little ship, undaunted, rode lightly on the calm. The little Edinburgh world of Mrs. Maclehose's acquaintances observed with edification her devotion to her delicate youngest boy. She, indeed, moved herself and her small household to Prestonpans for a season, where he lay. In the August of that year little Danny died, and it may be said most truthfully that no child ever winged his way from earth to heaven from tenderer maternal arms.

For all the rest of Nancy's doings are they not written in more books than one, so that he who runs may read? It is to be conjectured that her relations with her cousin became tacitly somewhat strained after the events recorded in this history, although there was no open quarrel. It seems probable that Herries, after Danny's death, and in the hardness of heart which grew upon him at this time, withdrew the superfluities, at anyrate, of the monetary assistance he had been in the habit of conveying to his relative.

This may have been one of the contributing causes to the curious impulse which, about the autumn of the year '91, moved Nancy to think of rejoining her long-lost husband, and induced her to undertake a voyage to the West Indies with that laudable end in view. The journey was not a success. She, indeed, found Mr. Maclehose with little difficulty, but she found along with him the partner of his exile, a swarthy lady of those climes, with a numerous coffee-colored progeny. And this discovery so shocked the moral sensibilities of the little lady, who had regarded with a lenient eye the amorous delinquencies of her Sylvander, that she incontinently fled the marital premises, and returned to Leith in the same vessel that had brought her out. The most remarkable feature of this episode is the fact that Robert Burns, although at this time nearly three years married, did indubitably come to Edinburgh to seek a farewell interview with his Clarinda. How they two met, with what feelings, with what memories, who shall be bold enough to say? The world, at least, became infinitely the richer for this parting and for poor Clarinda's absence. For the poet's soul was stirred, and soon fine Edinburgh ladies at the harp and spinet, and country lasses at their milking, were singing, to its melting air,—

'Now in her green mantle blythe Nature arrays,
And listens the lambkins that bleat o'er the braes,
While birds warble welcome in ilka green show,
But to me it's delightless—my Nannie's awa'.

The snaw-drap and primrose our woodlands adorn,

And violets bathe in the weet o' the morn;
They pain my sad bosom, sae sweetly they blow,
They mind me o' Nannie—and Nannie's awa'.

Thou lav'rock that springs frae the dews o' the lawn,
The shepherd to warn o' the grey-breaking dawn;
And thou mellow mavis that hails the night-fa'
Give over for pity—my Nannie's awa'.'

And also of this curious farewell were born those lines in which is reached, perhaps, the very topmost summit of the lyrical genius of Burns—those lines which are the epitome of all love-tragedy—of all hopeless passion—of all parting woe. And these shall the painstaking reader, who toils to the end of this history, read on the last page for his reward.

Sylvander and Clarinda continued to correspond with considerable desultoriness during the few years of life that remained to the Rhymer, and sad to state, in these communications there is to be traced a very decided recriminative tartness, which is a blow to the ingenuous and sentimental reader. So sputtered out, in rather fiery sparks—as, indeed, is the too common wont of such—one of the most curious of the world's classic flirtations.

Mrs. Maclehose lived to a great age, becoming a most *espièg*le and charming old lady—the centre of a large and admiring acquaintance. Years after the poet's death, when all danger was over, and passion, too, dead, it was her chief boast, her 'meed of fame,' to figure as Burns's 'Clarinda.' She kept, and would exhibit, many little souvenirs of the Bard, and on all matters pertaining to the history of his Edinburgh visits, she was for many years the greatest living authority. She publicly and impartially would maintain till the last that the poet's marriage with a peasant was the greatest mistake of his life, dragging him down to a low level, intellectually as well as socially; whereas with higher companionship he might have risen to heights incalculably nobler, both of prosperity and of fame. To her dying day she expressed a pious wish that she might meet in heaven the Bard whose soul she felt that she alone had understood as it deserved in the imperfect communionship of earth. All things considered, the hope of meeting in quite another quarter might have seemed more justifiable. But so—exit our charming Nancy from these veracious pages.

To Herries, meanwhile, in his house in George Street, these years brought solitary success and lonely gain. He set himself to his work with an iron determination to forget the past, and it seemed that he succeeded. To him Alison Graham was dead, as truly dead as though she lay in yonder graveyard under the shadow of the Castle rock, with a great stone to weight her down until the Judg-

ment Day. He never thought of her at all. He never pictured his room now as a drawing-room, with gracious feminine appurtenances; it was the office, pure and simple. In Creighton's room below worked his new partner, a young and stirring man. The business extended itself in all directions and flourished like a miracle. Some of the most resounding names in Scotland figured on the green tin boxes, in their yearly increasing phalanx, in Herries's room. He had the name of a hard man, and was, no doubt, rather feared than loved. But so he willed it—for he had had enough of love. Round him, in these busy years, grew wider and yet wider the gallant New Town of Edinburgh—curving into crescents, and widening into squares and handsome residential streets. More and more, the genteel world gravitated to this quarter, and left the Old Town to the squalor of decay. Herries, for one, never visited the old streets and closes—giving in, no doubt, to the new fashion. The High Street was his limit; the devious and narrow ways which led to the Potterrow knew him no more.

And meanwhile, down in the rich south country, in the little white farmhouse among the broom, on the bonny banks of Nith, Robert Burns pursued the downward tenor of his way. Poet and exciseman, farmer and bard: the kindly husband and father, the incorrigible rake: the eager host, the far too frequent—and far, far too uproariously welcomed—guest: the copious correspondent, the ill-balanced politician: the reckless, eager, revolutionary spirit, the remorse-stricken, disappointed, penitent man; at once affectionate and quarrelsome—losing friend after friend, and tiring out the patience of men and women who would fain have befriended him to the last; quixotically generous in money matters, refusing money for his songs, and then forced to accept, in grinding bitterness of spirit, the eleemosynary five-pound note under pressure of inexorable necessity—so he stands out, a tragic figure for all time, the presiding genius, the Rhymer of the North. Too soon the fair page—or that which had promised so fair—of the life at Elliesland had to be turned down, the stock and plenishing of the little farm scattered and sold, and the patient Jean and her little flock of helpless bairns made to flit sadly to Dumfries. Here the temptations of the country town and its taverns soon finished what the too trying and demoralising routine of the Excise had begun; and in the squalor of excess—in sadness, illness, disillusionment and pain—the shining light of genius grew dim, and flickered to extinction.

