

THE MINISTER'S WIFE.

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CHAPTER I.

NOTHING had occurred on Loch Diarmid for ages which had made so intense a sensation in the district as the death of the minister. The whole country bubbled up and seethed about that one house on the slope,—the Manse, peaceablest of habitations, a few days ago so full of quiet happiness, but now shrouded in a veil of horror and woe. Was it accident, or was it murder? At first the opinion of the country-side inclined strongly in favour of the former supposition. The beast was ‘spirity’—too spirity for a man of Mr. Lothian’s age; and the night was stormy and dark; and he had not nor could have any enemy—and he was not robbed. It soon, however, became known that there was an actual witness of the tragedy, whose deposition would set all doubts at rest.

‘I hope she didna do it hersel,’ said the smith,

when the tale was discussed. 'I canna understand Jean Campbell being the one to see it.'

'She had nae cause to be ill at the minister,' said Sandy Diarmid; 'he was aye kind to her; and because an awfu' deed's been done, that's no reason for taking away an honest woman's character.'

'Lord bless me! am I taking away her character?' cried Macwhirter. 'Man, can you no tell a joke from earnest? If I said she had dung down Ben Lomond, or the Cobbler, it would be about as likely. But a man maun mind his p's and his q's when he speaks to the like of you?'

'I like nae such jokes,' said Sandy, shaking his head, 'especially in the moment of sic an awfu' visitation. Nothing like it has ever happened on the Loch in my day. I hope it be na true a' thae prophets said, We've neglected our day o' grace, and noo we're delivered over to Satan. It looks real like it. She says there can be nae doubt that clour in his forehead was the man's doing, and with a' his might!'

'Naebody that saw it could doubt that,' said Macwhirter, more gravely, 'but I doubt it was nae mair than manslaughter at the worse. The man was down and stunned with the fa', and the tramp—if it was a tramp—saw a glitter of gold about him, and was struck wi' a sudden temptation. I canna think it was anything waur.'

‘And, what is awfu’ strange is, that nae tramp has been seen about these parts that answers Jean’s description,’ said a chance comer. ‘Our Margaret saw a man gaun ower the braes the last moonlight night—but he was humphie-backit, and no so big as herself; and Robbie has a story of a muckle black man like Mr. John——’

‘If ye listen to a’ the wives have seen, and a’ the weans’ stories, you’ll have plenty to do,’ said the smith. ‘But here’s Andrew White, and maybe he has some information. He’ll gie us a sermon, at least,’ he added in an undertone.

Mr. Lothian had been, as it is common to say, much beloved in his parish; but his people, as has been seen, recovered their spirits at an early date, and found such consolation in a discussion of the circumstances of his death, as made that dreadful event almost a pleasure, and certainly a public benefit. Andrew White had been at a funeral, and was in the solemn costume worn in Scotland on such occasions. The scarf round his hat was tied in a large bow, and fell down with long ends behind him. He wore an evening suit of black with ‘weepers’ on the sleeves of his coat. He was a portentous figure in the daylight, but not to eyes accustomed to the dress, which it is the pride of every Scotch peasant to possess to go to funerals in. Andrew’s aspect, however, suited

his costume. He looked like the conventional type (often very far from the reality), which the public accepts as that of a Dissenting pastor. It was not Chadband, benign and oily, but a more melancholy and meagre specimen; his very air, as he stepped into the smithy, was of itself a rebuke.

‘Have ye naething better to do than to claver here,’ he said, ‘John Macwhirter? and the pairish come through such a fiery furnace. I would have thought it might have had an effect upon you a’, and on a’ worldly-minded men.’

‘Is there ony mair news?’ said old Sandy; ‘that’s just what I’ve been saying. Such a hale, strong, weel-likit man!’

‘Ay, he was a weel-likit man,’ said Andrew; ‘and I hope he wasna taken unprepared,—too weel-likit, Sandy. “Ye shall be hated of all men for my name’s sake,” is what is written. There was none of that in Mr. Lothian’s case—and yet I hope he wasna taken unprepared.’

‘He was a real good man,’ said the smith, ‘and we’re a’ of one mind in these days. There’s nae persecution that I ken of. I hope we dinna hate the Name itself—’

‘Ay, and with a bitter hatred,’ said the elder; ‘every carnal soul among ye. Na, it’s no the fashion to persecute,—Satan’s mair cunning; you can do better than that. Ye can sneer, and ye can gibe, and ye can call names. “Be glad when men

‘speak evil of you.’” But the poor minister, he was pleased that men should speak well; and now he’s snatched away in a moment without time to leave any assurance to his friends of the state of his soul. I hope he was prepared.’

‘The Lord be thankit, I’m no ane of you wise folk,’ said John Macwhirter; ‘I’ve a respect for my Maker as I’m aye saying. I wadna turn off no a brute beast that had served me weel, because it wasna just ready the last time I wanted it. Nor will He,—or I’m sair mistaken in Him. But the question was—Is there any news?’

‘There’s nae news from where he is gone,’ said Andrew, ‘which is the real question. I think little of aught else. As for the law, it’s busy swearing the folk and hearing the witnesses. Jean Campbell, she’s very positive; but, whether it was the accident did it, or whether it was the man, or who the man was, or what was his motive, is past our telling. The one thing I can tell ye is, that this is from the Lord. It was prophesied to us that if we let the day of our visitation pass, fearful things would be sent among us from the Lord, and so far as I can see they’re now begun.’

‘But he wasna ane of the scorers, honest man,’ said the smith, slightly subdued, ‘I canna see how the wyte should fall on him.’

‘I wouldna say a word now he’s dead and gane,’ said the elder; ‘but only in warning to your souls.’

If there's a careless shepherd whose ain the sheep are not, that lets his flock stray where they will, and pays no heed to the day of visitation, weel I wot it's little more than justice if the first blow falls on him.'

Here there was a general outcry of indignation. 'A better man never steppit;' 'As good to the poor folk as if he had been their brother;' 'And worth six of your newfangled preachers;' 'Elder though you be, you're no blate to say a ill word o' the minister;' 'And him scarce in his grave yet,' cried old Sandy, as the climax of the storm.

'I'm no minding what you say,' said the elder, as he withdrew; 'it's my place, and no yours, to speak. The Lord is no to be cheated as we are. And though he may have been a good man—(and the Lord grant he was prepared!)—that's not to say he mightna be a careless shepherd. He wouldna see the day of visitation—nor would you—and behold your house is left unto you desolate. Take tent to yourselves as long as there is time.'

The parish in general, however, did not take up the matter in Andrew's way. The day of visitation by this time had but little effect upon anybody's mind, and Mr. Lothian's virtues were fully acknowledged. And the mind of the district was moved with the profoundest longing for news, however small the scrap might be, that was afforded

to it. People sprang up on every side who had seen a man about whom they did not recognise as a person known on the Loch. But, then, unfortunately the differences in their descriptions of him were so great that no individual likeness could be made out. One declared he was a perfect giant, another a little hunchback, one that he was dressed like a gentleman, and another that he was the meanest tramp. Jean Campbell was the only witness who had anything to tell; and her story, indeed, was terribly distinct as to the fact, though wanting in every detail that could identify the criminal. She gave her deposition in the narrative form which is always congenial to the peasant mind, and held by it steadily, though her strong, vigorous frame and rude health were almost worn out by what she had seen.

‘I had been to the mill to ask about my meal,’ said Jean; ‘and then I thought I would step in at the Manse and just ask for Mrs. Lothian, who is my stepdaughter. I heard a horse coming in the distance as I came out on the highroad from the awfu’ lonesome lane that leads to the mill. And glad I was to hear it. “Here’s company coming,” I said to myself. Ye’ll maybe no ken the road. There’s a high bank on one side with trees, and on the other you’re just on the braes, that are whins, and heather, and naething else. I was walking

slow on that side to let the horseman come up, for it's an ill bit of the road, and a man's company is aye canny. Just afore the horse came up, I was awfu' frichtened wi' a rustling on the bank. It was dark, and ye couldna have seen your hand before you; but I could see there was somebody among the trees, and what would he be doing there? I canna think he saw me, for the bank is awfu' thick with trees, and I was doun among the whin-bushes, and a' dark round and round. The horse came up, galloping as steady as a rock; but, just as it came to me, there was a blast of branches, and stones and moss came rumbling down the bank, just before the beast's very feet. He was a very spirity beast, as a' the parish kens — and he backit, and he reared, and up with his feet in the air, till I was nigh out of my senses with fright. Then there was a whirr first, and I heard a fa' and a groan. It was an awfu' thud, and the groan was an awfu' groan. I think he must have fainted. And I was awfu' feared myself; but before I could recover the man was down from the brae. There was a break in the clouds for a moment, and I could see him come rumbling down the bank. . . . No, I canna tell you what like he was. It was just a black shadow on the black trees. He went up to the one that had fallen, and me, thinking nae evil, I took heart, and ran up from where I had been among the

whins, and went forward too. The one black spot bent ower the other, as if it had been to lift him—and me, it was on my lips to say, “Lord bless us! I’m here too, and we’ll save the poor man!” And then I saw a motion, and heard it. . . . Eh, dinna ask me what!—a dull, heavy stroke, and a crack, and another groan. I gave a cry—if he had killed me the next minute I couldna have helped it; and the creature started, and made a grasp at something, and then turned and stared a’ round. I gied scream after scream, no able to stop. I had sunk down among the whins, and he couldna see me. And then he began to speel the brae as fast as he had come down. I stood there and cried, and durstna stir. And in a whilie down the lane came Andrew White and his wife and their laddie, with a lantern. And then we saw it was the minister. I was near dead with the fright and the awfu’ feeling myself. For weel I saw he had been murdered there where he lay. The laddie ran to the village for help, and Andrew’s man came down from the mill. And when I came to myself, I took my gown over my head, and ran a’ the way till I got to the Manse. . . . Me catch the villain! how could I catch him—and him up like a wild-cat into the wood? Na, I thought of Isabel. . . . I’m meaning of Mrs. Lothian, his poor young wife. And that is a’ I can tell you, if ye were to question me till the morn.’

The miller's testimony corroborated Jean's. 'The wife' had cried upon him, as he was sitting down to his supper, to come and listen to the screams from the brae; and Andrew being no coward, and having bowels of compassion, notwithstanding his gloomy view of religious matters, rushed down immediately with his wife and 'the laddie.' He heard a rustling in the wood as he passed, but took no notice, not connecting it, he said, with the accident, and found the minister insensible, and scarcely breathing. He had had a bad fall from his horse, which of itself Andrew thought must have been enough to injure him seriously; and there was besides the fatal blow on the forehead, which had smashed the skull, and extinguished all consciousness and possibility of life. The testimony of the doctor was the only other important point in the evidence. He could not decide whether the other injuries might not have been fatal. That they were very serious, there was no doubt; but it was the blow which had killed Mr. Lothian. As to the man who did it, however, no information could be gathered. He was to Jean but 'a black shadow' in the darkness. She could not even tell what was his height, or dress, or anything about him. The only thing of which she could be quite sure, was that the covering on his head was not a hat, which, in her opinion, made

it evident that he must be a tramp—for gentlemen in those days did not wear the undignified head-dresses of this more familiar period. And then, the whole country-side came in with tales of men it had seen—men of every variety of look, and dress, and purpose—who turned out to be pedlars, and labourers in search of work, and tourists, and innocent vagrants of every description, capable of giving an account of themselves. There was one story, better authenticated than the rest, of a strange man, who had certainly been seen in the steamer going down Loch Lomond the next day, with a scarf round the lower part of his face, though it was June, and his hat slouched over his brows—but then it was a wet day, and a man in the Highlands may put on a comforter without having any intention of concealing himself. And there was no telegraph in these days by which to pursue a fugitive, even had the traces of him been sufficiently distinct; and they were not at all distinct. There were not two people in the Loch who were agreed in opinion on the subject: some thought Jean's story altogether a delusion, and that the minister must have struck against something with his head as he fell; and some thought it was a vulgar murder, with intent to rob; and some thought it was some one whom Mr. Lothian had offended, who, seeing the minister

thus at his mercy, had given a sudden blow, perhaps not meaning to kill. There was even a certain amount of suspicion concentrated upon a certain wild fellow of the district, Robbie Sinclair by name, whose poaching and drinking propensities, and general lawlessness of behaviour, had made him subject to repeated reproof from the parish authorities. Just before the minister started for London, Robbie had been exposed to special reprimand, and had taken it very sulkily. 'What better is he than me?' the reprobate had been heard to say. 'If I had plenty o' siller, and could marry a wife like that, and take her to London, would I fash my head about the Paitricks or Betty Simpson?' And he had clenched his fist at Mr. Lothian. But Robbie, when he heard of the suspicion, came indignant, with his brown face in a glow, and demanded an investigation into all his circumstances at the time. 'Me strike a man that was down?' he cried, with fierce scorn of the accusation; and was believed from that day to have turned over a leaf, and become a new man.

The world of Loch Diarmid was thus utterly at sea, both as to the murderer and as to the motive for the crime. The minister had no enemies; for, to be sure, there was a difference between uttering a spiteful comment on his conduct in the smithy or 'at the doors,' and murdering him

in a lonely road under cover of night. The general explanation of the torn ruffle was, that the murderer dimly perceived some ornament on his victim's breast, and snatched at it before he was scared by Jean's cries, which left him no time for further investigation. The poor little brooch, with its setting of pearls, and the two curls of hair intertwined, attained notoriety in the papers, being described elaborately over and over again, in case it should be offered anywhere for sale. But no clue to the murderer was obtained in this way. The excitement gradually died down in the country-side. And then a new excitement springing up—the interesting question of the new presentee, to whom the Marquis had given the living, in Mr. Lothian's place—quenched the commotion about the minister's murder almost as suddenly as it had risen. The road became a place of evil fame to all the population on the Loch; the game in the wood through which the slayer had vanished was safer than though protected by a score of keepers; nobody who could help it cared to pass the spot after dark; and the tale was told to every new comer, with praises of the minister and shakes of the head, and, 'Eh, it'll be lang or we see his like,' in all parts of the parish. And then the excitement died out; and 'at the doors,' and on the way to church, and in the smithy, and everywhere

else where the parish resorted, all thoughts and criticisms began to centre in the presentee.

But while this gradual softening process acted upon the parish at large, the Manse was left like a desolate island in the midst of all the life and sunshine. All at once, mysteriously, as by a stroke of magic, the light had vanished from it; a sort of dumb horror wrapt the house, abstracting it from the community of which it had been for so long a cheerful centre. Grass began to grow on the path from the gate to the door. Except Miss Catherine and Jean Campbell, who went and came daily, and messengers with inquiries after Mrs. Lothian, which naturally grew less and less frequent as time went on, nobody visited the house of mourning. Not that there was any lack of popular sympathy for the young widow. There was not a lady in the county who did not make her appearance at the Manse-gates, to offer social consolation, or, at least, condolences. But Isabel saw nobody. She was stunned. The effect upon her whole being was such that she shrank from anything outside of the dim rooms and silent house so suddenly changed to her. She had not been a very joyful bride; her satisfaction in her life had been brightened by no transport of hope or unusual flush of happiness; everything had been very quiet in tone, sweet content, peace, a dutiful satisfaction with her

lot. And yet the most blessed of brides could not have been more distraught than Isabel when the sudden blow came, which shattered her life in a moment, and drove her back upon her old restless, petulant self, the being from whom she had escaped.

There had been something in her husband's society, in his unwavering observance of all her wishes, and in the consciousness of being loved so much more than she herself could love, and elevated to so much higher a position in his mind than she could feel belonged to her by nature, which harmonized all the jarring chords in her being, and would have made of her as sweet a woman as was the ideal of her which existed in Mr. Lothian's heart. All her impatient ways, her little freaks of temper, her movements of self-will, had been lulled into rest, and were vanishing from her, under that sweetest discipline of adoration, and admiration, and over-love. There are mean natures which are spoiled by such usage, but Isabel was not one of them: in proportion as she had been elevated on that visionary pedestal, the girl had grown humbler and more humble. All that exquisite tender worship for her, all this watchful, never-slumbering care, observance of her smallest likings, remembrance of her most trifling words—What was she, that she should be

treated as a princess of romance? Unawares, this elixir of life had penetrated through and through her. To lessen herself by any thoughtless word or act was a thing she had never feared or even thought of; but to lessen her husband's ideal Isabel, the creature he believed in, was not to be done, whatever sacrifice it might cost the real Isabel, the tender impostor who was training herself unawares into the dream-woman whom he loved so much. How we should all improve, if we were tried in that same way, instead of by the way of doubts, and jars, and contradictions, and an estimate under not over us, as is the way of the world!

And now this was all over and past. Miss Catherine loved her almost like a mother; but after the first shock was over, she would come and look with a certain disapproving eye at the languor of the girl-widow. 'My dear, if you would but exert yourself a little,' she would say, with a grieved yet half-reproachful tone. And Jean Campbell had given herself up body and soul to the service of her stepdaughter. She had left her own children almost untended at the Glebe, the highest devotion of which woman is capable, to give her whole time and care to the other child, who had been very undutiful to her by times, and not very respectful, and yet was 'our Isabel'—but

even Jean would shake her head and venture a remonstrance now and then, or, at least, show in her eyes that she noted, not admiringly but critically, and even disapprovingly, a hundred little matters in her stepdaughter's demeanour. When such a keynote is struck, it is amazing how soon the strain goes through a house. The very maids would remonstrate with sorrowful Isabel: 'Eh, mem, if ye would but rouse up a wee.' 'It'll no do to fight against the Lord.' 'It's *His* doing, and we maun put up with it.' 'A bit turn in the garden would do you good.' Even Kirstin and Mary now addressed her in such words as these. From her pedestal she had been brought down again to the ordinary level upon which, but for the natural reverence due to grief, she would again have been only Isabel. And that first conventional regard for grief which moves all bystanders at the moment does not last long. Sympathizers expect the creature with whom they have grieved to take a little comfort from their sympathy, to raise its head, not too soon perhaps, but yet soon enough to do credit to those who have condoled with it; and make a very fine distinction between 'proper grief,' and the pretentious sorrow which refuses to be comforted. Isabel's friends were very sorry for her in that she had lost her husband; but it did not occur to them that she had also lost her life; the peaceful harmo-

nious, subdued existence which day by day was widening into a fuller content.