CHAPTER XLIII.

As time went on, and his fortune accumulated, there came to Archibald Herries that impulse which generally visits the laborious and land-loving Scot at some period of his career—the impulse to possess himself of territorial acres—the ancestral ones if possible. The family from which Herries sprang had owned land in the Galloway region, or near about Kirkcudbright. It occurred to him suddenly, in the summer of '96, when town was empty, and the grass growing up between the cobbles of the Edinburgh streets, after its rural wont, that he would take a tour in the South and re-visit the country of his sires. He set out with a couple of good nags—one ridden by his servant, with a pack-saddle.

It was a successful expedition (all worldly matters prospered with Herries in these days), and in more ways than in mere pleasure. Not only did he see the country to advantage in the fine summer weather, but he discovered that a small property, with its excellent mansion house, which had once been the ancient possession of a younger branch of his family, was for sale. There seemed no reason—certainly not want of funds—why he should not become the purchaser. It might have occurred to him to ask himself why he, unmarried and childless, should burden himself with acres never to become an inheritance. But no such consideration gave him pause. He was inwardly determined that, at the first moment he thought fit to do so, he should marry—ay, and beget sons to carry on his name and fame. True, that moment had never come; but it was not for love's sake that it tarried—or so he was convinced.

It was on his return journey that he stayed for a few nights at Dumfries. With his pleasure-trip he had combined a certain modicum of business, and the affairs of an important client detained him in the country-town longer than he meant. In the long, summer evenings he would stroll about the streets, losing himself in its little vennels and closes, and stopping every now and then to stare about him, as a man will in a place that is strange to him. That Dumfries was becoming famous as the last home of the man who had practically ruined his life, Herries may have known, but only vaguely. The fashionable world had dropped the poet Burns. The town roared over 'Tam o' Shanter' when it appeared, but forgot to pension the unlucky bard struggling with his poverty on the banks of Nith.

It was one morning, as he sat at breakfast in his tavern, that a messenger brought Herries a note. It was written in a sprawling, uncertain hand, and was unsigned, undated and unaddressed. It ran—'A dying fellow-creature uses the privilege of his sad condition to summon Mr. Herries to his house. It may be that Mr. Herries will there hear that which might be of importance to his affairs.' Herries turned the note over with an incredulous smile. Who in Dumfries could know of anything that was of importance to him? A little boy waited to guide him to the house of his correspondent. Herries thought that he would go. The

mystery would help to pass an idle morning.

The child led him a little way down the hill, and guided him to a small and humble street called, as Herries observed, the Wee Vennel. They stopped before a decent two-storeyed house, like an artisan's dwelling of the better class.

'Here, my boy,' said Herries, giving the child a shilling, 'can't you tell me who it is that desires to see me?'

'No. I was not to say, sir,' answered the boy. He was a fine little fellow of about nine or ten, and as he spoke he raised his large black eyes—surely Herries had seen eyes just like these before—to the stranger's face.

The door was opened by a quiet-looking, young woman with a sweet face, but Herries did not then observe her with any particularity. She asked him gently to walk upstairs. At the door of a room opening to the left, she paused.

'You will be very quiet, will you not, sir?' she asked. 'You'll not excite him? He has not long to live.' She had a quiet, controlled, and yet a very sad voice. Herries then noticed her wedding-ring, and also the fact that she seemed very near her time. She opened the door to the sick-room, and left him.

The room was cross-lighted by two windows set in opposite walls, and by one of these, which was opened to the street and to the summer air and sunshine, was drawn a great chair, where someone sat, propped by a pile of pillows. A very pretty young girl in the rustic style sat near with an open book upon her knee, from which she had been reading aloud. She rose as Herries entered, and quietly left the room. It was Jessie Lewars, a neighbour's pretty daughter, who helped to minister to the dying poet—an innocent type of much that had been the reverse of innocent in his life—a characteristic attendant enough. Not as yet had the faintest warning reached Herries in whose presence it was that, after eight years of silent hatred, he stood. Something of awe, indeed, held him, for he recognised by instinct the atmosphere of death. But he walked up to the chair in total unsuspicion, mechanically holding out a hand. And then a voice arrested him.

'Nay, not yet, sir!' said Burns. 'Wait! When once before you met me, you held your hand behind you. It may be you'll put it back again before we've done.'

Herries started violently, and his hand dropped to his side, for now he saw and knew his enemy.

But this—this deathlike image—could it indeed be Robert Burns? The last time that Herries had seen him—that only too memorable time—he had been in the hey-day of his splendid manhood, flushed with wine and bold with license, handsome as Bacchus, careless of mankind—balancing on the corner of a table in unblushing drunkenness. Now, a spectre faced the amazed intruder—hollow-eyed and fever-haunted, the bony frame of a skeleton, the traces of death's clayey finger on cheek and temple, lip and brow. Only the eyes glowed with their

wonted and sombre fire; they seemed to look Herries through and through—to read the secrets of his heart. In spite of the old hatred, and battling with the old contempt, there struggled into Herries's sensations an unwilling reverence. All through what seemed to him the fantastic interview which ensued he strove with bitterness to assert himself. But it was with the curious and baffling consciousness that a greater than himself, albeit stained with a thousand sins and follies, strove with him and held him down.

CHAPTER XLIV.

'Will you not be seated, sir?' said Burns, pointing to the chair which Jessie Lewars had vacated. Herries, with a gesture and an inclination, intimated his wish to stand; and throughout the interview he continued to do so at some little distance from the sick man, his head bent, his eyes upon the ground, save when they were raised to meet the poet's dark and penetrating gaze.

'Now, sir,' the Bard began, raising himself with difficulty in his chair, 'have patience while you listen to me. You owe me the hearing which the dying may exact from those they leave behind.'

'I will listen to you,' said Herries, shortly.