It was horror first which had stunned the poor girl, and then it was this sense of her existence lost, which prolonged the heavy dullness long after the time at which it might have been supposed to give way to some faint pulsation of returning life. Her youthful, light heart had been buried in the grave with Margaret; and now the sweet, calm, untroubled existence which had seemed to be her lot, was laid under the sod with her old husband. A strange fate for one so young. She seemed to have died and come to life again, and the second life was full of jarring noises, of painful strains upon her patience, and contradiction of her wishes. She tried to stop her ears, and would not hear them. Oh! how could she go on living? How could she leave the Manse, her husband's house, and go back to the Glebe, as if she were still the Captain's Isabel, and there had been no such strange year in her existence. It was not yet a year since she had gone a pensive bride out of her father's house. Was it a dream? And now must she wake up, and take up her empty days, her restless heart, her unsatisfied being, with Jean Campbell and the bairns? She could not rouse herself to do it. And yet she felt her old hasty heart rising up angry against the little

interferences, the little dictations, the importunate advices, which assail the new-made widow.

Thus the winter closed in again upon the hills, wrapping the closed Manse in all its mists and clouds. While the parish was contending hotly about the presentee, Isabel shut herself up in her house, which was still hers until his appointment should be settled, like the ghost of what she had been. One of the maids was already dismissed, in preparation for the final breaking up. The gardener had gone some time before. And only the sorrowful young mistress, with her widow's cap on her brown curls, and desolation in her heart, and old Kirstin, who had been the minister's housekeeper in old days, dwelt alone in the mournful Manse.

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CHAPTER II.

‘DOES she know?’ said Miss Catherine. Jean Campbell had come to her, as she now often did with some scrap of news or matter to be consulted over concerning Isabel, notwithstanding that the old lady saw her almost daily. They had been having an anxious confabulation over some matter which had brought the tears to Jean’s honest eyes, though her mouth was quivering with a smile; and Miss Catherine, too, had wiped her glasses. They were laying their heads together, two kindly conspirators, over the fortunes of the melancholy girl. It was already three months after the minister’s death, and according to all rational prognostications, Isabel, who was not to call in love with her husband, as they both believed, ought to have been able to hold up her head a little, like a rose after a storm.

‘She’s that innocent, I canna tell,’ said Jean, ‘it was Kirstin that spoke to me, and our Margret, you see, was one that would never have a word spoken before her young sister. There’s scarce

a wean on the Loch but knows mair of such things than she does. But, eh, it would be an awfu' comfort to her heart.'

'One would think so,—one would think so,' said Miss Catherine; 'but I never would say with the like of Isabel. She's not just like other folk. She has aye puzzled me from her birth. Not but what I am fond of her, very fond of her, but——'

And the old lady shook her head. She had never shaken her head at Isabel as long as Mr. Lothian lived to throw the shield of his love over everything she said and did. Miss Catherine might laugh at the minister's fondness, but it invested its object with dignity in her eyes. But now that shield was withdrawn, and the old position was resumed. 'But I think she should be told,—and told soon,' she added, ending her sentence as she did not mean it should end.

'But she canna fail to find out herself, by-and-bye,' said Jean. 'She's that innocent, like the babe in the cradle—but still the time will come when she must find out for hersel.'

'But we'll not wait for that,' said Miss Catherine, peremptorily. The announcement made to her had been such a one as goes to a woman's heart, and it involved many preparations to make, and an event to look forward to—something which should break the monotony of life, and bring a new interest into

it. This, after all, is the thing which keeps life alive, especially in the country and among women. That there should be something to look forward to, —something going to happen, which cheats the days along, and makes flying-bridges over the flats from point to point. And the possibility of a new event was doubly important after the overwhelming character of the last. Miss Catherine was so disturbed by the news that she felt scarcely capable of going about her ordinary occupations ; and, at a very early period, much earlier than the usual afternoon hour at which she made her visits to Isabel, put on her bonnet and set out. She was so full of it that she could scarcely restrain herself from repeating the news to her own confidential maid, or even pausing in the village to get sympathy from some one ; and indeed Jenny Spence waylaid her, and came out to the door to ask for the young widow, in whom the whole community felt an interest which was not impaired even by the excitement about the presentee.

‘How is she the day, Miss Catherine?’ said Jenny, ‘in a general way we hear through Jean ; but either she’s no been at the Manse this morning, or she went hame by the braes.’

‘Very likely,’ said Miss Catherine, ‘Mrs. Lothian is just in her ordinary as far as I can hear.’

‘Poor thing,’ said Jenny, ‘and they tell me she

canna be got to rouse up or take an interest in anything. Eh, what an awfu' pity there's no family, nor naething coming to take up her thoughts!'

And when she uttered this crafty speech, Jenny fixed her eyes inquisitively upon the old lady, with a look of a woman whose suspicions are aroused.

Miss Catherine blushed. She felt the burden of her secret. 'I've had no conversation with her on the subject,' she said, struggling with the temptation; 'I don't think she has opened her heart to anybody, nor indeed if there's anything to tell.'

'If *you* dinna ken, Miss Catherine, naebody can ken,' said Jenny, with a marked pause intending to express polite but somewhat reproachful incredulity. And then she added, 'Ane can never tell if it's to be desired. She's but young, and she'll get another man; and if there was any family——'

'Whisht, woman, whisht!' cried Miss Catherine; 'the minister's grave is scarce green yet, and how dare ye talk of another man?'

'I was meaning no offence,' said Jenny, thus suddenly pulled up in her anticipations.

'No, I don't suppose it; but if you could see that poor thing's melancholy face—— However, you must not build any fancies on what I've said,'

added Miss Catherine, 'I know nothing,—not a word has she said to me.'

'As if Kirstin was a wean and couldna tell!' said Jenny to herself, as the lady of the Manor passed on; and, indeed, it was apparent that Kirstin's communications had been tolerably general; and by the time she reached the Manse gates, Miss Catherine had become weary of the significant questions put to her. 'How is Mrs. Lothian th' day?' 'I hope she's beginning to take heart a little.' 'Eh, she should think there's mair to consider than hersel.'

'Poor thing!' said Miss Catherine, driven to bay, 'it is that that makes it so hard to rouse her. She has neither mother nor sister, not a creature belonging to her; unfortunately she has nobody to consider but herself.' And with this speech which made an end to the controversy, the old lady hastened on.

'Can she no have heard?' said the women at the doors, looking at each other with puzzled looks. There was a little consternation among them lest their information should be inaccurate; but they ended, as Jenny had done, by the reflection that Kirstin was a woman of experience, and knew what she was speaking of, and that they had only the earliest knowledge of the fact—a thought which gave satisfaction to their souls.

To Miss Catherine's great astonishment, Isabel was in the garden when she reached the Manse. The young creature, in her gloomy dress, with her pale face surrounded by the snowy-white background of her cap, was seated by the window on the little terrace. It was a grey September afternoon, with now and then a burst of pathetic sunshine from the edges of the clouds—pathetic, because so often vanquished by blasts of rain—and mountainous piles of cloud heaped up upon the sky. Isabel sat full in the light, like a pale saint. The flowers in the borders were still bright; the mignonette lending a soft perfume to the air; the fuchsia branches all waving with their graceful bells. Before her the Loch lay somewhat leaden in the changeful light, a dark cloud interposing between it and the sun; and the horizon was low upon the hills, rain hanging round their skirts ready to come down at a moment's notice. It was a day full of the unconscious moralizings of nature—light one moment, gloom another. Isabel started when she heard the click of the latch. It was hard for her, even now, to believe that it was not the minister coming peacefully home. But instead of sinking upon her seat again, she turned to meet her friend, and going up to her with a step unconsciously changed in its measure, stopped just before they met, looked at her with a strange,

wavering, unsteady smile, and then threw herself into the arms which were opened to receive her, and fell into a passion of tears upon Miss Catherine's shoulder. The very tears were different—not the dew that would gather in her eyes unawares, but a hot, eager flood, full of new life. One or two whispers were exchanged between the two women, as they stood thus clasping each other, the exquisite fitful light flooding the whole world about them, and the silent house with its open windows behind. Mary and Elizabeth over again—always under so many changes of circumstances the same old scene.

But it was a long time after this—almost Christmas—when Isabel's baby was born. After that interview with Miss Catherine, the young widow began to raise herself up, like a daisy that had been crushed under foot. There was a little faltering and effort to shake off the heavy weight of dew, and all the soils of earth and the grave; but gradually the delicate head raised itself, the faint rose-tint came back, the bowed-down form grew erect. She had lost all that had come to her by the mere fact of being a wife; but something else was in store—another existence, a new dignity. She waited for it through the winter, with a pensive patience which touched the very heart of the country-side. Before the event occurred, she had

removed out of the Manse back to her own cottage at the Glebe, and the women 'at the doors' were all in a state of flutter and agitation, lest the trial should be too much for her. But Isabel, with her new strength, did not feel the trial. Her eyes were turned from the past to the future. It did not grieve her, as they all thought it would, to see the new minister come in and take possession—he, and his wife, and his heaps of children. Perhaps she had never loved her husband so much as she did in those days when the first mourning for him was over; but her love was the love of a child to a father. Was not he the father of her inexpressible hopes—of her perfected nature—of all the higher life she had ever known? And her eyes would fill with tears at his name; but the tears ceased to be bitter, for one's heart does not break over one's father's grave. One weeps—and the world goes on—and one learns to smile.

So it was with Isabel. By degrees, and unconsciously, the feeling came to her that her child was hers only,—a miraculous gift, the very blessing of Heaven embodied. She did not even feel, as so many women do under such circumstances, the anguish of the thought that there was no father to welcome little Margaret into the world—to protect the helpless creature. Was not she herself there with her youth come back to her, life running

warm in her veins, and such strength as she never felt herself possessed of before? All the clouds seemed to roll away from her when the child came. There was the one awful recollection in her mind indeed which nothing could ever blot out—and there was the soft sorrow, natural grief falling into tender regret, for her husband as for a father. But her child was more to her than its father had ever been. He had but cherished, elevated, worshipped her; but here was something which she in her turn could worship and cherish, and make into a wonder of grace and loveliness. To be loved is much—but to love with the utter abandonment of a young mother's passion is more. To give is, if not more blessed in this particular, at least more profound and absorbing than to receive. It was the great mystery of nature all over again, though Isabel was unconscious of it. Her husband had given to her the full devotion of a mature, experienced soul, which neither age, reflection, nor philosophy, could fortify against a love more deep and as ardent as that of any boy; and she had given him a soft filial tenderness, a mild affection, in return. And now Isabel lavished all her wealth of passion upon a child who as yet was incapable of giving her anything in return. Thus love's divine vindication of itself from all charge of egotism or selfishness was repeated and carried on;

but the young mother was not aware of this. To her her infant's cooings were a celestial recompense for all her pain, just as it had been the supremest gift of Heaven to Mr. Lothian to have his Isabel, soft, unimpassioned, tender creature, to answer all the ardour of his love with a timid smile and a half-concealed sigh.

Even the Glebe Cottage put on a different aspect with the coming of the new life. The grey parlour, which was so full of memories, the room in which Margaret had died, in which Isabel had been married, and which under other circumstances would have been an awful place to return to, in the renewed and deepened gloom, was all a flutter now with the white robes, the baby-paraphernalia, all the scraps of lace and heaps of muslin in which young mothers find so much delight. The place was metamorphosed and knew itself no longer. It was the centre of a hundred sweet consultations, such gossiping, in the true sense of the word, as renews the female soul. Even Miss Catherine was transfigured by the new event. 'I have gotten a grandchild in my old age,' she said with tears and smiles as she carried little Margaret into the parlour where one of Mr. Lothian's old friends stood waiting by the white-covered table to baptize the fatherless child. It was one of many scenes which were heart-breaking in their pathos to the by-

standers, but did not somehow bear the same aspect to the principal actor in them. The old clergyman who performed the ceremony broke down in the midst of it. He was a grandfather himself, and had not hesitated a year ago to make many a kindly joke upon Lothian's infatuation. But the sight of his old comrade's child, which would have been the crown of his joy, and which he had not even been permitted to know of, was more than the good man could bear. And the Dominie, who was standing by, turned quite round and leaned his grey head upon the wall, and could not suppress the groan which came out of his heart. And Miss Catherine and all the women wept aloud. But Isabel, with her child in her arms, smiled in the midst of all their tears. Her eyes were wet, which made them all the brighter. The excitement of the moment in her weak condition had quickened all the tints of lily and rose in her soft cheeks—the golden life-gleam in her brown hair shone out under her cap like a concealed crown. And she smiled upon them all with a certain wonder at their emotion, facing life and fate and all that could come out of the unknown, tranquil with her treasure in her arms.

‘Poor thing!’ the Dominie said; ‘poor thing!’ laying one hand on the mother's young head, and looking down from his great height upon the

child, his harsh face all working with emotion. He had hard ado not to weep like the women, and to keep down the climbing sorrow which choked him, in his throat.

‘Why poor thing?’ said Isabel softly, looking up to him, ‘why poor thing? She has me.’

‘And you are but a bairn yourself,’ said the Dominie, with his broken groan.

‘I am her mother,’ said Isabel, ‘who had I but Margaret? and Margaret was only my sister. And I am young and strong. She has me!’

‘My dear,’ said the old minister, who with all his sympathy could not let such a speech pass unrebuked, ‘she has her Father in heaven. She has the Father of the fatherless. You must not build on your youth and strength. Have we not all seen what awful change and overturn may happen in a single day?’

And then Isabel looked up at him with her tear-dilated, smiling eyes. It was cruel to thrust back upon her at such a moment the terrible tragedy in which she had such a part. But even that did not discourage the young mother. Two great tears wrung out of their fountains, as if her heart had been suddenly grasped by some harsh hand, dropped from her eyes. Before they fell she had already turned her head with a little start, that they might not drop upon the child. ‘I’ll live for

her,' she said. 'Oh I'll have strength for her,—God would never have me leave my baby alone in the world.' And then the smile came back,—an invincible smile, not to be quenched by any discouragement. When she was left alone even, and had no longer that stimulus of self-defence and resistance which came natural to her character, in the silence she still kept her smile. There, where Margaret had died,—where she herself had stood up in her white simplicity of maidenhood to be married, she sat by the imperfect light of the fire with her baby asleep on her knees, and defied all fear and sorrow. All the frivolous thoughts of youth had died out of her (so far as she was aware) as much as if she had been Miss Catherine's age. No longing for any love beyond the one she possessed was in her heart. Her sister, and her husband, whom she could scarcely dissociate now the one from the other, had left her on the way. But did not this make amends,—this which no one could take away, which was altogether her own?

'Has the lassie no heart?' said the Dominie, as he attended Miss Catherine down the brae. His own was sore for his friend. The minister had been to him a profounder loss than to Isabel; the solace of his life, his companion, the occupation of those evenings which were all that remained to him to enjoy in this world, had all gone with Mr. Lothian.

And to think his friend could have thrown away all his love on an insensible woman who could smile over her baby, and forget him so soon! 'This time twelvemonth he was planning where he was to take her,—how he was to please her; and now—— Have women no hearts?'

'Her heart is full of her child,' said Miss Catherine, with a touch of personal compunction, for she, too, had been thinking of the baby, and not of its father. 'You forget—she was fond of him, and grateful to him, but she might have been his daughter. It was not love like—what was thought of in my day.'

'Or in mine,' said the Dominie.

What the two old people thought in the pause that followed, it is not for us to expound. Surely the world had changed somehow since 'my day,' was colder, less real, less true—and life was growing more and more into such stuff as dreams are made of. But that perhaps was because to both of them,—old unwedded, inexperienced souls, the half of life had never been any more than a dream.

'You must not think ill of Isabel,' said Miss Catherine, after a pause. 'Until this hope came to her, she was heart-broken enough, poor bairn! And now she is all for the baby. Had the father been living and well, she would have forgotten his existence in the presence of that child.'

‘ And that’s why I ask,’ said the Dominie, with bitterness: ‘ Have women no hearts ? ’

‘ Some of us,’ said Miss Catherine; and they walked on together along the head of the Loch without exchanging another word. Curious, we repeat, to imagine what thoughts upon this subject, which belongs to the young, could be passing in their old maiden souls. Whatever their ideas might be, they did not communicate them to each other, but walked on side by side, with a secret panorama before them of two lives which were almost over, and to which no one but themselves possessed the clue. They were old friends, and thought they knew all about each other; but neither had the faintest insight into that vision of the past which each saw as they walked side by side along the habitual path.

But it was not the past which occupied Isabel, as she sat, in the firelight, with her baby on her knee. It was chiefly a soft respite from all pains and cares, the sense of ease, and weakness, and repose in the present. And whether it was feminine insensibility, as the Dominie thought, or absorption in her new treasure, or the want of any real love towards her dead husband, certain it is that no longing for him or for any one was in her mind. What she had was enough for, and filled her up. To find herself, a shipwrecked creature, tossed

from one woe to another, finding calm but to lose it again,—disappointed, sorrowful, and bereaved—to have suddenly floated once more into this safe, sure haven, so warm and still and satisfying and full of hope, was such a wonder and blessing as silenced all other thoughts. But for the child, what a desert her life would have been! And with the child, was it not a rich garden, to be filled with flowers and fruits and everything that makes existence lovely? Such were her musings, as she sat by the fire, a soft, weak, helpless woman, tired if she went two or three times across the little room, but, nevertheless, fearless to confront life and all it could do to her, no longer languid or discouraged now that she had, not only herself to care for, but her child.

‘My bonnie woman!’ said Jean, coming in, ‘you mustna sit there and think. Ye’ve been real brave, and kept up your heart wonderful; but you mustna think, for her sake as well as your ain.’