'Last night,' continued Burns; 'these two or three nights, indeed, I have seen you pass my door, unwitting; for here I sit with a sick man's look-out upon the world he must soon leave. I remembered you, and a bit of the Devil's work I did when the wine was red and ginger hot in the mouth came back to me, for it concerned your house. I have gossips in the town—too many, perhaps—and I soon heard that the great Edinburgh lawyer, Mr. Herries, was abiding at the "Globe," alone, but for his servant. Now, why alone?' The questioner's dark eye rested upon Herries's with a look half quizzical, half sombre.

'Where is man's God-given companion—where is the wife, sir?'

'I have no wife,' said Herries, sternly, most bitterly resenting the allusion to his private matters—yet, somehow, held by the overpowering personality of his interlocutor.

'What?' cried Burns. 'Then where is the lass that you loved—for you did love her—the big, bonny body wi' the bunch o' curls? Well I mind her, though she liked me little!'

'If you speak of Miss Graham,' said Herries, his lips hardly able to form the

name, 'I have never seen her or heard of her since the night I took her from your house.'

'Man alive!' ejaculated the poet, staring at his guest in blank astonishment. 'Is it possible? That there was a mischief brewing through some trickery of that sour devil, Nicol, I knew—fu' though I was, and roarin' fu' that night. But, as I live, I never thought but that you and the lass would kiss and make it up or ever you got the length of Princes Street!'

'Was I to take a sweetheart from your chamber?' said Herries, with a sneer.

'But, surely,' cried Burns, 'surely you knew the lass was there against her will? She had come on some cantrip of my Clarinda—well, I must e'en be plain, your cousin, Mrs. Maclehose; we had some trifle of dalliance in those days, and your girl was Cupid's messenger—just once too often, it would seem.'

'But she as good as told me with her own lips,' said Herries, 'that the disgrace of her situation was her own, and that she had deceived me....'

'Then she lied!' said Burns, energetically, 'and lied to save her friend, who was indeed most particularly in terror that your honour's self should scent her little game.... Listen, sir. I was never one to tell when I had kissed, but I must e'en out with it now. Here's a grave matter that needs more clearing even than I thought—and your own relative's honour is surely as safe with you as with me. The little lady thrives, I hear, on the fairest pinnacle of good fame, and you would be the last to interrupt her prosperity. But in those merry days she had a kindly eye for a poor Bard—and troth, so had the Bard for her—and we had—well, sundry tender passages and letters, though all within the strictest limits of Platonic friendship. And then there was your bonny lass—may God forgive us for the use we put her innocence to!—forever the go-between. Yet, sir, before real harm was done, I had compounded with my conscience to break with my Clarinda once and forever. Then came your ... Do you remember your letter?'

'I remember a letter,' said Herries, moodily, 'in which I forbade you my cousin's house....'

'Ay!' cried Burns, 'and what right had you, or any fellow-creature, to hector, catechise and insult me as did you in that letter? To a man of my temper, 'twas intolerable, and every drop of black blood in my veins rose at the injury. I had the creature Nicol at my elbow, and he made me write some trash—I mind not what—to you. But the real mischief was that your ill-judged and insolent order sent me, by provocation, hot-foot to your cousin's—ay, by night, too—and we were alone.... I outstayed—indeed, I did most damnably outstay, decorum's hour—and I will not say what devil whispered in my ear ... for opportunity and the fair one both were kind. Then there comes upon us, out of her first sleep, the lassie Graham. Ecod! I see her yet—the round eyes of her, like a bairn's, staring at me; the flounces of her night-rail, her bare bit feet. Up she comes, and takes

the woman from my very arms into her own, as had she been an infant, showing me the door the while wi' the gait o' a queen. 'Od, 'tis not often Robbie Burns has played so poor a part in an affair of that kind! I e'en slunk out o' the house like a whipped tyke wi' his tail atween his legs. And so the lass better'd me—and maybe saved the honour of your house. And for all reward you cast her off!' Herries had turned from white to red, and from red to white again, during this recital. But now his eyes glittered with a cold anger.

'You are utterly unjust as to my part in the affair,' he said deliberately. 'Your own letter, which you slur over so easily, was a tissue of falsehood—if what you now tell me be true—and it was written with intent to mislead me. Every word and every act of my cousin's was studied to the same end. I was hedged in with lies. Of those who wronged Miss Graham, I certainly was not the guilty one; I utterly deny it. I was the catspaw of others infinitely unscrupulous. If I did Miss Graham an injustice, I deeply deplore it; but I was not responsible.' Burns eyed the speaker long and curiously—ironically, indeed.

'The legal mind, I see, sir, lights on the cold justice of the case at once, and banishes emotion and romance,' he said. 'Let me tell you, here and now, how I repent my part in the unlucky business. The letter I sent you was Nicol's, in truth, and not mine. In a sober mood I'd not have lent myself to such a trick; but I was drunk, and there was my disgrace. I ask your pardon, as one erring human being asks pardon of another, who, in his turn, must be a supplicant for grace before the Throne of God.... Or is Mr. Herries, indeed, above his fellows, and in no need of pity and forgiveness from above?' Herries frowned—the annoyed frown of a man to whom heroics are distasteful.

'It is a Christian duty to forgive,' he said coldly. 'Your injury to me I do forgive, but your injury to another was far deeper, and confession and repentance, sir, have come a little late.'

'But not too late for reparation!' cried the poet, eagerly. 'Does your heart not warm again to that wronged lassie? 'Od, my own blood, that runs like ice in these congealing veins, leaps at the thought of her! I cannot get to her—I'll never see her face again—for earth will be upon these eyes, and the great darkness.... But I will bless her with the blessing of the dying—'tis all I have.... But you, sir—you—you have a horse, you've health and strength and time—a heart, I'd hope ... surely you will go to her—fly to her—losing not a day!'

'After a few hours' reflection,' said Herries, with a consciously exaggerated coldness, 'I shall be the better judge of how to act. In the meantime, although I do not doubt your statement, I should like proof positive that your memory does not play you false.'