‘I am not thinking,’ said Isabel, softly, and for the moment there sprung up in her a certain wonder at her own insensibility. Was she really insensible, unfeeling? She was not moved as they expected her to be. Things that she was encouraged to be brave for, as ‘a trial,’ proved no trial to her. Was it that her heart had sunk into

coldness? And yet was it not full of love that ran over and filled every crevice of her being, for the baby on her knee?

‘Tell me, was this your feeling when *they* were born?’ she said, with a little movement of her head towards the other part of the house in which Jean’s children were; ‘that nothing mattered any more—that you could bear everything and forget what it was to grieve, and work and toil and never tire—was that your feeling, too?’

‘Eh, I canna mind what was my feeling,’ said Jean, shaking her head, ‘except that I was awfu’ glad it was over. But your father was living, Isabel, and I had no need to take that thought—and besides, I was different from you.’

‘Ah, my father was living!’ said Isabel, with a little gasp, stopped short by the words, although even then she did not apply them to herself with any feeling that her case was harder than that of her stepmother. If it was harder it was sweeter, too, for her child was all her own.

‘Awfu’ different from you,’ said Jean; ‘ye can sit still and put a’ your bit fancies together, you lady-things that are above common folk; but what I was thinking was, how to get weel and be stirring about the house to keep a’ right for the Captain, and Margret, and you. My weans were what I loved best, I’ll no deny it—but they werena

my first thought; I had to think of *him* first and the house, and how to please ye a'; and syne took the wee thing to my breast for a comfort. There was aye the work that came first—and may be when a's done it is the best way.'

'You think I'm idle,' said Isabel, with a faint blush, 'but you shall see how different it will be. I was thinking we might build something on to the cottage—another room, or perhaps two. We have plenty now; and by the time she grows up—'

'Oh, Isabel, ye're like a bairn with a new doll: let the poor infant take a grip of her life before you think of the time when she'll be grown up. Ye'll be for a man to her next.'

'Oh, no, no man,' said Isabel, with a little shiver; 'what should my baby want with a man? She'll be mine as I am hers—my only one, all I have in the world.'

'You're little better than two weans together,' said Jean, looking pitifully down upon the mother and child and drying her eyes. Two-and-twenty, that was the girl's age, with half a century of life still before her, all its stormier, harder part, the heat of the day and the burden. Could she go through the world as she thought, with no wakening of other feelings in her heart,—altogether wrapt in this motherly virginal passion for her child? 'She'll be but a young woman still, when

the bairn is twenty,' said Jean to herself from the eminence of her own more advanced age. Such a thing was possible as that the heart thus thrown into one strain should never diverge, nor throb to any other touch. It was possible. But the woman in her experience sighed over it, and dried her eyes with her apron, and softly shook her head.

CHAPTER III.

THUS life went on for months over Loch Diarmid. The minister's dreadful end had fallen into gentle forgetfulness. Another minister was now the referee and head and butt of the parish, discussed in the smithy, criticised at 'the doors.' And he and his wife had been asked to dinner at the neighbouring country-houses, but not with so much success as had attended the *début* of Isabel—and had called upon Mrs. Lothian, 'the last minister's widow,' as the present female incumbent described her, and had not known very well what to make of the girl in her close cap, smiling over her baby—with her strange surroundings, and curious nondescript position. Mrs. Russell, the new minister's wife, asked with a good deal of perplexity, 'Is she a lady? I know she is a great friend of Miss Catherine. But everybody knows Miss Catherine is very odd. Dined at the Marquis's in London, and went to the Opera with Lady Mary! I can scarcely believe that. How could Lady Mary,

an unmarried girl, take anybody to the Opera? She does everything for that child herself,—no nurse, nor anything like a nurse; indeed, I am not sure there was any servant at all. The woman I saw in the kitchen was her stepmother, I hear. Naturally it is not very pleasant for us to have the widow of Mr. Russell's predecessor in such a position. Of course I would like to be kind to her if I could, but—— And then the way the people speak of her! For one that calls her Mrs. Lothian, there are half-a-dozen that say just Isabel, or Isabel at the Glebe, or the Captain's Isabel, or some country name like that. I can tell you it's very embarrassing for me.'

This little statement, which was made to Mrs. Campbell of Maryburgh, the nearest clergywoman of the district, and to Mrs. Diarmid of Ardgartan, and even to the doctor's wife in the parish, got into circulation through the malice or amusement of these ladies, and roused a little flutter of indignation on Loch Diarmid, where Isabel's position was so fully understood, and where she was known beyond all controversy to be a lady born—whereas of Mrs. Russell herself nobody knew anything. But it did not disturb the quiet at the Glebe, where Baby Margaret reigned supreme, shutting out all the outer world with her small presence, her quick coming smiles, the gradual

‘notice’ she took of the external world to which she had come, her first recognition of the devoted vassals about her. Her first little pearly tooth was a greater event than the Reform Bill, which happened somewhere about that time; and it may well be supposed that the first time the small princess visibly indicated her knowledge and preference of her mother was more to Isabel than if the Queen had called upon her, much less Lady Mary. The cottage was all absorbed and wrapt up in the child for that first year of her existence. On the whole, perhaps, it is no great testimony to the female intelligence, that it can thus permit itself to be swallowed up in adoring contemplation and tendance of a helpless, speechless infant, with no intellectual existence at all. I despair of being able to explain the phenomenon to the other half of the world. But yet it is quite real and undeniable. A woman with brains, and thoughts in her head, with sympathies as quick and wide as are likely to be found in human kind, with open heart and intelligent mind, is quite capable of absorbing herself, retiring into the little being of a baby, finding in the mere operations of washing it and dressing it, and singing it to sleep, and talking nonsense to it awake, a delight more exquisite than can be given her by all the arts and all the pleasures of the world. It is not that she is content and pleased to

do her duty, but that those nursery episodes are sweet to her inmost soul, and that, when unrestrained by the necessities of life, she gives herself up to them with passion, finding every little detail delicious, and resigning her whole intellectual being, all her loftiest aspirations to the rosy, round-limbed, babbling, little fetish before which she worships. So it is, and who can tell how it comes about. Her mind might be a blank for anything it matters to the object of her adoration; her time is all frittered away in the most trifling of occupations; her every moment is filled up, her sleep broken, ceaseless attention demanded — and she is, as it were, in heaven! Foolish female creature! what can universities do for a being always ready at a moment's notice to surrender herself into voluntary idiocy like this?

Such was the condition in which Isabel spent the greater part of the following year.

‘ Her old remembrances went from her wholly
And all the ways of men so vain and melancholy.’

She lived for the child, and was as happy as the angels are in heaven; taking no thought for the future nor of the past, but living in the sweet present, which developed daily a new smile, or a new dimple, or a new capacity (she thought) in Baby Margaret. When one has the delight of dis-

covering one day that one's idol can grasp and hold the glittering toy held out to it; and on another that the rose-feet which seemed made only to be kissed, have found their proper use, and are good to stand on as well, what are all the vulgar affairs of earth, or progress of external life? The little circle of bystanders round her stood and gazed with a little wonder and much envy at Isabel, except the Dominie indeed, who, instead of envy, felt the natural masculine balance of contempt. 'A creature that has been a man's wife, and companion, and idol,' he said, 'to sink to a maternal idiot like that!'

'Eh, Maister, ye had a mother yoursel!' said Jean Campbell.

'And so I had, and a careful woman that brought us up on her very life's blood,' said the Dominie; 'but never went down on her knees that I ever heard of to a bit breathing doll. How a rational creature can do it is more than I can tell.'

'But ye see ye canna mind when ye were like that,' said Jean. 'A bairn in your arms is a winning thing; even though it might grow up to be a gruesome man,' she added, with a curious contemplation of the Dominie, 'and no be able to understand.'

'I take the compliment,' said Mr. Galbraith, with his broad, sudden smile. 'And maybe, as you

say, it's well for men that women are such fools. But it cannot last.'

'Eh, why should it no last?' said Jean. 'Her only bairn,—the only flower in her life. I've seen the like myself; if it had been a laddie, nae doubt they would have to be parted—but this one will aye be her mother's companion, a genty thing like hersel.'

The Dominic shook his head as he turned away from the door. 'It cannot last,' he said to himself dogmatically, as he went down the hill, and kept repeating it till he met Miss Catherine coming up; for in this first year of Baby Margaret's reign some courtier was always going or coming to her presence-chamber; and even to Miss Catherine he repeated his sentiment, casting it in her face, as it were, in the vehemence of his dissent.

'What cannot last?' she said. 'You mean Isabel; but it will. It's a silent life for a young creature; but she's content.'

'I cannot understand you women,' said the Dominic; 'if she keeps content it is more than I can fathom. No—if her heart had been dead like the hearts of some—but her heart has never been right awakened; and if there was any word, say of that English lad——'

'Lord, preserve us!' cried Miss Catherine, holding up her hands in dismay; 'you don't mean to

say, Mr. Galbraith, that we're threatened with him back.'

'I say only what I hear,' said the Dominie. 'They were saying in John Macwhirter's last night that he had been seen looking at the beasts on Smeaton's farm; and he should be well known at Smeaton's farm, if anywhere. There's a fine breed of cattle to be roupit.'

'Oh, yes, I know all about that,' said Miss Catherine, who had endeavoured in vain to secure some of the cattle in question. 'Archie Smeaton's a worldly-minded body, and aye hankering after more siller. But to bring that lad back,—the only man I have any fear of in the world! No, no, it is you that makes me doubt poor Isabel. With her bairn in her arms there's no man in the world she would ever look at; we need not fear that.'

The Dominie shook his head. 'It may be nature,' he said; 'you should know better than me—but at three-and-twenty, to give up ally our life to an infant, and never seek more in this world, is what I cannot comprehend. If her heart was crushed and dead it might be so, but that is not the case. I am not saying you are right or you are wrong, but it's very strange to me.'

'And for one thing, she must not know,' said Miss Catherine, with an anxious look in her face;

‘neither you nor me will say a word to let her know?’

The Dominie turned away with a grim smile. ‘If that is all your certainty,’ he said, ‘there’s no such great difference between us.’ They exchanged a few more anxious words, standing together half way up the ascent, and then Miss Catherine continued her walk towards the Glebe. But though she made an effort to answer for Isabel, her heart was very sore with the news she had just heard. That English lad!—he whom she had dreaded three years ago, and of whom she had prophesied that, being her first love, Isabel would forgive everything to him. A certain horror of him arose in her mind. ‘He has done me no harm,’ she reflected to herself, but the reflection did not bring her any comfort. She thought over all the gossip of the district during the time he was at Loch Diarmid, and she could not remember that he had harmed anybody or done anything to justify the dislike with which he had been regarded. Other English lads had visited the Loch who had been popular favourites—so that it could not be his nationality. Was it some subtle want of sympathy, some general sense of heartlessness and untruthfulness? But whatever it was, the impression produced by him had not been a kindly or friendly one. And Isabel, after all her trials, had glided into such

halcyon waters—such a soft tranquillity of content wrapped her life about! What evil spirit could have sent him back again, where he was so little wanted, to disturb a life just settling into permanent repose?

‘You have heard of something that vexes you,’ said Isabel, when, after all due court had been paid to the little princess, Miss Catherine sat wearily down and sank into a kind of abstraction; and then the old lady roused herself up with a guilty start.

‘Me!—no,’ said Miss Catherine; ‘what could I have that would vex me?—except just one thing, Isabel, my dear, if you will promise not to be frightened. There’s measles about. Jenny Spence’s second youngest—the one that was the baby——’

‘But he’s better,’ said Isabel, breathless. ‘It was last month he was ill.’

‘You can never say when they’re better,’ said Miss Catherine, solemnly; ‘and I heard they had it up at the toll on the Kilcranion road; and if one of the Chalmers’ bairns has not the whooping-cough, my ears are not to be trusted. But you must not be frightened. I was thinking if we were to take a week or two at the Bridge of Allan ——’

‘Oh, my darling!’ Isabel was saying, with her lips on her baby’s cheek, whom she had seized out of its cradle in her panic. Miss Catherine’s guilty

heart smote her, but she was not a woman to be diverted by a mere compunction from pursuing what she felt to be the safe way.

‘My dear, you promised me not to take any panic,’ she said; ‘there is no occasion. You take your walks on the braes, and not through the village; and Margaret has never been so far all her days as the toll-gate. But just to keep you easy, and her clear of all danger, I think you and me, Isabel, might go cannily away to the Bridge of Allan to-morrow. It would do us both good.’

‘You would not say that, if you thought there was no danger,’ said Isabel. ‘Oh, what would I do if anything happened to my darling? — Should I take her away to-night?’

‘There is no such hurry as that,’ said Miss Catherine; and then turned to confront Jean Campbell, whom it was more difficult to blind, and with whom it had been impossible to have any private communication. ‘We are going off to the Bridge of Allan,’ she said, with a faint conciliatory smile; ‘we are just making up our minds all at once. A change would do Isabel good; and as for the child, babies are always the better for a change of air.’

‘And there’s measles in the village, and whooping-cough,’ said Isabel, pressing her baby to her heart.

‘No such thing,’ said Jean. ‘Measles!—Jenny Spence’s bairns had them, but they’re all better a month ago; and there’s nae kink-cough I’ve heard of atween this and Maryburgh. Na, if it’s for your pleasure, that’s different. But eh! dinna tempt Providence by getting into a panic when there’s nae trouble near.’

‘I think you’re wrong about the kink-cough,’ said Miss Catherine. ‘There’s one of Peter Chalmers’s boys ——’

‘He’s had that cough as long as I can mind,’ said Jean. ‘Na, na, my bonnie woman, dinna you be feared; there’s naething catching in the parish but I’m sure to hear of it. Put down the bairn, and let her sleep.’

‘Well, I am of a different opinion,’ said Miss Catherine; ‘and I’m wearying for a change. I’ll take my maid, Marion, who is very experienced about bairns, and we’ll start in the morning to-morrow with the boat. I cannot stay, Isabel, my dear. Keep up a good heart, and the fine air yonder will make you look like two roses, the baby and you. —— Lord preserve us, woman!’ said Miss Catherine, turning round upon Jean, to whom she had made a sign to follow her, as soon as they were outside the door, ‘could ye not see I had a reason? and was making you signs enough to rouse a whole

parish—if she had not been so taken up with the bairn.’

‘Me!—how could I tell?’ said Jean, surprised; ‘and I couldna find it in my heart to put her in such trouble, and it no true.’

‘Nonsense about putting her in trouble!’ said Miss Catherine, energetically. ‘Perhaps you would like better to wring her heart, and bring in another man to her, and turn all her peace to distress once more.’

‘What man?’ asked Jean, seizing with instant penetration the point at question.

‘Yon English lad!’

‘Eh, me!’ said Jean Campbell, ‘blessings on you for a quick thought, and a quicker act. I heard he had been seen over the hill. I’ll swear it’s the kink-cough!’ she added, under her breath; and so the bargain was made.

It was the first night of pain Isabel had spent since her baby was born. It seemed to her as if she ought to get up and fly away with her through the darkness, to escape from so terrible a danger; and she went back a hundred times to the cradle after the little Margaret had been disposed of for the night to listen to her breathing, and look at her little rosebud face, and touch her tiny fingers, and make sure she had not caught anything.

‘The bairn’s as well as ever she was in her life,’ Jean said at last, with a little impatience, as this process went on.

‘But you said there was whooping-cough about,’ said Isabel.

‘I said it might be,’ said Jean, ‘for anything I ken; but, eh, why do you think our bairn should get it, and no other bairn a’ the country round?’

‘Because she is all I have in the world,’ said Isabel, with a sudden fall out of the soft content in which her life had been wrapped.

Jean did not know of the revolution which that moment made. She saw the brown eyes open wide and flash in the soft, domestic light, but had no insight to perceive how Isabel had suddenly stumbled, as it were, against the limits of her lot, and woke up to see that her happiness was as a flower on the edge of a precipice, that all her life was concentrated in this one blossom, against which nature itself, and the winds and the rains, and the summer heats and the autumn chill, were ready to rise up. Most mothers have gone through that same sudden gleam of imagination, and beheld heaven and earth contending against a child in whose frail ship of life all their nature of happiness was embarked. Isabel saw herself standing as on the brink of a more dreadful

destruction than she had ever dreamt of, and her very soul failed within her. It could not last. Before any new influence came in, the Dominie's words had proved themselves, though in a sense different from anything he understood.

'Oh, if harm were to come to her!' cried Isabel, with a sudden, low, stifled cry.

'Weel, weel,' said Jean, in her calm voice, 'that's what you're aye thinking as soon as ye hae weans. What if everything should gang against ye? What if trouble should come in a moment, and leave a' the rest, and strike yours? Ye mustna gie way to that, Isabel. What if the lift were to fa' and smoor the laverocks? No, no, my bonnie woman! It's no you nor me that can guard the bairn from whatever's coming, but just God—if it's His will.'

'And if it were not His will?' said Isabel, driven from despair to despair.

'Then ye would have to submit,' said Jean, didactic and almost solemn, 'as you've done before. There's nae striving against God.'

And then silence fell upon the little grey room, in which the fire flickered cheerfully, and the child slept, and Isabel's heart beat. It had been beating so quietly up to this moment, and now what wild throbs it gave against her breast! Ah, yes! God's will had to be submitted to, whatever it was

—God's will, which had carried Margaret, twenty years old, to her bed in the churchyard, and laid the minister in his blood beside her. 'Oh,' sighed Isabel, 'to be with them! to have everything over that must happen! to rest and know that nothing could happen more!

'And mony folk would tell ye,' said Jean, momentarily forgetting her compact with Miss Catherine, 'that to run away as soon as ye hear of trouble was tempting Providence, as if God couldna smite in the steamboat or the coast, as well as in your ain house. No that I'm of that way of thinking,' she added, hastily recollecting herself. 'This change will do the bairn good, and it will do you good, and relieve your mind. Na, Isabel, ye must not take fancies into your head, or think that things are worse than they are. There's little Margaret the picture of health.'

Isabel turned away, and threw herself down noiselessly on her knees by the side of her child's cradle. The baby's breathing was regular and soft; its hand was thrown up over its head, with the unconscious grace of infancy; its attitude full of ease and perfect repose. But how could any one tell? It might be like that to-night, and stricken with fever to-morrow; it might be blessedness one hour, and the next confusion, and misery, and death. Her very heart stood still as she looked at the

infant's sleep. Oh, if God would but sweep them away together somewhere, it did not matter where—into the light of heaven or the sleep of the grave—anywhere, anywhere—so that she might not have to contemplate the possibility of parting with her child. But He was not so kind as that. On the contrary, was there not something in the Bible about idols which had to be crushed, lest the heart should worship them? or if not in the Bible, certainly in sermons such as all ministers preached? Was it not true that, when you loved anything too much, God might take it from you at any minute? and indeed lay in wait for you, to catch you at your happiest, and take away the desire of your eyes? He could smite in the steamboat or on the coast, as Jean said; and what if it should be tempting Providence to go away? Thus Isabel questioned with herself, suddenly, in the twinkling of an eye, awaked out of her soft serenity and happiness, and plunged into all those fears that torture love. It had not needed the charm of another presence, such as they all feared. Nature herself had done it, shattering all the soft harmonies which herself had brought into being. Isabel, on her knees beside the cradle, could not even pray; she could but make an outcry dumbly—an inarticulate sound, like that of an animal in pain—remonstrating with God.

She lay all the night through with her child breathing sweetly beside her, debating the question with herself,—Should she remain, and put her fate into God's hands, and perhaps propitiate Him by such an appearance of trust? Poor child! she did not mean to be impious, nor to cheat Him with a semblance of confidence she did not possess. It was not her doing, but that of Love in arms, and terrified, which is always heathen in its panic. Would He be more likely to be merciful to her that way, if she placed herself before Him in the aspect of one willing to trust all in His hands? or was it most safe to go away and trust to 'means' which were not in themselves unlawful? Or, if He saw her flying with her treasure, would He send a thunderbolt after her, to punish her want of faith? Isabel's mind was full of such questions all the long night through. She did not sleep, but lay in the rustling palpable darkness, sometimes fancying the child's breathing grew hurried, sometimes that it stopped altogether, and looking all kinds of horrors in the face. She rose from her bed in the same uncertainty; and the day was cold, and Jean wavered, doubting whether such an uncertain and distant danger as that of the 'English lad's' reappearance was sufficient inducement for the immediate sacrifice demanded of her.

'I doubt it's an east wind,' Jean said, as he

went into Isabel's room to call her; 'I doubt it's tempting Providence;' and went about all her arrangements languidly, with no good-will in them. 'I'll put in all her warm winter things,' she said, as she packed the box for them; 'ye maun take awfu' care of cold. Travelling is aye dangerous, and at *her* age, the bonnie lamb!'

'Oh, tell me,' said Isabel, suddenly throwing her arms round her stepmother's neck. 'I am distracted, thinking one thing and another. Should I go, or should I stay——?'

Jean paused. She was put on her honour. It was hard to part with the baby, and allow old Marion, Miss Catherine's maid, to get her hands upon it. But she had given her word. And then 'another man' was something too frightful to be contemplated; and Isabel was young, and had once loved Stapylton, or thought she loved him. It was hard upon her stepmother to be obliged to decide; but she did so magnanimously for Isabel's good.

'It's no so cold as I thought,' she said. 'The wind's only in the north. It's no a warm wind, but it's no dangerous, like the east; and if you keep her well and keep her warm, and no trust too much to Marion, who knows nothing about

bairns, no doubt a change of air would do her good.'

And after a while Miss Catherine's carriage came to the door, and took the mother and the child away.

CHAPTER IV.

STEAMBOATS were novel luxuries in those days; but the West of Scotland was in the van of such improvements, and Loch Diarmid had secured for itself one of the earliest of those little fussy agents of civilisation and trade. The steamboat fretted its silvery bosom daily, opening up the world to the hill folk, to whom, in former days, the means of descent to the ordinary level of humanity were difficult. The steamboat fussed its little way from point to point, touching at the little piers on each side of the Loch, and at less populous corners approached by boats, the universal means of communication throughout the district. The Lochhead was its terminus and starting-point, and the little party from the House were installed in the best places and received with that rustic Scotch courtesy which, though not deferential, is so cordial and friendly. It was the morning of a lovely day in spring, one of the softest of May days, when the sun had already begun to have some force; and on

Loch Diarmid the east winds are never violent. Baby Margaret was as bright as a little rose, in her warm pelisse and bonnet, 'noticing' everything that came under her baby eyes. And her bright looks, and the bright morning, and the novelty of the start, had restored Isabel's spirits and given her new courage. Scarcely a passenger entered the steam-boat who did not come to pay his or her homage to the minister's child. And the little groups collected together and shook their heads kindly and said, 'Poor things!' under their breath, looking at the mother and child, who were, indeed, anything but poor or open to pity. 'What would she do without Miss Catherine?—she's been like a mother to her,' the women said to each other. And their conclusion was that Isabel's beneficent genius was taking her away to cheer her up and give her a little novelty in her life. 'Eh! puir thing, I wonder if she'll ever get anither man?' said one. 'If she was of my mind she would never take another man,' said another; 'one's bad enough.' 'But she's awfu' young to have nae comfort in her life.' 'Comfort! when she has her bairn.' 'And there's little comfort in a man if ye kent a', said the moralist of the party. As for Miss Catherine, she wrapped her cloak about her and arranged her shawls over her feet, and felt like a general who has accomplished a most skilful and honourable

retreat in the face of overwhelming odds. She was pleased with herself, pleased with the weather and with Isabel, and more than pleased with the baby, who crowed at her and recognised her as one of its belongings. Thus the steamboat went on rustling through the shining water, the hills rose in sight behind, the green banks sloped down to the edge of the Loch, the white houses scattered among their trees shone peaceful in the sunshine. There was not a house of them all which was not familiar to the two travellers. Miss Catherine remarked the stir that was visible about Ardgartan, and certain after-breakfast groups idling on the lawn, watching the steamer with the interest which every little daily event awakens in the country. 'They have visitors, no doubt,' she said; and Isabel was the one who found out that the windows were open at Ardnamore for the first time for months, and that some one was looking out from the gable window. 'Can they be coming back?' she said, with that familiar local knowledge, as house by house was passed by, which makes name or further identification unnecessary. Thus they went gliding along, alive to all the interests around them, when the steamer slackened its course opposite Brandon and waited for the ferry-boat. The ladies did not take much notice of the ferry-boat. Their attention was fully fixed on that figure still

visible at the gable window of Ardnamore. It was a homely, old-fashioned, whitewashed house, standing high on the brae, with a steep green slope surrounded by trees, cleared in front of it, and the white walls nestling into the darker heather of the summit above. The gable window was in a projecting wing, and all the rest of the house was still closed, which made it more remarkable still to see a human figure there.

‘Can they have come home?’ said Miss Catherine.

‘Oh, no—never that,’ said Isabel; ‘perhaps it is only the housekeeper. She might be putting the house in order for the fine weather.’

‘Or they may have had sense enough to let it, if they cannot take the good of it,’ said Miss Catherine; ‘it is a good house. There are—let me see—five, six, nine bedrooms, if I mind rightly; two in that wing, and one on the ground-floor, and the rest at the back, looking out on the hill. And the drawing-room is a pretty room, painted in panels, and all the length of the house. Oh me—if Magdalene Diarmid could have lived to see her only son wandering about the world as he is doing—’

‘But that is better than what went before,’ said Isabel. Her eyes had been fixed on the house, which already began to grow dim in the distance, as the steamer continued its course. And then she

turned her head, with a little natural sigh, thinking of Ailie and all that had happened since the two prophets disappeared into the world. She turned round, thinking of nothing beyond that limited local circle, and, raising her calm eyes suddenly, all at once encountered another pair, which were gazing at her. She started so that it seemed to her the very vessel staggered and thrilled, and gave a low suppressed cry. For the moment 'all that had happened,' and even the child she held in her arms, grew into a mist round Isabel. The eyes she had so suddenly looked up into unawares, and which were gazing upon her with extraordinary intensity, were those of the man she had once loved. Stapylton, from whom she was, without knowing it, flying, stood within half-a-dozen paces of her, on the narrow deck.

Miss Catherine heard the cry, low as it was, and felt the start with which her companion made this discovery; and turning round, saw, with feelings indescribable, the man from whose very shadow she was escaping, standing by her, taking off his hat, and claiming recognition as an acquaintance. She grew pale, and then crimson, with consternation and excitement, and in that awful moment ran over all the possibilities in her mind. Should she land at the next landing-place, thus betraying her motives to Isabel, and proceed on

their journey by some other route? Should she turn back and go home, now the dreaded meeting had been accomplished? Should she admit the claims of civility, or refuse to know him altogether? But Isabel was a free agent. She was not indifferent to the sight of him. Her start had been sufficiently evident to attract the attention of any bystander. He must have seen it himself, so near as he was, and with all his attention fixed upon them. Therefore, if it were but to shield Isabel, Miss Catherine felt that civility was her only policy. It cost her an effort to bow her proud old head in answer to his salutation; but she did it, taking the conversation and all the burdens of politeness upon herself.

‘It is something quite unexpected seeing you,’ she said, ‘Mr. Stapylton; are you here on a visit, or have you come to stay?’

‘I am going away,’ he said, half indicating with his hand a little pile of luggage. Miss Catherine ventured to take breath. If that were all, things might not turn out so badly; and she felt able to note his looks, and the changes that time had wrought in him. The first thing she observed was, that he was intensely pale, and that he looked at Isabel, in her mourning dress, with a trembling about the muscles of his mouth, and nervous movement of his hands, which betrayed some very strong feel-

ing. Why should he be moved like that to see her, after abandoning her, leaving her to be wooed by the minister, showing no sign of recollection for all these years? And yet the indications of feeling about him were too marked to be unreal; and Miss Catherine, hard as she felt it her duty to be, could not but feel a certain womanish compassion for him in her heart.

‘You can have made but a short stay, since we have heard nothing of you,’ she said; ‘you were at Archie Smeaton’s, I suppose, over the hill.’

‘For some little time,’ he said, ‘and I heard from him,’ lowering his voice, with a glance at Isabel, who had betrayed her recollection of him only by a slight movement of her head—‘of many things which grieved me much.’

Was this the old flippant, arrogant, unsympathetic ‘English lad?’ He had grown much thinner Miss Catherine decided, looking at him. His voice was subdued; the very lines of his face refined and altered. His aspect, long ago, had been that of a somewhat surly, self-sufficient youth, careless of what anybody thought of him, ready to meet reproof half way; now everything seemed softened, toned down, and improved. Yes, improved. She could not deny it to herself.

‘Yes,’ she said, hastily, ‘there have been changes; but no doubt you would hear of the chief

of them at the time they happened. We will not go over an old story. You have been in distress yourself, if I am to judge by your dress.'

'Yes,' he said; 'my father is dead; but he lingered long after the time I left the loch so hurriedly. I was kept in close attendance upon him for nearly a year. He had a tedious illness. But for that I should have returned sooner; and, I am sorry to say,' he added, 'my position is not quite so good as I had hoped.'

When he paused, inviting sympathy, Miss Catherine found herself obliged to show some sign of interest. Isabel had not spoken. She was busy with the baby, whispering to it, encouraging its play with old Marion, the maid, who had come to her other side, with a perfect understanding of the position, 'to take off her attention.' But yet Isabel had betrayed that his affairs were not indifferent to her. At this point she raised her brown eyes to him with a questioning look, much more significant than words. It asked, more plainly than her lips could have done, what it was, and all about it? And then the eyes sank confused—becoming conscious. All this pantomime Miss Catherine saw and noted with an ache in her heart.

'I have been in America this last year, looking about,' he said. 'I am cut off, if not with a shilling, still with a very poor remnant of what I ough

to have had. What with my mother and sisters, and all the rest — But I cannot expect you to be interested in this,' he added, looked at her pointedly, and then at Isabel.

'I am sorry you've been disappointed,' said Miss Catherine. 'I hope you have good prospects now.'

He shrugged his shoulders and then he stretched out his hand for one of the folding-stools which stood about the deck, and sat down in front of the little party, commanding it. 'I am thinking of settling in America,' he said.

'I have heard it is a very fine thing to do,' Miss Catherine answered with alacrity, 'for a young man.'

And then there was a pause—Isabel did not even look up this time; but her absorbed face as she arranged her child's dress, the nervous twitch of her fingers, her apparent blank of inattention, told their own tale to the anxious observer at her elbow. Did he observe it too? He did not seem to look at Isabel, but — 'it cannot be for me he is coming so close, and staying so long,' Miss Catherine said to herself.

'I had thought of Scotland once,' he said; 'I have let my own place; no chance of keeping that up at present—and if I could hear of a good farm——'

‘Dear me, I would think that was a poor business for the like of you,’ said Miss Catherine : ‘farming makes no fortunes now-a-days. For a young active man, with no encumbrance, I would say America was the thing.’

‘I suppose it is,’ he said, with a little sigh; and looked at Isabel with eyes that were almost wistful. She took no notice of him. She behaved in every respect as Miss Catherine would have had her behave, had she instructed her previously in the matter, holding up little Margaret to old Marion, taking share in the play, and when that was no longer necessary, giving her attention to her baby’s dress, keeping her eyes and hands and mind occupied. Just as she ought to have behaved, but yet, in the very perfection of this conduct, there was something which alarmed her guardian. The calmness was too elaborate, the composure too carefully put on; after the first start too, and anxious look of her appealing eyes.

But it was clear there was nothing more to be made of this. He pushed his seat away from them a little as if owning himself discomfited. ‘And you are going away?’ he said.

‘Only for a day or so,—only,—not for long I mean—to pay a visit,’ said Miss Catherine, feeling the warfare carried into her own country; and then there was another embarrassed pause. ‘You will

excuse us, I am sure, Mr. Stapylton,' she went on taking courage. 'But you see Mrs. Lothian has scarcely gone at all into society—I mean has seen nobody since — And you will perceive that here in public, with all these folk about, and seeing any stranger for the first time ——.'

'I understand,' said Stapylton. The sound of the name, *Mrs. Lothian*, had given him evidently a painful thrill. He rose to his feet when he heard it, and grew once more quite pale. Mrs. Lothian! Well, well, Miss Catherine reflected, to hear her called so, who had once been his Isabel, must have been hard upon the poor lad. She thought his lip quivered as he looked again at the young widow. And for her part, Isabel just then raised her eyes to her former lover. Tears were hanging upon their lashes, there was a look in them, which Miss Catherine could not entirely fathom. Was it a dumb sense of the terrible mystery of life which brought together in this way the two who might have been all in all to each other? or was it but an innocent pang of recollection, and half-conscious appeal to the sympathy of an old friend? Miss Catherine's heart began to melt over the two, as they looked at each other across that gulf. It was surely a gulf unchangeable, that lay between them; and in that certainty she could acknowledge with a sympathetic tear stealing to the corner of her eye

that it was hard. He took off his hat and withdrew with a delicacy of feeling for which she had not given him credit. Was it possible that she could have done Stapylton injustice after all?

And he kept apart as long as they remained together in the steamer. When they were landing at Maryburgh he did indeed approach for an instant to make himself of use to them, but without a word or look, so far as she was aware, which a saint could have censured. She did not hear, it is true, the five words which somehow dropped into Isabel's ear when she found herself standing dizzy and agitated on the pier, 'I shall see you again;' that was all. But Miss Catherine did not hear them, or perhaps she would have been less softened in respect to Stapylton, and less satisfied that he was finally got rid of, and to be seen no more.

Isabel was a perplexity to her friend for all the rest of the journey. Instead of the cheerful stir there had been about her when she started, she had fallen back upon herself. Her eyes looked heavy, a *sour*d excitement seemed to hang about her, which her anxious companion could not explain. It was not the natural thrill of recollection which might have moved a young woman under such circumstances, she thought, but a certain suppressed painful tumult of mind to which Miss Catherine had no clue. But for one thing, she was more absorbed

than ever, if that were possible, in her baby. She scarcely spoke, except to little Margaret, to whom she pointed out everything, as if the child could understand her, fidgeting about her dress, fastening and unfastening the wraps round her, inventing a hundred little occupations to fix her attention to her child. She would not allow Marion, who had been looking forward to the delight of assuming the management of the baby, to touch her, but left Miss Catherine at once on their arrival to put little Margaret to bed. 'Marion will do that; the bairn knows her,' said Miss Catherine, but Isabel only shook her head. 'No, I cannot part with my baby,' she said, and went away burying herself with the child in her own room, where, after a long interval, she was found hugging it in her arms, having as yet made no progress in its toilette. Then Miss Catherine began to get alarmed.

'My dear,' she said, 'the tea is waiting. I came to look at her in her bed, the darling! You're thinking of the time we were here before, Isabel. But you must not give way to your feelings, and such a treasure in your arms. You must think of the bairn.'

'And so I do think of her,' cried Isabel, straining the child so passionately to her breast that little Margaret, unused to such violence, began to whimper with fright, and put out her baby arms.

to Miss Catherine. Then Isabel's excitement broke forth in weeping. She almost thrust the child into Miss Catherine's arms, and covered her face with her hands. '*She* turns from me too,' she cried, with floods of sudden burning tears. And little Margaret, half for sympathy, out of an infant's strange forlorn consciousness of something unusual in the air, cried too, and the scene altogether became so painful that Miss Catherine lost heart.

'I cannot understand you, Isabel,' she said. 'There are no memories here to make you heart-broken like this, and nobody is turning from you that I know of. I have come away with you myself, though I've plenty to do at home. And there is not one of your friends but would make a sacrifice to see you happy. What is the matter? You have always been happy with your baby. Why should you change now?'