'Most noble judge!' said Burns, with bitter irony, 'it shall be yours! The sacred pages of my Clarinda's letters will be proof-positive enough in all con-

science, and you shall see them. They are safe with you. I'll have the packet searched for, and to-morrow, if you will trouble to call, it shall be delivered to your hands.'

'To-morrow,' said Herries, 'I shall be absent at B—— on the Duke's business, and perhaps for two days; but on my return I will do myself the honour to call.'

'I may not be here,' said Burns, significantly. 'But, no matter, the letters will be ready.' He paused. The two men looked at each other in silence—antipathetic to the last—across a gulf of mutual misunderstanding, that not years of speech or explanation could have bridged over. The ardent and impulsive temperament of Burns might indeed have leapt the chasm, and he longed even now for a reconciliation with the man he had wronged—a reconciliation with warm, heartfelt words, and a clasp of the hand. But to Herries, hedged about with the prejudices of a lifetime—to Herries, just, but cold—even the semblance of reconciliation was impossible. It was Burns who spoke next, in a gentler voice, and with a kindly shrewdness in his eyes.

'How well it would be, sir,' he said, 'could nature sometimes mix her handiwork! Had I, now, some of your excellent qualities of judgment and coolness, how much more wisely should I have waged the war of life! And you, methinks, might be a little better for a few drops of the hot blood that has been the plague of me all my days. But we are as God made us, and the Devil spoiled us, and to make or mar is seemingly little in our own power.' The poet's voice had become fainter, and the excitement which had upheld him throughout the interview began to wane. His excessive weakness became apparent, as he leaned back against the pillows, with closing eyes. Herries came nearer to him for the first time.

'You have stretched a great point for me, Mr. Burns,' he said, 'in that you have undertaken this interview when you were so little able to bear the strain. I admire your fortitude, and I beg to thank you for the unselfish effort. I see how it has worn you out, and I will leave you now, and call your nurse.' The poet opened his eyes, and fixed them on the younger man with an indescribably yearning look.

'I would do better now,' he said, 'to pray than to preach! There is one prayer for us all, Mr. Herries—for you—for me: "*Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors!*"'

'Amen!' said Herries, with the first ring of emotion in his voice. Then, with

a deep inclination, he silently left the room.

CHAPTER XLV.

It took Herries three full days to accomplish the business of which he had spoken to the poet. When he returned to Dumfries, the town was ringing with the death of Burns. A suppressed excitement seemed to pervade the streets; men spoke in muffled voices, awe-stricken, of the great spirit fled—and women cried to think of the destitute young widow, with her flock of orphans, who must so soon, in double peril, and under the very shadow of death, give to the world the poet's posthumous child.

Herries felt a great delicacy in presenting himself at the house of mourning, and yet time pressed, and the possession of the letters was of vital importance to him. He waited one day, and then, on the morning of his departure, directed his steps to the Wee Vennel. This time the door was opened to him by Jessie Lewars, her pretty face swollen and discoloured by tears.

'I was directed by—by the late Mr. Burns to call here for a packet of letters,' said Herries, with respectful hesitancy.

'We were bidden to expect you, sir,' answered the girl, and then she added that invitation which, under the circumstances, among the peasantry of Scotland, is never withheld and never refused: 'Will you be pleased to come up the stair and view the corpse, sir?' Herries followed her upstairs, but she did not enter the room with him. He was left to do that alone.

It was the same room in which he had spoken with the poet, but now swept and garnished, and with a Puritan simplicity and dignity in its poor belongings that went strangely to the heart. The widow rose from her seat at the bed's head. Herries had seen her before, but only now realised that this must be Jean Armour. With a singularly unaffected gesture of restrained and decent sorrow, she removed, in silence, the fair white linen kerchief that covered the face of her dead. Herries, with folded arms, and with a singular mixture of emotions, looked long upon the splendid mask. As in life, the dark hair swept the pallid brow, and though the glory of those eyes was quenched under the sealed lids that would lift no more, there was, in the fixed and immutable gravity of the lifeless face, a language beyond all looks, beyond all uttered speech: that air of incommunicable knowledge which, in the Dead, baffles the living with its eternal silence.

After a few minutes the widow, gently and reverently, covered the face once more.

'It was to be,' she said simply, with the quiet fatalism of her class. She turned and took from the table a packet of letters, and handed them to Herries without a word. He noted the quivering of her bloodless lip, but noted, too, the mild placidity of her wise, broad brow. Without some such element of enduring calm, never, surely, could Jean Armour have met the complicated trials of her life.

Herries took the letters from her with an almost humble reverence, and, strangely subdued in spirit, left the house and journeyed from the town.

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As Herries, thus leaving Dumfries, turned his horse's head to the north, he was still undecided as to the precise direction he must take. Northwards he must go, but whether straight to Edinburgh, or, with a divergence to the west which would lead him to the home of the woman he had once loved, he could not, deeply though he hated indecision, make up his mind. A singular mood of coldness and hesitancy was upon him, and he could not shake it off. Yet it would be wrong to judge Herries, even now, as a man without feelings; he had feelings, but naturally so deeply hid, and, of late years, so sternly repressed, so purposely held down, that he began to doubt their existence in himself. Where was the enthusiasm, the chivalrous ardour that should have urged him on an errand like this: that errand—a privilege, surely, to any generous man—of reparation to a noble and innocent woman for a cruel wrong? This was his errand now, but it left him cold. No gush of revived passion stirred his heart; he seemed to himself to have become old and pulseless, and, unconsciously, he pictured Alison the same—old too, past feeling. Was she alive or dead? He did not know. Married, perhaps? It might well be, and with another man's children at her knee. She had acted nobly, bravely, in that miserable episode of the past. Well—perhaps—and yet Herries was not even in sympathy with the note of sacrifice in her act. It angered him rather—the injustice, the cruelty of it, and the total unworthiness, in his view, of her for whom the sacrifice had been made. Alison had held Nancy's honour as dearer than his—Herries's—happiness, and had sacrificed him, as well as herself, to her ideas of loyalty to a friend. He doubted whether she had done well: to his present cold mood there seemed a something less noble than quixotism in this—a touch of womanish hysterics. His own part in the affair he felt must be a source of bitterness to him that could never die; yet he would not allow that there could be any element in it whatsoever of remorse. His had been the dupe's part, and, to a man of Herries's proud temper, that was a galling thought, however it might lessen his responsibility. The woman in whom he had believed