'I have not changed,' said Isabel, under her breath.

'I hope not, my dear,' said Miss Catherine, giving back the child into her arms. 'I suppose it is coming out into the world for the first time, and seeing—strangers; and coming to a new place. I would not wonder, for my part; but you have aye been so good, and so reasonable and patient—since *she* came.'

'And so I shall be,' said Isabel, hastily drying

her eyes; 'as long as she is well, oh, what can harm me? I want nothing but my lamb.' And then she began, with a thousand caresses, to undress the little weary creature, kissing its round limbs and dimples with a kind of passion. Miss Catherine sat looking on somewhat grimly, not understanding this outbreak of feeling more than the other, but unable in any way to connect either Isabel's tears or her demonstrations of maternal adoration with that unlucky encounter in the boat. She did not understand, and she could not sympathise, but sat looking on with that grim air of observation and criticism which winds an excited mind up to almost delirium. Isabel finished her task under those severe, yet kindly eyes, growing more and more agitated and nervous. She was in the state so common to women, when tears are the only practicable utterance. Tears, meaningless words in Margaret's ear, who could soothe but not understand, and such quietness as she might have had in her own house, would have composed her after the shock she had received; but Miss Catherine's steady presence, restraining the tears and compelling a certain amount of external self-control, prolonged the inward pain, and the evening passed like a painful dream.

'It cannot be the recollections of the place,' said Miss Catherine to her maid, when Isabel had

escaped to her room, 'for I cannot recollect that the poor minister was ever here; and it cannot be any fright about the bairn. There's neither measles nor whooping-cough that we know of in this place.'

'And neither was there at home,' said Marion. 'Oh, mem, it's no for me to be the judge—but it's like flying in the very face of Providence and tempting God.'

'I was not asking your advice on the subject,' said Miss Catherine, sharply. She was not, indeed, in the way of asking any one's advice. But anger towards her old maid was impossible, and the next moment she had again begun to discuss the troublesome matter, talking not so much with Marion as aloud with herself.

'It's near a year now,' she said; 'poor thing! it would have been hard for her to have been at that quiet Glebe with nothing to take off her thoughts the very time it happened. The change will make it pass easier; the measles and the rest was but an excuse to get her away.'

'And do you think, mem, she was that fond of the minister?' said Marion, with respectful scepticism.

'She was his wife, woman,' said her mistress, indignantly; 'what would you have more?'

'But, ah, far more like his daughter,' said Marion. 'Nae doubt it was an awfu' end; but

when it's no just heart's love —— Do ye think there could be onything in the meeting with yon young English lad to-day ?'

'What do you mean by anything?' said Miss Catherine, sharply.

'Eh, I wasna setting up my ain pair judgment ; but I thought you looked a wee anxious yourself. And as for Mrs. Lothian, poor lassie, she was shaking like an aspen leaf ——'

'Marion, I request you'll speak no more such nonsense to me,' said Miss Catherine, with indignation. 'What is he to her, think ye?—a stranger that has not been seen in the parish for three or four years?'

'And that's true, Miss Catherine,' said Marion, with a cough expressive of much doubt and general uncertainty. Her mistress lost her temper, and immediately fell upon Marion, not on this subject, but on some other totally unconnected with it ; but the experienced handmaiden was in little doubt as to the real occasion of her wrath. 'As if I didna ken the Captain's Isabel cared more for that lad's little finger than for the minister and a' he could do for her !' she said to herself, as she retired to her rest. Miss Catherine was left with the painful sense that everything had happened cross ; that had she let matters alone Isabel need perhaps never have seen this disturber of her peace—that

her peace *was* disturbed, whether by him or by some working of her own mind, or by the mere effect of movement from home ; and that even her own maid penetrated her motives, understood the whole plot, and saw how fate had defeated it. And when it is added to this that she had the discomforts of a strange bed and cold lodgings in which there had been nobody living all the winter, and was without the many comforts with which she was surrounded at home, and which people miss when they are no longer young, it will be perceived that Miss Catherine must have ended the day with cheerless sensations, aware that she had sacrificed herself for nought, or worse than nought.

It would be impossible to describe what Isabel's condition was on that same bewildered painful night. How was it that she had thus awoke all at once from her peaceful dream of a life devoted to her child, into this sudden conflict and tumult of all troublous thoughts? She had been so calm, so serene, so tranquil before Miss Catherine's fiction woke her into wild alarm for her baby. And now even the baby had gone out of its mother's mind. She kissed her little Margaret in her sleep and wept passionate tears on her knees by the bedside, but it was not Margaret she was thinking of. And she was aware of this, tingling to the extremities of her frame with the shameful guilty consciousness, that it was

not Margaret she was thinking of, nor Margaret's father, nor her health, nor any of the limited subjects natural to her life—but of *him*! Oh, that there should be a creature in the world who could glide his shadow between her and her child! Oh, that anything could drive her back even to the very outskirts of that chaos in which she had once grown bewildered and almost lost herself! She sat over the fire and cried and rung her hands for hours after Miss Catherine, with some groans of self-pity, had laid herself in the bed which she feared was damp. What was this awful external force which had seized hold against her will of poor Isabel, forcing her thoughts unwillingly into one channel, filling her with wild fancies, recollections, dreams, which took possession of her in spite of her struggles, fighting their way against all the fluttering forces she could bring against them. How could she help it? Had she known he was near her, she would have kept indoors, that she might not see him, instead of putting herself as she thought in his way by this sudden journey. She had been an involuntary innocent agent in it all; and yet it was she who had to suffer. To think she could be so mean a thing,—she! Mr. Lothian's wife—little Margaret's mother—as to be driven back to the distractions of her maidenhood in a moment against all the efforts of her will, at the mere sight

of her old love! She cried bitterly, helplessly, in the silence over the dying fire. It was with no will of hers. Tears of guilt could scarcely have been more bitter than were those tears of innocence, or more full of trembling shame. She felt that she loathed herself for it. Little Margaret's mother!—and yet to be moved by all this crowd of intrusive fancies like a girl. And then she would find herself dwelling on his looks, his paleness, his emotion at the sight of her, his change of aspect. Oh, what was it all to her? And yet how was she to shut it out from her painfully throbbing, resisting, vanquished heart. She had never even suspected the existence of such weakness in herself. Twenty-four hours before she would have smiled with the serene superiority of youth at any suggestion of such a danger. All that was ended and over, she had thought. Once she had been very foolish before reason and affection had matured and completed her life; but now between the baby's mother, and the foolish girl who once dreamed of love, what a gulf was fixed? The mere fact of her matronhood had been enough, she thought, to do it? And yet here was the giant back again, taking sudden possession, triumphing over every frail rampart she had put up, making a sullen, tearful, unwilling slave of her,—a slave struggling wildly, but unable to escape. He looked so pale. She alone had seen the expres-

sion in his eyes, when, glancing carelessly up, she had suddenly looked into them,—two dark seas of nameless, unfathomable trouble. Perhaps he had been like herself, feeling it to be for ever over, feeling himself calm, composed, serene, taking no thought of Isabel; and perhaps this strong man armed, the old Love of which he had no fear had sprung upon him too, and mastered him in a moment, as had been her own case. The tears came slowly stealing over Isabel's cheeks, as she bent lower and lower over the dying fire. It was very late—it was cold, and dark, and miserable—and the house was a strange house, and an unknown dark world was lying outside the windows, and it was the dead of night. And here she sat crying, helplessly feeling her thoughts, and her faculties, and her own mind, taken away from her, and herself conquered in this struggle. All so unforeseen too; nothing had even whispered to her a warning of what might befall her. And all so shameful, so terrible, so guilty,—little Margaret's mother!—and oh, to find herself out capable of such weakness and wickedness as this.

When Miss Catherine woke in the middle of the night, still with the fear that the bed was damp and put her shawl over the coverlid as a safeguard, she gave a sigh which was almost a groan, and said to herself, 'The Lord be praised, he's going

to America.' But when Isabel, worn out with her struggle, laid herself softly down by her baby's side, other words than these kept fluttering in her ear, making her miserable. 'I shall see you again.' Oh, no, not if any power in heaven or earth could help it! She could not bear it. It would be better to take her baby in her arms, and fly anywhere to the remotest corner of the world.

CHAPTER V.

THE visit to the Bridge of Allan was anything but a successful expedition on the whole. Little Margaret took cold, and had a trifling illness, which filled her three slaves with trembling terror; and Isabel was so much disposed, with unconscious superstition, to regard this as 'a judgment' on her own distracted thoughts and wavering mind, that she was not a pleasant companion to Miss Catherine, who, on the other hand, blamed herself for her over-confidence in her own opinion, for exposing the child to bodily risk and the mother to temptation. Marion made no small amount of critical observations to herself behind their backs, thinking the child's illness also 'a judgment.' 'Them that flees from the Lord, the Lord's hand will find them out,' said Marion to herself. And the little party was not a happy one. They remained until after the anniversary of Mr. Lothian's murder, of which Miss Catherine was rather disposed to make a solemnity. Poor Isabel, with her heart still

trembling for her child, and still suffering from the sharp assault of the new life which had taken her at unawares, found it difficult enough to force back her thoughts into the channel of the past, and feel all the grief, the heavy weight of recollection that was expected of her. She thought of her husband, and shed tears when she woke in the morning and remembered what day it was, and how tender he had been to her, and the dread difference there was between his peaceful going out on that bright June morning and his return. The scene came back vividly before her,—the handsome, white-haired man, ruddy and vigorous, mounting his horse at the door, and herself lingering about him, brushing his hat, arranging his cambric ruffle, with the brooch in it which was so mysteriously identified with his fate. And then the tramp of the men coming through the storm carrying him home. Isabel's heart contracted, and great tears sprang to her eyes. Oh, so good as he had been to her!—no one could have reproved her—could have carried her off from home risking her baby's health,—could have touched her heart with that sharp anguish of the old love, had he been there. These were her thoughts before she saw any one in the morning, when she bent over her baby alone, and kissed little Margaret, and said, Poor child! poor child! that had

never seen her father. But a whole day is a long time to continue on one note, however strongly it may be struck. Almost before she met Miss Catherine at breakfast, Isabel had exhausted all the emotion of which she was capable. She was serious, as remembering the anniversary ; but she was not buried in grief as a widow might have been on such a day. She did not turn her face from the light and sicken at the sight of the sunshine. Her mind was fatigued and subdued by the real sorrow which had come naturally with the first thoughts of the morning. But she was not suffering acutely or moved by any actual passion of woe. It was natural, but yet Miss Catherine was vexed by it. Her sense of propriety was assailed. Such a day ought to have been spent in retirement, in tears, with closed shutters, or at least with the blinds drawn down. Yet it was evident the young widow felt capable of all her usual occupations, and was even heard singing little Margaret to sleep at the hour of her midday siesta. Miss Catherine was annoyed. It worried her to feel that her old friend was not getting his due, and that her young friend, who was still more immediately important to her, had not those feelings which it was becoming and fit she should have. She did not mean to be unkind, but she shot some little arrows at Isabel, half con-

sciously commenting upon the difference in 'some people's feelings;' and Isabel felt the reproach, and the little party in their lodgings, separated from all the wholesome occupations and interruptions of home, and thrown entirely upon each other, were not happy. Isabel found herself even sighing for her stepmother, who would have kissed her and called her 'my bonnie woman,' and been glad to see her capable of 'bearing up,'—and for the peace of the Glebe. And sometimes alas! would there not come a longing into her mind to steal once more over the braes alone in the darkening, to sit under the birch-tree, and snatch, out of her own disapproval, out of her uneasy soul and twilight life, and dim monotonous future, one hour of dreams?

After the anniversary was over they went home. It was on a brilliant June day—a warm, languid, breathless afternoon, when the steamer once more carried them up Loch Diarmid. Miss Catherine herself looked round her with an anxious air when she first stepped on board, involuntarily feeling that *he* might be there again waylaying them. Isabel did not look for him, but an excitement which she could not conquer took possession of her. It seemed to herself that she was coming home to wait for him, and that, sooner or later, he must come to the place he knew so well

to disturb her life. And yet what could she do?—it was her only home. But she was aware by instinct that he was not there. Their next meeting would not end in a few constrained words and distant salutations as their first had done. He would not, if he could help it, repeat that experience—of this she felt sure. As for Miss Catherine, her heart grew lighter when she had scanned all the groups, and satisfied herself that Stapylton was not among them. ‘Thank God, he is going to America!’ she repeated to herself; and when relieved from this fear, felt restored to her usual lively interest in all that was going on. The minister of the Rue was in the boat, going home to his parish; and so was Mr. Diarmid of Rossford, on the opposite side of the Loch, ‘a distant connexion;’ and they unfolded to her all the news of the district, while Isabel sat with her baby sheltered behind her veil, and still preserved by her recent widowhood from immediate encounter with the public. She heard what they were saying, but she paid little attention, and took no share in the talk; and when both the Rue and Rossford had been passed, and the diminished number of passengers bound for the head of the Loch, became distinguishable, she had but little heart for Miss Catherine’s comments upon them. The Lady of the Manor recognized group after group, and

speculated with Marion, as there was no satisfaction to be got from Isabel, upon their different errands. 'There's John Campbell has been settling his son in Glasgow,' she said. 'I hope it will not turn the lad's head. They're a very pushing family. But I can't tell what the smith's wife should have to do so often in Maryburgh, wasting her time and spending her siller. Marion, is that Archibald Smeaton I see there at the other end of the boat? Go and ask him if the queys are all sold, and what price they brought; and here!—listen—ye can ask him,' said Miss Catherine, aside into Marion's ear, 'if yon Englishman is still about the Loch.'

While Marion went upon this commission there was a momentary pause in Miss Catherine's talk—partly because Isabel was unresponsive, and partly because she was anxious as to the answer which might be returned to the last question. But her eyes were not the less busy scanning the shores of the Loch with that strange interest which a local notability takes in every symptom of change that may have become visible in his or her absence. She gave a sudden exclamation at one point as they went on, and seized upon Isabel's arm, forcibly calling her attention.

'Look at Ardnamore!' cried Miss Catherine, with a gasp of surprise. Isabel started and lifted

her eyes. The house was all open to the rays of the setting sun, the very door was standing wide open, and every appearance of inhabitation was about the place. But what was most wonderful of all was the apparition of a white figure fully revealed in the intense light, standing on the green clearing of the lawn. The trees were all so thick around, and the yellow, slanting sunset shone so full upon the green slope and the one figure on it, that it was difficult to pass it without notice. All the windows were lit up with a glow as of illumination; the green trees were almost reddened by the rays; the white walls of the house blazed with intensity of tone; and the one woman stood in the midst of it all, looking out with a certain wistful, lingering patience in her attitude. Perhaps imagination only conferred upon this white figure, which was too distant to be seen, the qualities of expectation and patience. But the whole scene struck the travellers with a shock of surprise.

‘And no one ever told me a word about it,’ Miss Catherine said, with indignation. ‘Can he have had the sense to let the house—or can they have come back? but then who was that?’

‘It was Ailie,’ said Isabel.

‘It was no such thing,’ said Miss Catherine. ‘Ailie, indeed! My dear, you are thinking of

something else, and you have not looked at her. That is the figure of a gentlewoman. They must have woke up to their interests at last, and let the house. An English family, I would not wonder. But even an Englishwoman can have no need to put on a moonstruck look like that.'

'You are speaking of my wife,' said some one at Miss Catherine's ear.

Like most people who live among their inferiors, she had a way of expressing her sentiments without any constraint of her voice or concealment of her opinion. She was a person of importance, and she was very well aware of the fact; consequently she started, and turned round, not well pleased, to ask the intruder what he meant by thrusting himself into private conversation; but was struck dumb, and all the strength taken out of her for the moment, to find Mr. John himself standing by her side. Isabel was roused and startled too. It was, indeed, her little cry of recognition which persuaded Miss Catherine that the apparition was real and undeniable.

'John Diarmid!' she cried, with a voice half choked with wonder and curiosity; and then made a dead pause, looking at him with a surprise too great for speech.

'You must beware how you speak of my wife,' he said. 'Yes, we have come home. I have

brought her home—and she is no longer Ailie, but my wife. If you would be a friend to either of us, you might show an example to others, and not lead the way to trouble.’

‘ Trouble—what trouble?’ said Miss Catherine; ‘ and why should I be a friend to you, John Diarmid, or set anybody an example to do you pleasure?’

‘ Why should you be a foc?’ he said.

And then they both paused, and looked at each other. Mr. John’s appearance had changed. It was nearly three years since he had left Loch Diarmid with his wife; and the wild look of passion and excitement which had marked the prophet had died out of his face. But his appearance was more strange to homekeeping eyes than it had been even when his face was lighted up with that glance which was half insanity. He had acquired the foreign air which in those days was given by a beard; and his dress, too, was foreign; and there was about him that indescribable look which is not English, which has come to be conventionally identified with the conspirator and revolutionary. He had a great cloak on his arm—a Spanish cloak capable of being thrown around him after a fashion not impossible in those days, though now identified with, at the least, a Byronic hero. His dark face, so much as could be seen of

it in the forest of dark hair and darker beard, was more like that of an Italian than a Scotchman; his aspect was that of a man full of weighty cares and responsibilities. The wild inspiration of his supposed mission had gone from him; but it was not only that he had lost that: something also there was, which the keen-sighted spectators perceived without understanding, which he had acquired. He looked at Miss Catherine without flinching, but with no excitement, meeting her eye calmly, and repeating what he had already said.

‘Why should you be a foe? I am none to you. You might be a protection to my wife. Am I to understand that my sins have been such that you will not forget what is past, and give your countenance to her? It might be a comfort to her,’ he said with a suppressed sigh.

‘I cannot see what other protection your wife wants, John Diarmid, when you are here.’

‘But I am not likely to be here,’ he said, quietly. ‘I have many things on my hands. I am here to-day, and gone to-morrow. Poor thing! she is alone; her own friends are unlike her now. You saw her standing there——’

‘You have made a lady of her,’ said Miss Catherine, with a half congratulation, half reproach.