had been made to appear to him as unworthy of belief—by evidences so strong that to doubt them must have been to doubt the testimony of his senses and his sanity. He had cast her off, but it had not been without question. He had been stern, perhaps—but, in his opinion, it behoved men to be stern where honour was concerned. He had been tricked, and though it was not Alison who tricked him, yet she had connived at the trickery, and stood by and seen him made a fool of. As he went on his way, riding slowly, and resting often, he would take out and read those letters which had been given up to him—those fevered letters of 'Clarinda'—which certainly cleared Alison of every kind of blame, save that of a too yielding good-nature to her unscrupulous friend. How they enraged him, as he read—just as their writer used to do in days gone by—with what an impotent rage against this trivial feminine thing that he despised, and yet that had had power enough almost to ruin his life! Yet the letters brought decision, for they shaped his course, which now definitely took the westward route, towards the Perthshire highlands.

All this time, as he pondered, he had been riding through the classic country—sacred even then, as it is still, to the genius and the name of Burns. He had taken his way along the broad and river-haunted valley of the Nith; he had threaded the wild and hilly country of the Cumnocks; he had rested at Mauchline, and might have seen, without knowing it, Mossgiel. All around him, rich and fair, yellow now to its abundant harvests, spread the country that had nursed the peasant poet to his Titanic manhood—noble valley—rolling river—fertile plain. The lowly farms were eloquent of him; each humble implement of toil—the plough, the harrow and the reaper's hook—spoke of the hardy labours of his strenuous youth. The woods whispered of him; the summer evening breathed the legend of his first idyllic love—seemed instinct with the young undoing of Jean Armour, with the kiss, the jest, the gaiety of rustic courtship. At inn and toll, at kirk and market—yet rang the echoes of his splendid joviality, and by haunted kirkyard wall, and clattering arch and hoary brig, it seemed as though you yet might hear the thundering hoofs of flying Tam o' Shanter's auld mare Maggie. One name only seemed ever on the lips of men and women—and Herries heard it, as it seemed to him, wherever he rode, wherever he rested, wherever he spoke, or ate or slept upon that memorable journey. Strange irony of fate that should lead him—the instinctive enemy of the dead poet—antipathetic to him in every thought and impulse and idea—to haunt these scenes. Stranger still that he should come to them fresh from the last great scene of all—the closing scene in that tremendous tragedy of a poet's life. Even Herries—unimaginative, unsympathetic, cold—felt the coincidence, and felt with it some singular, reluctant, vague understanding of the spirit that had passed away, even though his own wrongs, and the deeper wrongs of another, from the dead man's very hand, cried

out for their too-long-delayed redress.

In this unwonted and unwelcome mingling of moods, he took his way, riding up the western coasts from Ayr, crossing the Clyde near Glasgow, striking inland to the mountain land up by Loch Lomond, through the exquisite wild Highland country of Glen Falloch; and so, by pass and glen, and wood and water, fertile strath and harvest fields, down to the lowlands again, and the tamer country of the Ochills. One summer night found him, at length, at the last gate of the Highlands, the little town of C——, and he knew that he rested but two miles from Alison's home, if indeed Alison were still Alison Graham and had a home at The Mains.

CHAPTER XLVI.

Away down at The Mains it was high summer, and the low-lying, wood-encircled old white house lay brooding in the August heat. The bees hummed in the lime tree, and in the spruce woods the pigeons crooned all day, but the rooks in the plane trees kept their cawing till the evening.

But in these days there were great changes at The Mains; not only those deliberate changes, due to the slow workings of nature, which are common to the obscure places of the world, but the more violent ones which come of the striving and the energy of man, or rather woman. In the first place, Mrs. Graham, that tremendous creature, had married all her daughters, every one, save, indeed, the predestined old maid of the family, who, though she had had (as her mother frequently reminded her) the best chances of them all, in an Edinburgh season, was mateless still. By remorseless energy, by ceaseless harping on the subject, had this stringent mother goaded six daughters into matrimony against tremendous odds. One, as we know, had 'taken' Mr. Cheape; two had married ministers—albeit one had been a 'wanter,' i.e., a widower, with a numerous infant family. Another had captured a soldier lad, a subaltern in a marching regiment, quartered, during some manoeuvres of the County Militia, at the town of C——. Yet another had espoused a surgeon, while one, alas! the pretty Sally, barely at sixteen, had run away with a handsome shepherd off her father's farm. Hot was the hue and cry after the misguided lassie; her father spurred to overtake the couple and prevent the union, but returned crestfallen—thankful, eventually, to have been shown the marriage lines. This episode was no great feather in the ma-

ternal cap, and poor Sally's name was conspicuously absent from the fly-leaf of the family Bible. The mistress of The Mains now rested from her match-making labours, and devoted, henceforth, all her energies to the insane indulgence of her only son—now a pampered and disagreeable boy of ten.

In these times would Mrs. Graham publicly announce among her neighbours that she did not intend to marry off her daughter Alison. Disgraceful though it was to have a girl left on your hands, yet one unmarried daughter was not unuseful. Jacky would need a housekeeper until he married. After that great event, Alison's future might be nebulous, but in no case was it a matter of very great importance.

In the meantime, useful occupation was not lacking to Miss Graham of The Mains. In these changed days, she had, besides her household work and poultry-keeping, certain grave and tender duties which kept her much confined to the house, even in this lovely summer time. It was to get a few moments' respite from these, and a mouthful of fresh air, that she would steal out, bare-headed, on the drowsy afternoons, and wander in the garden. One day (it was, indeed, the day after Herries's arrival in the country), she did this, having in charge, however, her brother. The mistress of The Mains was absent on a drive to visit a distant neighbour, and in her absence the precious heir was never trusted a moment by himself.