‘I have made her——’ he said, and paused.

‘No, I have made her nothing; nought of it is my doing. It is another than I, that must bear the blame.’

‘Then there is blame to be borne?’ said Miss Catherine. ‘John Diarmid, I know nothing about your history since you’ve been away; but if you’ve been unkind to that poor lass, after making her marry you——’

‘My kinswoman,’ he said, with a faint touch of scorn not distinct enough to be called a sneer, ‘what I have done to her is of little consequence. It is God who has been unkind of her. Don’t start as if I spoke blasphemy. *She* can see but one way of working——’

‘Then I suppose,’ said Miss Catherine, vehemently, ‘you’ve given up the trade of prophet for yourself? I thought as much—and left her, poor weak thing! to bear the burden. And what is your way of working now?’

‘You have no right to speak to me so,’ said Mr. John. ‘I have given up no trade; but I see it is by nations and peoples, and not by single men, that the reformation of the world is to be accomplished. Why should I explain my views to you? You would not understand me. What I wish is that you would protect her as a woman and my kinswoman might, when I am not here to do it.’

‘And why should you not be here to do your

duty yourself, John Diarmid?' said Miss Catherine. 'You have done her all the honour a man can do a woman, and it's your place to stand by her now.'

'Honour!' he said, and uttered an impatient, weary sigh. 'It might have been better for her had she never come to such honour.' Isabel, who had been listening eagerly, though she had not spoken, heard the exclamation which was muttered between his teeth, and in her hasty heart rebelling against Miss Catherine's coldness, felt it was time for her to interfere.

'Mr. John,' she said, 'I am not just Isabel, as when you knew me—but Mrs. Lothian. I will go to Ailie, and—take care of her, as much as I can, while you are away.'

Miss Catherine turned and looked upon her with almost as much consternation as if it had been Baby Margaret who spoke. And as for Mr. John, the strangest change came over his face. His large fiery eyes, in which excitement still lurked, though it was unlike the excitement of old, softened over with a glimmer as of tears. He went up to her, close to her, as if it would have given him pleasure to lay his hand on her head, or her shoulder—'Is the child yours?' he said. 'Tell me its name.'

'Margaret,' said Isabel, under her breath.

‘I thought it was Margaret; God bless her!’ he said, with something between a sigh and a moan; and then waved his hand and left them hurriedly, going to the other side of the boat, and turning his face to the opposite shore. Thus he left them as abruptly as he had come to them, leaving Isabel’s offer of service totally unanswered. To him as well as to Miss Catherine it was as if a child had spoken; and Isabel’s voice was like her sister’s, and the deeper expression which had come into her face made the fundamental resemblance of the two faces more striking. It was to John Diarmid as if his dead love herself had risen up to offer her protection to the woman who was his wife.

‘So, Isabel, you’ve taken Ailie under *your* protection? You are a married woman, no doubt,’ said Miss Catherine, with emphatic scorn; ‘but you’ll not find it an easy task to introduce Mrs. Diarmid of Ardnamore in the county, you may take my word.’

‘Was I thinking of the county?’ cried Isabel. ‘Oh, Miss Catherine, how can you be so kind and so cruel? I was thinking of her heart breaking, and her comfort lost——’

‘Her comfort lost?’ cried Miss Catherine. ‘The comforts of Janet Macfarlane’s cottage were you thinking of? I am not so high-flown. It is plenty, I hope, for Ailie to have gained her pur-

pose, and got herself made lawful mistress of Ardnamore, without exacting protection, which means introductions, from either you or me.'

'Oh! you cannot think that was her purpose,' cried Isabel, fully roused; but by this time the pier was reached, and Jean Campbell's anxious face was visible, looking out for the travellers, and all the familiar landscape opened before them. Isabel's attention had been so drawn to other things that the sight of home came upon her like a revelation. Home! which was it? Last time she had thus arrived, it was on her return from her expedition to London, and it was to the Manse, shining yonder in the last brightness of the sunshine, that she had walked, leaning on her husband's arm. Now, the Manse had other inmates and other interests, and she had no arm to lean on, either on that steep ascent, or on the steeper, harder way of life, with all its diverging lines. Perhaps never before in all her mourning for him had the same profound throb of sorrow gone through Isabel's heart. Sorrow? no, rather regret. 'He would aye have told me what to do,' was the thought that welled up like a sob into her throat. She did not know what to do about Ailie. She meant—indeed she could not tell what. All the greatness of her loss, all the sense of want and deprivation which little Margaret had stolen from her, seemed to come back in that

moment. Had there been only that kind face with the white hair to welcome her; that tender, strong arm, like a father's, to support her and his voice to tell her what to do—what to do! She was not sensible how strangely contradictory that longing for her husband's direction was with the real struggle which she dimly perceived to be shadowing over her; indeed she did not stop to think at all, but only felt what ease, and comfort, and infinite relief, there would have been in putting all doubtful matters into his hands, and being told what she must do.

She was very subdued and pensive when she re-entered her own home—the home which now was her only shelter upon earth—her first, and, as she thought, her last dwelling-place. Not positively sorrowful, but softly and full of musings and melancholy thoughts. When the child was put to bed she went and sat by the window, and watched the lingering night out, through the long, long twilight, and sweet wavering darkness lit with stars. Oh, sweet nights! so full of suggestions of what might have been, so tremulous with all possibilities of happiness, so wistful and heavy with visionary longings. Twice had the charm been taken out of those soft twilight hours for Isabel. Once when the calm of married life—that calm which she had identified with marriage itself, the soft apotheosis of the

real, and annihilation of all dreams—had filled her with a gentle tranquillity ; and again, when Baby Margaret had poured the sweet absorption of new motherhood into all her veins, and made active service and endless adoration a delicious substitute for all visions. What was it now which had brought back to her the fancies, the vague longings, the sense of wonders and mysteries to come which had belonged to her youth ? It was as if these two years had been blotted out of her history altogether. The shadow had gone back on the dial. The mother, the wife, the widow, had become a girl again. How was it ? She was but three-and-twenty, and yet she wondered to feel herself back in that atmosphere of her youth.

But she had by this time grown so far accustomed to the change that it did not move her to the horror of shame and self-disgust which she had felt when the first thrill of that renewal came to her. She had been conscious then how it came. She had felt the tumult rising, and struggled vainly against it, and cried in her helplessness, and hated herself. These violent emotions had quieted down. Her heart had grown subtle, and put on excuses to hide its movements from her. And the reasoning part of Isabel had grown wise too, and forebore to ask the questions which it was so difficult to answer. And by reason of this cautious policy, life had become

more bearable. She had permitted herself to float forth on the enchanted stream of fancy, without pausing always to ask where she was going? She had allowed herself to relinquish thought, and to remain quiescent, wrapped in a soft haze of indefinite sweetness. Ah, yes, life was still sweet! And so were the lingering nights, and the mystery of the soft skies, and the whispers of the upward-looking earth. No anxiety to get the candles lighted, to go to work at Margaret's little wardrobe—to do up the little laces and ribbons, and fresh frocks for her idol—moved her. Once more she could content herself to do nothing—soft feminine evidence of a heart to which its dreams were sweeter than any common task.

‘You’re sitting in the dark,’ said Jean Campbell, coming in. ‘Eh, Isabel, my dear, I canna bide to see ye sitting that idle, with nae light. You’re thinking, and that makes sorrow. I thought you were tired with your journey and in your bed, which would be a better place.’

‘No, it is not sorrow,’ said Isabel, softly; ‘it is the long day and the bonnie night. It is not dark yet, and I was doing nothing. Do you think she is looking well, now you’ve seen her? and you’ve noticed how she has grown?’

‘I saw the difference before you were out of the boat,’ said Jean. ‘Bless her—the bonnie lamb!’

She's like a rose, and so she has aye been since the day she came into this world. If ever there there was a bairn that brought a blessing——'

'You did not tell me when you wrote,' said Isabel, hastily, 'that Mr. John and Ailie had come to Ardnamore.'

Jean had given a perceptible start at the beginning of the sentence, as if she feared to be questioned; but recovered herself as soon as she heard these names. 'I scarcely kent myself,' she said; 'I wouldna believe it till I saw Ailie at the kirk. Eh, she's changed. Me that minds what she was——'

'Does she look—as if she were happy?' said Isabel, feeling her own voice flutter like a sigh through the dark.

'She looks—like a spirit; no like a woman,' said Jean; 'ye should have seen the folk how struck they all were. Some thought she would be giving herself airs noo she's come home to her ain, and some thought she would be currying favour to make folk forget, and some——'

'Oh, never mind what they thought,' said Isabel, 'tell me about herself.'

'Eh, Isabel, you would have been struck! She was as white as a woman cut out of stane, and a' dressed in white, which was awfu' strange to see. She went no to the Ardnamore pew, but to her

auld seat, and knelt down at the very prayers when a'boddy else was standing. But the strangest of all was the look in her e'en. You would have thought she had never seen one that was there in all her life before.'

'But oh,' cried Isabel, the tears coming to her eyes, 'it was not pride.'

'No, it wasna pride,' said Jean; 'there was some that said it was, but no one that looked at her close like me. I dinna like to say what I thought myself. There's been mad folk in the Ardnamore family for many a generation; but then Ailie's no one of the Ardnamore family except by her marriage, and that wouldna affect her; but——'

'I am going to see her to-morrow,' said Isabel.

'I wouldna if I were you,' said Jean. 'Oh, Isabel, my bonnie woman! I canna bide to see you have any troke with such folk. And there's strangers about the parish I'm no fond of. I heard yesterday of a man that spoke to young Mrs. Diarmid of Ardgartan, and gave her an awfu' fright, and——unless Miss Catherine would take you in her carriage. And you in your deep crape! You canna go and pay visits so early. It wouldna be like you to show so little respect——'

'You have some reason more than this,' said Isabel, growing pale in the darkness, and faltering

as she spoke, for her heart began to beat and took away her voice.

‘Me! what reason could I have?—but just your good, my lamb!’ said Jean, with nervous volubility; ‘but I’m no for you mixing yourself up with such folk; and I’m no for you walking about the country-side your lane. There’s a heap of Irish about, aye coming with thae weary steamers. You’re no to blame me, Isabel, if I am awfu’ anxious, more anxious in your condition than if you were a bairn of my own——’

‘But I see you have another reason,’ said Isabel; ‘am I such a bairn or such a fool that you will not tell me? But I am going to see Ailie to-morrow, whatever happens; if you like you can come with me yourself.’

‘Na, it’s no my place, as if I were Mrs. Lothian’s equal,’ said Jean, standing irresolute by the table, tracing a pattern on the carpet with her foot. Little Margaret woke at the moment, which was a godsend to her. She had to be patted, and rocked, and sung to, ere she would go to sleep again. Jean escaped under cover of this interposition; but her face was full of care when she brought in the candles, flashing the light in Baby Margaret’s eyes, who immediately opened those dark orbs wide, and made herself very broad awake, and had to be played with for ever so long before she would

consent to sleep again. And Isabel was tired, and not to be disturbed with agitating news, and 'put off her night's rest.' Besides, what good would it do to tell her? But Jean's heart was heavy with thoughts of what might be coming, when she bade her stepdaughter good-night.

CHAPTER VI.

THE next day Isabel was too much occupied with her project of visiting Ailie at Ardnamore to be open to any argument or dissuasion. She put aside her stepmother's attempts to move her, with soft obstinacy. 'She was never a friend of yours that you should be so keen about her now,' said Jean.

'She was more to me than you think,' said Isabel; and her stepmother's amazement was great.

'She was liker Margret than you; but far, far different from Margret,' Jean resumed, after a pause; 'and you but a gay heedless lassie, no thinking of such things.'

'But I tell you she was more to me than you thought,' said Isabel.

This was all that Jean could extract from her; and it gave rise to many marvels in the good woman's mind and serious anxiety, which she could not express. 'Eh, if Ailie had anything to do with that English lad,' was the thought that passed through

her mind; 'eh, if she should be in league with him now!' But she could not surmount her hesitation about mentioning Stapylton's name to Isabel. 'I canna do it,' she confessed to her gossip Jenny Spence; 'maybe it's weak—ye may say it's weak; but name a lad that came after her when she was a young lass,—to Mrs. Lothian in her widow's weeds. It's a thing I couldna do.'

'I'm no that sure I would like to do it myself,' said Jenny; 'but it should be done.'

'He may not bide,' said Jean; 'or he may bide, and mind his ain business and no come here. He has never been near the doors, so far as I've heard.'

'But he kent she was away,' said Jenny, disapprovingly. 'And if she were to meet him, poor thing, about the road, without any warning ——'

'Weel, weel,' said Jean, in despair, 'I wash my hands o't—I canna help it. She maun just take her chance, like a' the rest.'

'Eh, I wouldna have such a faint heart,' said Jenny. 'I wouldna be that feared for a bit lass, though she were Mrs. Lothian fifty times over.'

'But you 're no me,' said her interlocutor, with a little offence; and to this undeniable argument nothing could be said.

Isabel had to leave her child behind, which was a novel thing to her, and very strange it felt to

walk away alone through the village and down the other side of the Loch towards the steep lane that led to Ardnamore. She had gone nowhere except to Miss Catherine's, since her husband's death; and though she had gone about with all the freedom of a country-girl in her native parish before her marriage, since her widowhood she had fallen out of all the uses of social life. She was more shy than she had been at sixteen. When she found herself passing Lochhead and walking alone along the further road, it was strange to her. She shrank from the eyes of the stray passengers, and from the greetings of the village folk, with a sense of something unseemly in her own presence there, which she never had felt in her earliest stage of life. She was, as Jean said, 'still in her deep crape;' her gown weighted with it, her bonnet black as night, with its great overhanging veil like a cloud. When the women at the doors eagerly claimed her acquaintance, and insisted on detaining her, to ask questions about Baby Margaret, and spend their own homely condolences and encouragement upon herself, she did her best to escape from them.

'I have a long way to go, and I must be back soon to my baby,' she said to them, eluding all their importunities.

When she got to the gate of Ardnamore, it was

the height of the warm langorous afternoon, and the air and the weariness had soothed her, and brought a langorous feeling into her heart. She was not excited about Ailie, poor girl! Isabel, in her own heart, had made out a story for Ailie, setting her down as a neglected, melancholy wife, with a strange past behind her and a mysterious future before, no doubt; and yet not so much lifted beyond the range of ordinary humanity as she had been in the old days. She expected to be shown into the old-fashioned drawing-room, with its bright windows looking out on the Loch, and to be joined by the mistress of the house, when she had waited awhile, and to see Ailie's attempt to look contented, and to bear herself like the other ladies. As she approached the house, the garden and everything around looked so everyday and ordinary, that all that was extraordinary in Ailie's story gradually died out of her visitor's mind. She would be awkward, perhaps, in her new position; she might not even know how to receive Isabel's visit; but, still, no doubt three years of absence and travel had improved her. And Isabel felt more and more as if she were paying an ordinary visit, when the maid, who was just like other maids, let her into the house, which was precisely like other houses. The deerskin mats at the door, the antlers in the hall, the hats and plaids hanging about, each took

something from her interest. She began to forget Ailie, and think only of Mrs. Diarmid of Ardnamore.

The drawing-room was a large, light room, rather low in the roof, furnished with old-fashioned, spindle-legged furniture, gilt and painted, and covered with white covers, to preserve the fading damask below. A certain air of homely, pleasant, refinement, and of connexion with the big distant outside world,—such as distinguishes so many Scotch country-houses of sufficiently humble pretensions—was in this dainty, homely place. There were miniatures of ancient fine ladies, and officers in uniform threaded here and there in lines upon the wall; there were Indian curiosities about on the tables, far-travelled toys, elaborate ornaments in ivory, a splendid tiger-skin on the faded carpet—all so many signs of sons of Ardnamore who had served their country in various quarters of the globe. A dealer in old furniture would no doubt have despised the chairs and sofas, with the gilding half worn off them, and their pinafores of brown holland washed white with much care, and the old faded carpet which was covered with white too. But yet the room was one in which only gentlefolks could have lived. Isabel went in with a little gentle curiosity, seeing no one. She moved a few steps into the room, her eye catching the Indian

inlaid work of a set of writing things upon a table, but not perceiving in the whiteness of the room a white figure seated just within the curtains at the bay-window, half hidden in the recess. Even when she did perceive her, Isabel stood uncertain, hesitating whether to go forward or to wait quietly apart till Ailie should make her appearance. For surely this was not Ailie—it must be some visitor, some caller ——— But a strange sense of recognition stole over her after the first start. She stood in her intense blackness and gazed at the unknown being whose appearance was such a contrast to her own; and then there came at last a faint sound of a voice: ‘Is it you, Isabel?’

‘Oh, is it you, Ailie?’ she cried, and went up to her with something of her old impetuous manner. Yes, it was Ailie, and yet as unlike Ailie as fancy could have imagined. She was sitting against the wall with no appearance of any occupation—her listless hands lying in her lap. She was dressed in dead white, not light muslin, but opaque white stuff, loosely made, or else hanging loosely upon her worn figure. Her face was almost as white as her gown, her blue eyes were dilated and wandering, her fair hair, which once had so much pale gold in it, had lost its lustre. She was like marble, but yet she was not like

death. Something of movement, a thrill of wavering agitation and life, was about her, although she sat as still as if, like the Lady in 'Comus,' she had been bound by enchantment into her chair.

'I did not see you when I came in,' said Isabel. 'I only heard of it yesterday; and so you've come home?'

'Ay—I've come home.'

'And you've seen your own people again after all,' said Isabel, trying to adopt a tone of congratulation.

'Ay—I've seen my own folk.'

'And I am very glad you are back,' said Isabel, 'home is the best. But I never heard till yesterday, when I came back too. How glad they would all be! And I hope you were glad too—I hope you were pleased yourself?'