Jacky wished to go and climb upon a wall which was being built round the old, and hitherto only hedged, garden. So far but a few yards had been completed—the broad parapet offering a tempting promenade for youthful agility. It was a forbidden joy, but such things, to the spoilt child, are ever only nominally forbidden, and Alison, by sage experience, was aware that protest would be only waste of time. Jacky, therefore, pranced upon the wall, deftly cracking a huge carter's whip—his latest acquisition, which he had already made a terror to every man and woman at The Mains. He was now a fat, overgrown and hearty boy, with long, fair, effeminate ringlets, which a fond maternal hand could not bring itself to shear, and which assorted ill enough with the sturdy and thick-set appearance of the youthful heir.

For a little while he strutted all content, and Alison stepped about the sweet old garden in the sun, and picked herself a little bunch of white clove pinks, and stuck them in her dress. But her moments of respite were soon numbered.

'Come now, Jacky,' she called, going to the wall's foot; 'come down like a good boy! You know I must go in to father.'

'I'm no comin',' said Jacky, with the serene finality of the spoilt child.

'Ah—but you must,' pleaded his sister, 'for mother would never have you left upon the dyke your lone, and father wants me.' But Jacky paid no heed.

'I'll have to come and pull you down,' said Alison, rashly going nearer.

'Ye'll no!' said Jacky, with a deft swirl of his whip. It cracked like a pistol shot on the silent summer air, and the tip of the lash caught Alison on the ear, so that she clapped her hand to the place with a little cry of pain.

'Ah, Jacky,' she cried, 'you've hurt me now.' But Jacky—a fiendish, little, spoilt wretch—only laughed.

Nemesis, however, hovered behind him, for there had been an unsuspected witness to the scene. A gentleman on horseback had come down the road which passed close to the new wall, and, attracted by the repeated cracking of a whip, had paused. Finally he had dismounted, tied his horse to a gate-post, and, standing a little way off from the end of the unfinished dyke, could see and hear what happened both above and below. While Alison, the tears of her smart in her eyes, still expostulated vainly with her brother, she was suddenly electrified to perceive his ankles clasped by two hands from the other side of the wall. With a sharp howl of terror, the heir of all the Grahams disappeared abruptly from his perch. Alison ran round the dyke, and lo! with the roaring Jacky struggling in his arms, there was Archibald Herries, or his ghost.

Alison stopped dead, and the two, with eight years between them of pain, and parting, and estrangement, stood staring at each other—so strange is human life—upon the verge of laughter. Herries released the boy, who ran yelling to the house, and then, flushed and awkward, he stood before Alison.

'I—I am come to The Mains, you see,' he stammered, not brilliantly, it must be confessed.

'I see, sir,' said Alison, a little giddily. (How sweet, how strong—too strong—the pinks smelt in her dress!) 'But you are like to have an odd welcome,' she went on, in a queer, steady voice, and yet with a little uncertain laugh, 'if you begin like this, by beating Jacky. 'Tis a providence has sent my mother from home this day, or you would be like to get into her black books.'

The summer world, the trees, the sky were reeling round her, but she kept her head, better, indeed, than did the man. He, dumb, stood looking at her, while the world, his world, changed round him, like the world of dreams. What had he expected to see?—a faded woman past her prime? Alison was twenty-eight now, but at twenty-eight, young women living quiet country lives are neither old nor faded as a common rule. She was a girl yet, the flush of summer on her cheeks, not the tendril of a curl changed; bewitching womanliness was in the sweet curves of her young body beneath the cotton gown. Her eyes seemed larger than of yore, perhaps because the face had fined away a little from mere girlish chubbiness to slightly hollower lines of cheek and chin. Her soft, broad forehead knit itself a little. Herries felt his heart go from him, and his cool head swam. He tried to keep command of himself, but himself—the self of all these barren years—was slipping from him even now.

'Can I—can I have a few words with you alone?' he asked humbly.

'Surely, sir,' said Alison. 'But I cannot spare you many minutes, for I am wanted.' A look of pain, of harassed anxiety, came into her eyes, which should have been an omen. But Herries did not see it. They began to walk in the garden, on a grass path between yew hedges.

'Have you seen Nancy lately, and is she well?' asked Alison, breaking the silence.

'I never see her,' said Herries, shortly. 'Have you dropped all knowledge of her too?'

'At first we wrote a little,' said Alison, quietly, 'but I am no great hand at letters, sir, and so—and so we grew apart.'

'That's well,' said Herries, abruptly. He chafed at this dull talk, walking at Alison's side, but what to say, where to begin? He stole a look at her. 'Alison,' he cried suddenly, 'your ear hurts. That little monster cut it with the lash; it bleeds.'

'Does it?' said Alison, faintly, putting up her hand.

'Wait—here!' said Herries, eagerly. 'I have a soft silk kerchief.' He noted, with a kind of anguish, the smudge of blood upon a little curl, and yet thought himself cool enough to wipe it away unmoved. But the touch, the contact, the terrible sweetness of approach were all too much. The pent-up tenderness of years would be denied no longer—his empty arms rebelled against their emptiness.

'Ally!' he cried. 'Oh! Ally—oh, my soul!'

For, indeed, it did seem as though, after all these years of deathly trance, his soul had come back to him.

CHAPTER XLVII.

And now Herries, who had found an advocate, became his own accuser.

'That you can forgive me this long and cruel silence is impossible,' said the man who had hitherto held himself so proudly blameless.

'Nay, there's nothing to forgive in you,' said the fond woman, who held him blameless still. 'Do you think I did not know you?' she went on softly. 'I knew that you, being you, must have acted as you did. And I said to myself I would abide by your action, whatever it was, for I knew it would be just!'

'If it was not my action that was sorely wrong,' said Herries, in his new contrition, 'then it was something deeper. 'Twas my heart and nature that erred;

to doubt yon was a cold-hearted, an abominable crime!' But Alison only smiled.

'If you had erred,' she said, 'it might have been easier for me, for then I might have found some comfort in thinking you unworthy. But no, I would not, for all the world, have had it so! I'd rather have borne the hardness of our parting than that!'

'Was it—was it so very hard—to you?' whispered Herries.

'Is it hard when the nest and the young ones are torn from the bird, do you think?' said Alison. 'If that is hard, my suffering was like it; for all that I had went from me when I went from you!' Herries sighed, and memory tormented him. He heard the plashing rain upon the pavement—the rain of that night of parting; he saw the white face that Alison turned upon him from the window of the sedan as the chairmen carried her away into the darkness.

'May God pardon me the hardness of my heart,' he said, raising the hat from his head, 'for I'll never forgive myself as long as I live.'

They spoke of Robert Burns, and they spoke of Nancy, unravelling that terrible entanglement of the past. Herries spoke with a new gentleness, and Alison, as she heard him, pressed close to his side.

'You forgive them—you do forgive them—don't you, Archie?' she whispered. 'For, you know, Nancy never dreamed how deeply she injured us, and he—the man—knew not what he did. We cannot be happy if we leave them unforgiven!' Herries did not answer, for his heart was big within him, and in his ears was the sound of a voice, now stilled for ever, pleading for that forgiveness which the sweet woman at his side now urged upon him.

'"*Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors!*"' said he, at last, in the same words, and they fell from him with a sigh.

'I must go now,' said Alison, at last, 'for I dare not linger. I have stayed too long.'

'Nay, but I'll not let you, Alison,' said Herries, 'till it is promised me that our parting is at an end, and that I can come and ask you of your parents this very day. Why not?' Alison stood still and looked at him, and in her eyes was a something akin to that compassion with which you will see a mother look at her careless and unconscious child.

'Nay, Archie,' she said faintly. 'I had been thinking that you knew.... But that's all gone and done with now. I have no freedom to go with any man. I cannot leave my home.'

'But, by the God that is above us, you shall—and with me!' said Herries, violently. 'I will permit no second sacrifice of our love and life.'

'Come with me—home, Archie,' said Alison, gently, 'and I'll show you what I cannot tell you.' In a brooding silence they went to unloose Herries's horse,

which had pawed the ground beneath him to a pulp. A lad took it from them as they went towards the house. 'I am taking you to my father's room,' said Alison, in a low voice. She led him down the dark narrow passage to the library.

'Here are two steps in the dark—take care,' she whispered, and as he stumbled he felt her guiding hand come out to him. She opened the library door, and in the warm light of the summer evening that came in through the little deep-set windows, Herries saw the laird of The Mains.

Alas! for the four-bottle man—our jovial ancestor of a drinking age! His life may have been a merry one, but it was generally short, and often before middle age the gout would get him at his vitals, or deathly paralysis lay him by the heels. It was the latter vengeance that had overtaken the laird of The Mains—pinning him helpless, and almost speechless, to his great lug-chair by the fire for which he shivered even in the hottest day. There he sat, huddled in gown and slippers, the wreck of a man at fifty-six, and behind him, rudely carved upon the green stone mantel, Herries read the doleful legend, which seemed the text of a wordless but expressive sermon:

'In human life there's nothing steadfast stands,
Youth, Glorie, Riches fades. Death's sure at hand.'

Hardly anything of the sick man could move but his eyes, and these turned upon his daughter as she entered with a dog-like look of expectation, while he set up a painful, inarticulate cry for water—for he was tormented by an insatiable and raging thirst.

'Tis ever so, if I leave him for but half-an-hour,' said Alison, in a low voice. 'No one comes to him; they let his cup be empty and his fire go out. Oh, I've been cruel to leave him so long,' she cried, with a pang of remorse. She held the cup to his lips, and in her strong young arms raised the supine and helpless form against the pillows. Herries, inexpressibly shocked, with a sense of foreboding against which he vainly strove, watched her.

'But, Alison!' he whispered, passionately, 'this—this is your mother's duty. She's bound to it by every law of marriage—by every impulse of humanity.'

'You do not know my mother, sir,' said Alison, quietly; 'God forgive me for these unnatural words against her that bore me. But my mother has her health, and is, besides, of an impatient nature, and cannot understand that others should be sick and feeble.... I'll say no more.'

They went together to the far end of the low, long room, which was now getting dark.

'But this is monstrous!' said Herries, vehemently, 'a second sacrifice—I

repeat it! You sacrificed me once to Nancy—and now you would sacrifice me to another. You cannot love me!'

'I love you,' said Alison, intently, 'I love you better than all the world—better than my poor father. But, or ever I saw your face, Archie, I knew his, and he has been a good father to me. God would surely desert me if, knowing what I do of things at home, I were to leave him in his helplessness. Archie, you'll not bring me to tempt God's anger?' It was almost a cry, but Herries would not hear the justice in it.

'Then I go,' he said, sore and angry, 'I go, uncomforted and alone.' But Alison clung to him with a sob.

'Oh, no—no—no!' she whispered, 'don't leave me, Archie—oh, not yet! I've been so long alone—so long—and never a sight of your face, and sometimes I would be nearly mad to think I might forget it. But no—I have remembered every line.'

Herries held his breath, and in the poignant sacredness of the moment his heart stood still. For never had Alison's arms held him as they did just now, or her eyes read his face; and he felt that woman's passion, unashamed, had taken the place of a girl's timid love. Her fingers touched his hair, and yet, somehow, with all its passion, it was a touch that might have been his mother's.

'You're gotten so grey, Archie,' she said, with a little tender laugh. 'You'll scarcely need the powder now!'

But Herries put her from him, almost roughly, with an oath.

'I can't bear it, Ally,' he said. 'If I must go, let me go now. I must have all or nothing.'

He took his riding-whip from the table where he had laid it, and turned and went without a word.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

That night did a stranger cause much commotion in the streets of C——by rampaging (as the inhabitants expressed it) up and down, demanding at every turn the surgeon who waited upon Mr. Graham of The Mains. It was Herries who pursued this curious quest, and the placid citizens judged him demented, as, indeed, but a few hours since, he would have judged himself. He traced the personage whom he sought to his own dwelling, where he found him, resting after the

labours of the day, over a comfortable and steaming glass of toddy. Herries entered the room, booted and spurred as he was, and rang a guinea on the doctor's table with much the air of holding a pistol to his ear.