Ailie made no answer. She turned her head half away, and gazed again over the Loch. A little almost imperceptible nod of her head was the only indication she gave of having heard. And Isabel began to grow nervous in spite of herself.

'Will you not speak to me, Ailie? are you not pleased to see me? I thought you would be pleased—and I would not lose a day. And you must have heard,' said Isabel, a little affronted as well as amazed at the indifference shown her, and instinctively producing her highest claim to con-

sideration, 'what dreadful trouble I have had since you went away.'

The word seemed to catch Ailie's ear without any that followed or preceded it. 'Trouble!' she said, vaguely, 'what can your trouble be in comparison with mine?'

'Oh, I beg your pardon,' cried Isabel, with violent youthful compunction, 'you know I have heard nothing. Oh, Ailie, don't sit there and look so sad—tell me about it—was it your child?'

Ailie turned upon her her great wandering, dilated eyes: 'My child?'

'I did not know,' said Isabel, almost crying, 'I thought you might have lost—a child—when you said your trouble was worse than mine.'

'My trouble is worse than any trouble on earth,' said Ailie; 'and oh to come back here to look on the same place night and day as I knew in my dreams. I think my heart will burst—it's broken long, long ago,' she added, turning away from Isabel, with a sudden pathos in her voice. It seemed a confession of unhappiness so open and undisguised, that Isabel was driven to her wits' end, not knowing what to do or say.

'Oh, Ailie!' she said,—'oh, Ailie, you should not say that now—I told you, you should not marry him——'

'Marry him!' said Ailie, with a faint wonder

stealing over her face. 'We are meaning different things, you and me. Ay—I thought I was wedded to the Lord; I thought He was sending me forth to do His will. Oh, woman! what is your bairn or your man to that? And it was not that I deceived myself,' she continued, rising into vehemence; 'I never deceived myself. There was His promise, clear as the sun in the skies. Could I no see all the wonders of the latter days? I saw them in myself; I spoke in power; I rose up off my bed that might have been my dying bed—and a' to be betrayed, and casten down, and deceived!'

'Oh, Ailie,' cried Isabel, wringing her hands, 'what are you speaking of—what do you mean?'

For the moment Ailie made no answer. She never turned her head to one side or the other—but gazed before her into the air, seeing nothing. 'Your Margret was right,' she said, after a pause. 'It's sweetest to die—oh, it's fine to die. Christ died, Isabel. We say it's for us you know, and so it is for us, but He had to do it. Nae miracle saved Him; that's what your Margret said.'

'But He saved you,' said Isabel, in her awe, under her breath.

At these words Ailie burst into a few sudden, violent tears—a momentary paroxysm which she seemed totally incapable of controlling. 'Whiles I think it was some devil,' she said.

‘Oh, Ailie,’ cried Isabel, ‘this is not you that is speaking—not you that was always so good!’

‘That is another thing,’ said Ailie, without any apparent sense of reproof, ‘whiles that is what I think; that it’s no me, but some ill spirit in me. And though I think I’m sitting here, I may be with your Margret in heaven, throwing my gold crown before His feet. Oh, if it was but that! Sometimes at night the Lord sends such thoughts like dew,—if it is the Lord. But then comes the awfu’ morning, Isabel Diarmid, and I open my eyes, and my heart cries out,—He has broken His word.’

‘Ailie! Ailie!’

‘Oh, dinna speak! He has broken His word. I gave up all for it—all! I thought first I was to serve Him my own way, a single lass. But, Isabel, you mind? I wouldna maintain my way in the face of His word. I gave up all! And he wiled me out to the world with false hopes. And He’s broken His own word. He’s done nought—nought—nought, that He said!’

‘Are ye speaking of Mr. John?’ said Isabel, driven to her wits’ end. ‘Oh, Ailie, is it him you mean?’

‘I mean the Lord,’ said Ailie, folding her hands together, and pressing them to her breast.

And then there was a pause. Isabel, to whom

this sounded like blasphemy, drew a step or two apart, full of agitation and alarm. But Ailie was not excited. She did not even change her attitude, but sat still with her eyes vaguely fixed on the world without, and the Loch which lay so bright in the sunshine. She gazed, but she saw nothing—her mind's eye was turned inward; and to the young creature full of life, and all its movements, who stood by her, this abstracted woman was a marvel past all comprehension. Was she unhappy in her home? was it in the want of love that had frozen her? was it grief or loss, or some bereavement of which Isabel knew nothing? She broke the silence at last with timid inquiries, which sounded like a prayer.

‘But, Ailie,’ she asked, faltering at every word, ‘you have had no grief—in your life? You have still—your husband? There has been no—death—nor—trouble? You’ve been—happy?—as much as folk are in this world?’

‘Happy!’ It did not sound like an answer, but only like an echo of the other voice, and another pause followed. ‘It was God’s will I sought and nothing else,’ she said at last. ‘Was it me to think of marrying or giving in marriage? It was my meat and my drink to do His will. Oh, Isabel Diarmid! it’s your man and your bairn you think of—but no me. What I was thinking on was a

world lying in darkness,—a' bonnie and bright outside,—like *that*,—and a' miserable and perishing within,—and He promised He would mend it a'. Go forth and preach, He said,—and I'll come again and the holy angels, and bring in a new heaven and a new earth. And there was the word in my ain mouth for a testimony. What was I that I should speak in power if it hadna been Him that did it?—and now all my hope is gone. The Lord Himself has broken His word. What do I care if the earth should tumble to pieces this moment! 'The minister is but dead, Isabel, and you'll find him in heaven; but I'm disappointed in my God,' cried Ailie, suddenly hiding her face in her hands; 'and Him I'll never find again, neither in heaven nor earth.'

This tragical outcry was so bitter and full of anguish, that Isabel stopped short in the protestations that rose to her lips. And yet the very thought of thus reproaching God made her tremble, as if it must bring down fire from heaven. 'Oh, Ailie,' she faltered, 'it is not for me to teach you; but oh, I dare not stand and hear you judging God!'

A low moan came from Ailie's breast. She shook her head sadly. Her great eyes turned to Isabel's for a moment with the anguish of a dumb creature in pain. She was far beyond tears. 'There's nae power nor voice in me now,' she

said, 'to teach or to speak. He's taken His gifts away, as well as the hope. I canna burst out and cry, "Oh, why tarry the wheels of His chariot?" It's all gone—all gone! spirit, and power, and life, and hope!'

Isabel was too much bewildered and overwhelmed to reply. She, who had come here hoping for those confidences of the human life which are wont to pass between two young women with husbands and children, and with their first experience of the great events of life still fresh upon them—to be met by this spiritual despair and agony!—She had wanted to know how Ailie's reluctant heart had settled into the common bonds of life,—whether she had grown to be 'happy' with her husband,—whether she had been comforted with children. She had wanted to tell her own story, her pre-eminent woe which marked her out among women,—her baby consolation. These human thoughts had been so strong in her, that she had almost forgotten even Ailie's prophetic character, yielding to the natural conviction that husband and children must draw down the most soaring spirit to a certain sweet bondage to the things of earth. 'Oh, Ailie, have you no child?' she cried, at last finding no other words that would come.

She had but asked the question, when the

door opened, and Mr. John came suddenly in. The house was strangely noiseless and quiet, with no sounds of movement or human life in it, and his entrance was like an entrance on the stage, not as if he had come naturally from another place. He had a travelling bag slung across his shoulder, and a cloak on his arm, and his hands were full of letters, which the post-woman had just brought him. When he saw Isabel he paused, and the same softened look which had come over his face in the steamer at the sight of her again gleamed over it.

‘You have come to see her?’ he said, and looked from the young widow in her deep mourning to his marble-white wife in her snowy cold dress with the strangest look of comparison. It seemed to the man as if the fate that might have been his and that which was really his, thus stood together in visible contact. Isabel had grown more and more like her sister without knowing it. And now when her heart was so touched with sorrow, and wonder, and compassion, and all the depths of her nature moving in her eyes, it might have been Margaret herself who stood there, looking with infinite pity, striving vainly to understand the woman who was John Diarmid’s wife.

‘She is changed,’ he said, following with his eyes Isabel’s anxious look,—‘sadly changed. It is

because she will look at things only in one way. We were mistaken, I think. The world itself is changed, though so few can see it. It is not by converting a single soul here and there, but by moving nations that God's work is to be done. Ailie, I am going away.'

'Going: where to?' she said, with a momentary glance into his face; 'to take the sword like them that shall perish by the sword? That's no His command. I'm a poor creature,—a miserable creature—He's cast me off, and broken His word to me; but I'll no forsake Him. No; there's no word of power put into my mouth to speak to you, John Diarmid, not any word of power, but them that take the sword shall perish by the sword. He said it with His own lips.'

'Amen!' said Mr. John; 'it matters little. What is life to you or me that I should care to preserve it? As long as there is a race oppressed, so long is God's word hindered in this world. I must go to my work—the time of patience and quiet is past.'

'Oh, Mr. John!' cried Isabel, 'you will never go and leave her alone like this?'

He turned to her with once more that softened look. 'Perhaps I would not,' he said, 'if I could do her good. But no, Isabel. We have wrenched ourselves out of the common soil, she and I, and

we cannot take root again. I must go to do what's left me to do. We were fools, and took God at His word, without thinking that the paths must be made straight and the rough places smooth. I must go and work as I can—and she—will die.'

He said this so low that Isabel hoped she alone heard it; and she could not restrain a cry of wonder, and horror, and protestation.

'Ay!' said Ailie from her window, 'I will die, if I can. Oh, how easy it will be now, and sweet! When I think how I vexed Margret—And now she's in the secret, and knows all; and I'm fighting with my own heart, and cast off by my God. John Diarmid, maybe I'll be gone before you come back.'

'I would not hinder you, Ailie!' he said, going up to her with sudden emotion and taking her listless white hands into his. 'No, though you will reproach me before God, I would not keep you back,—now when things have come so far, that is best.'

'Yes,' she said, 'it's best. All's gone from me—all's gone! I'm of no use but to die. They say when the seed dies in the ground—Oh, John Diarmid! if you'll grant it was a lying spirit, and no a word from the Lord, I think I could die content.'

He did not make any answer, but stood before her holding her hands, gazing down with a certain anguish upon the white face from which all the tints of life had altogether died away.

‘Here’s Isabel,’ she went on, now for the first time rousing from her blank contemplation of the world around, and fixing her eyes on his face, ‘*her* sister. It is as if it were Margret come herself, out of heaven, out of her grave, to hear you. John Diarmid, it was never love for me, I know. Will you tell me again before *her*; was it the word of the Lord you brought me yon night, and no just the madness in your heart?’

Still he made her no answer, but stood and held her shadowy hand and gazed down into her face.

‘He said I was to wed him, Isabel, for it was the word of the Lord,’ cried Ailie, rising into excitement. ‘If he’ll answer me this I want no more on earth. If it was but his madness, and no the word of the Spirit, then I could lie down at my Lord’s feet and say we’ve sinned. Oh, can you no see the difference? Say we’ve sinned, it’s easy, easy! But say thou hast tempted me and made me fall; it’s bitterer than death.’

Isabel, with the tears streaming down her cheek, drew near at this passionate appeal. She did not understand what it meant, nor what she

was called upon to do. But her mediation was asked for, and she answered the call by instinct. She laid her hand upon Mr. John's arm and looked up with beseeching eyes in his face. 'Oh, if you can ease her mind!' cried Isabel, not knowing what she asked.

'Would you have me say I had spoken a lie in the Lord's name?' he cried, and let his wife's hands fall, turning away from them with the old fiery glow blazing up in his eyes.

Then at once, and as by a spell, Ailie fell into the stillness and apathy from which she had been momentarily roused. Her husband turned away and went to another window to read his letters, leaving her relapsed into her old attitude, her hands again crossed in her lap, her eyes gazing out upon the bright, unvarying landscape. Isabel stood by her almost as motionless as she, looking at her with an anxiety which seemed to deprive her of all power of speech. What could she say? What was there in heaven or earth that could comfort this forlorn creature? How hopeless she looked, abstracted from all the life that surrounded her! Mr. John returned to them before Isabel could find a word to say. He went forward to his wife and kissed her lightly on the forehead.

'Farewell, Ailie,' he said; 'if I should, as you say, perish by the sword, this will be the end of

all between us — and, perhaps, it would be best for you.'

'Farewell,' she said, dreamily; 'farewell!' It seemed at first as if she was about to let him go without even a look. But at last a little stir of life moved her. 'We've been no blessing to each other,' she said; 'neither you to me, nor I to you. And my heart's dead and the Spirit gone from me; but you were never an ill man to me, John Diarmid. It's right Isabel should know. The will o' the Lord—if it was the will o' the Lord—hasna been blessed to you or to me. But you were never ill to me; you would have been good to me if——'

'If ——' said Mr. John. 'We will enter into that subject no more. But farewell, Ailie. I think we will never meet in this world again.' Then he turned to Isabel and took both her hands into his. 'I do not care for my life,' he said, 'no more than she does. It is for God's service to do what He likes with. But so long as she lives will you be good to her? Neither for her sake, nor mine, but for——'

'O, hush!' cried Isabel, 'there should be no other name spoken of here. Why should you go away? Ailie, you are his wife, tell him to stay. And you are not old that you should part. Oh, Mr. John, look at me! Is it well to be alone in the world at my age, and at her age? Stay and

take care of her yourself. She is your wife. Ailie, take his hand and make him stay!’

She stood impetuous between the two, holding a hand of each, trying, with her young energy, to draw the sombre, passionate, disappointed man and the abstracted, visionary wife to each other.

‘God will not bless you if you part,’ cried Isabel. ‘Oh, look at me that am a widow! What would I give to have my good man to be my help and protection? Ailie, speak to him, and he will stay.’

Mr. John was the first to free himself from her hand.

‘I cannot stay,’ he said, ‘not even if she wanted me as much as now she wants to be free of me. I have my use in the world, though not the use I once thought. Farewell! the chances are I will never see Loch Diarmid again.’

‘Is he gone?’ cried Isabel. ‘Oh, Ailie, look out after him, or kiss your hand to him. Oh, give him one look before he goes, as if you were a living woman, and no made of stone!’

And in her horror she rushed herself into the recess of the window, and waved her hand to him as he went away. Mr. John turned round before the door of his father’s house, which he was leaving, as he believed, for ever. A strange smile came over his face. The woman whom in his madness

he had compelled to marry him, was there like a white vision, making no sign. But the other tearful face, full of emotion, was turned towards him; and Isabel, who had almost hated him for half her life, waved her hand in the compunction of her mind. 'My Margaret!' he said, softly to himself; and thus turned and disappeared out of the quiet world in which he was unfit to live.

'He is gone! Oh, Ailie, he is gone!' said Isabel, coming back from the window with a sob.

'Ay, he's gone!' said Ailie; 'and you are more moved than his wife. I know what you would say, Isabel, but it's useless—useless! What is man to me? All that I ever was, all that I wanted, was to be the handmaid of the Lord.'

'But you are married to *him*!' cried Isabel; 'you are his wife; you should go with him, or he should stay with you. Oh, Ailie, if it is not too late——!'

'There's nae marrying, nor giving in marriage in heaven,' said Ailie. 'If there is a heaven—if it's no just a delusion like the rest. But what can I do? I'm willing to come to an end, and be done with all manner of life, if that's the Lord's will. Asking and praying and wishing for one thing more than another, has gone clean out of my heart.'

'And you have not a thought for him, the

moment he has said farewell to you—not a tear. Oh, Ailie!’ cried Isabel, in her impetuosity, ‘are you made of stone?’

‘My heart’s dead,’ she said; and then relapsed into silence, which the hasty, eager creature beside her could not break.

To leave her thus in her apathy seemed impossible to Isabel, and it was equally impossible to stay and devote herself to Ailie’s solace, for Ailie did not seem susceptible of any solace. She was lost in her own thoughts. Before Isabel’s heart had ceased to throb with agitation and excitement, Ailie had settled back into the profoundest stillness, saying nothing to her visitor, taking no notice even of her presence. And there was nothing left for it but to leave her to herself—to the silence she preferred.

Isabel had just made up her mind to do this, when the door opened again, this time with more sound and commotion, and Ailie’s mother entered the room. She came forward briskly, bringing the ordinary out-of-door life into the mysterious atmosphere, though a certain appearance of anxiety about her eyes betrayed that even Janet was disturbed by a state of affairs so much different from her hopes.

‘Eh, Mrs. Lothian, I’m glad to see you,’ she said, ‘but will you no sit down? My daughter is

so taken up about parting with Ardnamore that she's no as thoughtful as she should be. Ailie, my dear, I hope you've thanked Mrs. Lothian for coming to see you. It's a real attention, and her no in the way of visiting; but you were aye friends. Will you no sit down?'

'I am going away,' said Isabel, with a little dignity. 'I have been here a long time. If there is anything I can do for Ailie, or anything Miss Catherine can do, if you will let us know——'

'Miss Catherine, no doubt, will come and see her,' said Janet; 'she's her ain relation. Na, there's nothing anybody can do. She's in her ain house, and a pleasant house it is. But Mrs. Diarmid will aye be glad to see her friends. You see she's taken up just at this moment with her husband going away,' said the dauntless old woman, confronting Isabel bravely, with a look which defied criticism. Isabel, however, had been too much moved by the interview to have any regard for appearances. She turned round upon the watchful mother as soon as the door of the room closed upon them.

'Oh, tell me,' she said, 'has she been long like this? Is she always like this? Is there nothing that can be done?'

'Like what, Mistress Lothian?' said the old woman, looking direct into Isabel's eyes.

And then there was a dead pause. Janet's forehead had a contraction in it which only anxiety could have made so distinctly visible among the native wrinkles. The ruddy old cheek was blanched out of its usual wholesome wintry colour; but she stood by the door of the room in which her daughter sat, like a sentinel, and defied the world.

'I mean—oh, how can you ask me?—who can see her, and not feel their hearts break?' cried Isabel. 'Will it always be like this?'