'I am given to understand,' said he, 'that you attend the laird of The Mains. Oblige me by telling me in confidence how long, in your opinion, it is probable that Mr. Graham has to live?' The astonished Æsculapius looked up, open-mouthed, shoving his spectacles from his nose to his bald forehead.

'God bless me!' he exclaimed. 'And who are you that put this most extraordinary question? It is outrageous!'

'I have paid good money for your opinion, like any other man—and should get it, I presume,' said Herries, sulkily.

'Not at all, not at all, sir!' said the doctor, swelling with professional offence. 'I never heard of such bold impudence!' He was, in the meantime, looking Herries up and down, and perceiving a gentlemanly man, well dressed and with a pale, grave face, made up his mind that he was neither a man in liquor nor a madman, but some person of consideration.

'If,' he said at last, 'you will give me satisfactory reasons for your extraordinary question, I may see whether I can answer it with decorum and with due attention to professional etiquette. I am too old a bird not to know that there are often good reasons for the strangest actions.' Herries was silent. He had intended no confidences; an impulse, very unlike him, had driven him to this crude method of trying to find out how long a time, Laban-like, he must yet serve for Alison. There was something kindly in the old doctor's weather-worn, sagacious countenance.

'I have a reason,' Herries said, suddenly determined to be frank. 'I am a suitor for the hand of Miss Graham, and she will not marry in her father's lifetime.'

'Oh—ho! sets the wind in that airt?' said the doctor, much more genially. 'Come, sit down, man, and let us talk it over. And so you are a friend of Miss Alison's? So am I—in troth, her earliest! And she will not leave her father for you? Well, I daresay not, I daresay not—a good lass! But the mother, let me tell you, stands in your gait fully more than the laird. She'll not do wanting Alison, and so she tells the world. A tremendous woman, sir, and set on her own ways. You'll not get Alison from her.'

'I'll take her!' said Herries, with a short laugh.

'A bold man!' said the doctor. 'Well, rather you than me to meddle with the mistress of The Mains! As to the laird, it goes against the grain with me to give his death-warrant. Many's the bottle I've cracked with him, honest man, sitting in the parlour at The Mains yonder—the mistress brought to bed upstairs—and waiting for they lasses of his to come into the world. But we must all die!' He

paused, and then went on gravely, 'I cannot tell you how long you may have to wait. It might be a month, it might be a year, it might be ten. Some, in paralysis, die soon. Some linger in a death in life like his for half a lifetime. The Graham stock is tough, uncommonly so; but my old friend is in a bad case—the Lord send him rest!—and I do not think he'll live the year.' The speaker eyed Herries curiously. 'Does that content you?' he asked, with a twinkling eye.

'God forgive me for a cold-blooded questioner in this!' said Herries, really vexed and sorely ashamed. 'But I am clean distraught, I think! This young lady and I were contracted eight years since, but mischief came between us and we parted. And now we meet only to part again, this feeble life of a man almost dead between us. Am I excused in your eyes, sir?'

'Oh, I think so, I think so!' said the good-natured man of medicine with his husky laugh. 'But I'll not tell on you ('twould hardly do, you know) in after days!' He fetched another tumbler from his cupboard and would have Herries taste with him before he went. And so the aristocratic and reserved lawyer of George Street found himself sitting in the stuffy parlour of an unknown country doctor, with a singular tumult in his blood, a new and tender anticipation at his heart, drinking to happier days.

The laird of The Mains, however, falsified the prediction of his medical attendant and lingered for nearly two years, then dying in his chair. He was gathered to his fathers in the family vault, and friends and neighbours, gathered to his funeral, noted one stranger sharing in his obsequies—a stranger to all but Alison and the old doctor. The same man, in the dusk of the evening, spoke with Alison at the little gate under the lime tree—Alison, tall and pale and sad, in a black gown. It was no moment to speak of love, but, nevertheless, these two did then, in an enforced secrecy, arrange their future. A second time would Alison leave her home, and leave it in secret. For Mrs. Graham was set upon a perverse and obstinate opposition to any marriage for her last remaining daughter, rightly estimating the loss, to her, as one of a superior and most hard-working servant. Alison, who had battled so long, had no more strength and no more courage for the fight. In a month she and Archibald Herries fled to Edinburgh town, and were married by license.

That it was a merry wedding, you are not asked to believe. For, firstly, it took place almost in the shadow of death; and then, happiness that comes after long tarrying, comes—but comes timidly—like a flower that blows too late and trembles for the storm. Yet, in the spring after, the same plant will throw out vigorous

and fearless shoots. And so it was, I feel sure, with Alison and Archibald Herries. They were happy in their marriage; children were born to them in the fine George Street house, and there were gay summer migrations to the Galloway home, and all the due symbols of a rational and well-deserved prosperity. I think that to the last they were on calling—if not cordial—terms, with Clarinda, and that Willy Maclehose, grown a fine young man, was a frequent visitor at their house.

But these things are all past and gone now. Alison's children are dust, and their children, I daresay, are preparing in turn for the inevitable abdication. For so the world wags, and we live and die, and Nature renews, for each one of us, the slowly-moving pageant of joy and sorrow, of passion and of pain. But it is the RHYMER, of whatsoever generation he may be, singing of these things for us so that we all understand, who is the only Immortal.

BURNS TO CLARINDA

'Ae fond kiss and then we sever,
Ae fareweel and then forever!
Deep in heart-wrung tears I'll pledge thee,
Warring sighs and groans, I'll wage thee.
Who shall say that fortune grieves him
While the star of hope she leaves him?
Me, nae cheerful twinkle lights me,
Dark despair around benights me.

'I'll ne'er blame my partial fancy,
Naething could resist my Nancy;
But to see her was to love her;
Love but her and love forever.
Had we never loved sae kindly,
Had we never loved sae blindly,
Never met or never parted,
We had ne'er been broken-hearted.

'Fare thee well, thou first and fairest!

Fare thee well, thou best and dearest!
Thine be ilka joy and treasure,
Peace, contentment, love and pleasure.
Ae fond kiss and then we sever;
'Ae fareweel, alas! forever.
Deep in heart-wrung tears I'll pledge thee,
Warring sighs and groans I'll wage thee.'

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