'I dinna take your meaning,' said Janet, grimly. 'Ardnamore's away on business, and Mrs. Diarmid is, maybe, no so cheerful as she might be. And I wouldna say but she's a wee tired with her journey. I think ye never were abroad? It's more fashious than just going to London. And when ye've been travelling like that, day and night ye want rest.'

Isabel's innocent mind was confused by this view of the matter. 'Then, do you think, after all, that she's not unhappy?' she asked.

'Unhappy!' cried the old woman, 'and her a good man, and a comfortable house, and well thought on, and everything that heart could desire!'

She had raised her voice, and the words seemed to ring through the mysterious, silent house. Isabel, who was too inexperienced to avoid yielding a bewildered assent to any strenuous assertion, was so

moved by this that she went away wondering, asking herself whether she could be mistaken. But as soon as the door had closed upon her poor Janet's strength broke down. She threw her apron over her head, and leaned against the wall, silent yet convulsed by a momentary struggle. 'But I'll never let on to the world,' the old woman said to herself, as she came out from under that veil with a fiery sparkle in her worn, old eyes. Poor Ailie had at least one defender ready to stand by her to the death.

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CHAPTER VII.

ISABEL went out again on her way home with a mingled feeling of relief and bewilderment. She had seen sorrow in many of its phases, and had acquired some experience of the ordinary perplexities of life. But unhappiness and disappointment she did not know. The sight of them, the very thought of them, was novel to her. Those strange jars which are in life, which turn its sweetness into gall, and change the current of all ordinary human emotions, were unknown to her. Her own marriage had not been a love-match; but yet she had settled down into affectionate dependence upon her husband and brightened to passionate love for her child. It did not seem possible to her that a woman could be a man's wife and yet be absorbed in other things, like Ailie, or that a man should regard the companion of his existence as Mr. John did. It was a curious cross light streaming over the common path. She had been startled by Janet's affirmation

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of fatigue ; but as soon as she was alone her good sense came to her aid, and brought back before her the true state of affairs. The two were bound together by a link painful and irksome to both. The purpose for which they submitted to it had failed ; and now they were mutually straining at the chain. How strange it was ! Why could not they content themselves with the inevitable—why could not they make the best of it ? Ailie might not be a prophetess any longer ; but she might be a good Christian, and mistress of her house, which Isabel within herself felt would be the better part. And why could not Mr. John settle down and be kind to his wife and do his ordinary duties ? God could surely take care of the world without them. Why would not they content themselves and return to the common course of life ? This Isabel asked herself with the unconscious arbitrariness of people who judge for others. She saw their duty so clearly. It seemed so wonderful that they could not think sensibly and act wisely, and perceive all the advantages of this for themselves.

The road which led from Ardnamore gate to the borders of the Loch was steep and narrow and enclosed in high banks. It was, indeed, one of the little glens which furrow these hillsides in all directions. A burn ran by the edge of the way, and it was full of abrupt turns and corners, which

seemed to cut short the path, and hid what was coming. Isabel went along musing, her face and her mind full of thought, so much occupied with this new problem, and how it was that people could elude or mistake their plainest duties, that her own affairs had quite gone out of her mind. For the moment she was once more disturbed and fancy-free, feeling somehow her own still life, and the one sweet absorbing natural duty left to her, to be doubly sweet in comparison with the unnatural torpor and excitement in which Ailie's existence had lost itself; and asking herself whether she could not do something to win the unhappy prophetess back to the common level, and to some hope of happiness, or at least peace. She was not nourishing one single thought of herself or her own affairs as she threaded the winding way; and perhaps it was for this reason that the sight of the figure, advancing to meet her as she turned the corner, came upon her with such startling suddenness. Two steps brought her from the solitude of the road immediately in front of him, and these two steps marked the immensely greater revulsion from unselfish solicitude for another to the sudden wild return of her own life into her passive soul, which seemed no actor, but only a spectator of the change. She came round the corner lightly and swiftly with dreaming eyes, looking into the air, which was

vacant of everything but the trees and the reflexions of sky and water, and all the sweetness of the time :—and suddenly looked full into the face of Horace Stapylton, so near to her that he seemed to have sprung from some hiding-place, or dropped from the sky ! Had there been even a minute's interval to prepare her for his appearance, it would have been different. But he came upon her all at once without even a sound of his step on the mossy, grassy path. She stood still and gave a low cry. Her heart gave a leap as to her lips. A sudden colour rushed over her face, and with a pang as sudden, the sense of having betrayed herself rushed after the first thrill of emotion into her heart.

‘ Isabel ! ’ he said, making one rapid step towards her, and taking her hand in his. He would never have ventured to do it, but for her self-betrayal. He had not been taken by surprise. He gazed at her with eyes that shone and glowed with unconcealed feeling. Isabel grew as suddenly pale as she felt the warm pressure of his hand. She drew herself away, and stepped aside, and made him a little formal bow.

‘ I beg your pardon,’ she said, ‘ Mr. Stapylton ; I did not know you were there. It was—the surprise——’

‘ And then when you recollect, and get over

the surprise, you drive me away,' he said, looking as he had looked in the old days, when he had a lover's right to her attention, and dared complain and quarrel with her. 'Why should you drive me away? Why may we not be friends?'

'Mr. Stapylton, you mistake,' she said, with confusion; 'I was not thinking—there is no reason. I was startled to see you—I mean, to see any one. The road is so lonely here.'

And then they turned mutually, and looked at each other, feeling a change which neither could account for. It might be that he was the more respectful as being less sure of her than he had been before. But his tone was softened, his very intonation was different, Isabel felt, as she glanced at him slyly from under her drooping eyelids; she could not think it was the same man who had once treated her with the half-contempt of a superior, even amid all the softness of a lover. Why should she think of such things at all? What was he to her more than any other stranger? What power was it that took away all her composure, and made her heart beat, and her cheek flush, and her lip falter, in spite of herself? She could have beaten herself, as she stood there arrested against her will, her eyes shrinking before his, notwithstanding all she could do to keep calm. As for Stapylton's feelings, they were full of

wonder too. She was the same Isabel, and yet not the same. Her very movements, the pose of her slight figure, though identical, were yet different. Her shy, youthful grace had grown into a still shy, most youthful matron dignity. The two recognised instinctively, as they stood confronting each other, that a change had passed upon each; and the change, howsoever produced, and wheresoever tending, was so far of an elevating tendency. Admiration more ardent than he had ever felt for her before sprang up in Stapylton's mind; and in Isabel's there breathed a certain sigh of satisfaction. 'He was more worthy than I thought him,' she said to herself, looking shyly at the face which bore traces of refining passion. He had deserved the thoughts she had once lavished on him. She believed she would be satisfied never to see him more—but yet for that once she was glad.

'There was a time,' he said, turning with her as she made a movement to go on,—'there was a time when it would have been no surprise to you to meet me anywhere, wherever I knew you to be.'

'But times change,' she said, breathlessly, and then, with eagerness to change the subject, made the best plunge she could into general conversation. 'I have been seeing Mrs. Diarmid, at Ardnamore.'

'That was Ailie; was it not?'

‘Yes, it was Ailie,’ she said, regaining a little courage. ‘She married Mr. John. Not caring for him, perhaps—that is—I mean—not at first.’

‘People do such things,’ he said, not looking at her, ‘every day.’

‘And she has come back,’ said Isabel, who was too much agitated to think that he meant to launch any passing arrow at herself, ‘and I do not understand what ails her. She is no longer a prophet; but that is not all. She sits and never looks at you, never speaks; and she says God has deceived her; and her husband has gone away.’

‘They must be a strange couple,’ said Stapylton, bringing that subject to a sudden close. Perhaps it was her evident agitation, the tremor with which she recognised him in her surprise, that made him so bold; but he was impatient, it was clear, of ordinary conversation. ‘I can’t call you by your new name,’ he said, suddenly. ‘When I saw you the other day, with that old woman by your side—and that—child—in your arms——’

‘Mr. Stapylton, you are not to speak to me so!’

‘When I saw you,’ he repeated, with a certain hurry and sweep of passion, which she could not stand against, ‘it shook me like an earthquake. Yes, Isabel—I have been like you, trying not to think. Don’t try now to make me believe you are

quite calm talking of other things. You can't forget three years ago—I know you don't forget——'

'I have nothing to be ashamed of—in—three years ago,' said Isabel, trembling, and with all the colour rushing to her face.

'And I have,' he said. 'Ah, I acknowledge that; I would confess it on my knees if you would listen. Ashamed,—bitterly ashamed! To think of all that might have been prevented,—all the harm that might have been spared—if I had not been such a coward and a fool.'

For the moment he seemed to forget even her. His eyes were fixed on the ground, and he gave a shuddering sigh that was almost a groan. The anxious spectator, looking on, felt, with a woman's unconscious half-satisfaction, that he looked back with remorse at follies or sin which his loss of her had led him into. There was self-reproach in his voice; and Isabel felt a tender compunction seize her, felt her strength stolen from her. If going away from her had made him desperate, should not she be the first to forgive?

'Indeed I do not blame you,' she said softly; 'it has turned out—for the best.'

'For the best!' he cried passionately; 'at least, you cannot expect me to grant that. Your very dress which you wear for *him*—your very name—everything—How can I stand here and look at

you and bear it—I who have never changed in my heart?’

‘Mr. Stapylton,’ said Isabel, ‘you have nothing to do with me now. You are a stranger, and we were not speaking of your heart. That has nothing—nothing to do with me. I must go home to my baby. I beg of you not to come any further, but to let me go.’

‘Isabel,’ he said, ‘look at me, don’t turn your eyes away from me: I am not a stranger; you could not make me so were you ever so cruel; the time will never be when we shall have nothing to do with each other, you and I—only look at me! What reason can there be why we should part now?’

‘Oh, Mr. Stapylton, let me go,’ she said, shrinking aside from him, not venturing to raise her eyes. She dared not look at him as he begged her to do. She knew that her eyes would have betrayed her—that the beating in her temples and the throbbing in her ears would have found some expression in every look she could turn upon him. Never for all these years had her heart beat as it was beating now. She had been a wife and a widow and a mother, and yet the sound of Horace Stapylton’s voice moved her more deeply than all the events of her own life had done. She hated herself for it, but yet it was so. Her heart went

out to him past all her power of restraint. And though her face flushed with bitter shame, and her heart ached with self-reproach, yet she could not help it. The only safeguard she had was in flight. 'Let me go,' she repeated, keeping her eyes on the ground, and keeping as far apart from him as the narrow path would permit.

'Yes, if you hate me altogether,' he said, with vehemence. 'If you do, I might have spared myself—much, very much, that can't be undone. If you hate me, I will let you go!'

The sound of his voice went to her heart. She was free to pass, yet she could not refrain from one glance at him. He was trembling; his face was as pale as death, and drawn together with tragic force of passion. And Isabel could not bear this dreadful expression on the face of the man she had once loved.

'Oh, it is not that I hate you!' she cried, out of the depths of her heart.

'Then you love me!' he said, wildly seizing her hand. 'Between us there can be no alternative. Oh, Isabel, I have bought you dear! Never send me away again.'

'Oh, let me go!' she repeated, with such a struggle going on within as her whole past life had not experienced. She, Mr. Lothian's wife, to stand here with a man—any man, be he whom he might,

kissing her hand ! She, little Margaret's mother ! She could not bear it. She snatched her hand from him, and covered her face with it, and sank down on the grassy bank where she stood. What else could she do but weep her heart out, words being impossible ? She could say no more ; she could not dare to look at him again. The struggle had come to such a point that there was nothing left for her but the unspeakable utterance of tears.

And she was grateful to him that he took no advantage of her weakness. He did not even take her hand again, or take her into his arms as he might have done, but stood looking at her, with something she did not understand in his eyes. How it was she saw the look in his face, through her passionate tears, she herself could not have explained. But she was conscious of it, and of a certain compassion and awe mingled in the eagerness of his gaze, which kept him standing apart, with a delicacy which had never appeared in him before.

‘ Isabel,’ he said, hoarsely ; ‘ though you are cruel to me, I will not be hard upon you. I love you the same as ever—and you love me ; all that has come between us is past. Don’t let us so much as speak of that—it is all over, my darling ; there is no obstacle between us now. No, I will not press you further. I would not vex you for

all the world. I will come to you to the old place or to your own house, my dear, if that is better. And after all it has cost us, Isabel—oh, Isabel! may we not be happy at last?’

‘Horace, let me be!’ she cried, rising to her feet and holding out her hands to him as with an appeal for mercy.

‘I can never let you be,’ he cried, seizing her hands and putting down his face upon them for one moment. She felt that his eyes were wet and his lips dry and quivering, and their positions seemed reversed all at once—and it was she who yearned over him, longing to console him and give some comfort to his heart.

‘Oh, Horace,’ she said, ‘you are going away,—you said you were going away? and you ’ll forget. I could not live if I thought it grieved you and made your heart sore. You ’ll go away, and you ’ll think on me no more! Why should we be so sorry? It has not been appointed that you and me should be together. Bid me farewell; and, oh, go away and mind me no more. But I ’ll think of you every night when I say my prayers.’

His answer was such a groan as made her start and shrink; and then he raised a pale, passionate face to her, and drew her to him holding both her hands.

‘You are to be my wife, Isabel!’ he said.

‘No: oh, no. I am *his* wife,’ she said, with a cry half of terror; ‘and my child,—my child!’

‘Was it my fault he took you from me?’ he cried. ‘I was absent and did not know. Your child shall be mine, Isabel; and you are mine—say you are mine! We can never more part again.’

‘Oh, Horace! let me go.’

It was the sound of a step on the road which interrupted this strange struggle. He let her hands fall as this sound, and that of a cheerful rural voice singing some homely ditty, fell suddenly into those exclamations of passion, and stopped them as by a spell. When Helen, the ‘lass’ from Ardnamore, came down the road she saw, at first without surprise, Mrs. Lothian walking down before her, with a ‘strange gentleman’ by her side—‘ane of thae English,’ Helen said to herself, reflecting that the young widow had been in London, and consequently might be supposed to be acquainted with that nation in general. Helen’s after reflections, when she came to put this and that together, were of a different character, but for the moment she was not suspicious. She passed them with the ordinary salutation, ‘It’s a fine day,’ taking no note of the tearful dilation of Isabel’s eyes; and, all unconsciously to herself, was Isabel’s guardian and pro-

pector. It was like the Stapylton of old that he should have fallen into a moody silence after this interruption. And he left Isabel when they reached the highroad. 'I will see you again,' was all he said. To see them thus parting, taking different directions, no one would have thought what a contest of wills had just taken place between them, nor with what an agitated soul Isabel turned along the sunny way by the Loch side, to the home which had once been so still and quiet, where her baby awaited her, and her tranquil, pensive, unexciting life remained waiting to be taken up again as soon as she should return.

Could she take it up again? Could she drive from her ears the sound of the words she had just heard, and silence the throbbing of the heart into which they had fallen? Could she be again as if this past day, this hour, had never been? She was so exhausted by the violence of her own emotions, that she was scarcely capable of asking herself these questions as she went quickly, feebly, almost tottering at first, along the long, smooth line of road. Who can annihilate any hour of his life, and make it as though it had not been? And of all hours, this hour, the most passionate, the most startling that had ever come to her? Isabel hurried along, her limbs bending under her, her

veil covering her agitated face. She could not go through the village in the tumult of her thoughts. She went up past the house which had been her own, the Manse to which she had gone a bride, and been brought away a widow. Except when she went to church she had never before approached the Manse since the moment when she left it. Now she gazed at it, trying to make herself feel the associations of the place—trying to recall her life there, the bitterness of her sorrow—trying to realize the pang she ought to have felt at the sight of other dwellers about, and the new minister standing at the familiar gate where her good husband had so often stood. She tried with all her simple might to bring back into her mind all those regrets, and even bitteresses, which Mr. Lothian's widow should have felt. She tried so hard that she succeeded in bringing the tears into her eyes. But all the time her heart was beating with guilty agitation—a tumult more painful, more poignant, more delicious, than any emotion of her past life. Poor Isabel doubled her veil over her face, and stole across the braes towards the Glebe with a stealthy, guilty feeling, as if she had been an impostor discovered. Oh, to think she was that good man's wife! to think she was little Margaret's mother! and yet have a heart capable of thus

throbbing, and aching, and dancing in her breast, at the words of any man! She went home like a ghost across the sunny, heathery braes; and the Dominie, who saw her from his door, felt his heart bleed for her, thinking how hard it must have been for her to pass that way, and wondering why she exposed herself to such an unnecessary trial. Poor young thing! going alone, with her head bent, and her crape veil covering her tears, from the home where she had been more worshipped than a queen, to the melancholy little cottage of her childhood! Tears came into the Dominie's great cavernous eyes, moistening the thick eyelashes, as he watched her lessening figure on the hill-side path. Why had she exposed herself to such a trial? And if he could have seen into Isabel's heart, and looked amazed upon all the trouble there, it would still have been next to impossible to a soul so inexperienced in those strange sophistries of nature, to have understood the reason why.

CHAPTER VIII.

JEAN was looking out in the opposite direction, somewhat anxious for her stepdaughter's return. She was standing at the cottage-door with Baby Margaret in her arms, straining her eyes along the vacant road, and full of anxiety. She gave a suppressed scream when Isabel came noiselessly up behind her, and, without saying a word, clutched at the child and took it out of her arm.

‘God bless us, I thought it was a ghost!’ she cried. ‘Oh, Isabel, you’re like death. It’s been more than you can bear.’

‘I am tired,’ said Isabel, holding her child close with a vehemence which terrified the little creature; and as she looked at her stepmother, the pallor gave way to a sudden, overpowering flush. Her eyes fell before the good woman’s anxious, searching look. She turned away, still holding her child strained to her heart. She could not trust herself to meet Jean’s eyes, or even her baby’s. Could

she ever venture to look any one in the face again?

‘It’s a long walk,’ said Jean, anxiously, following her in, ‘and you’ve come the long way round by the braes; and it’s been too much for you. Oh, Isabel, my bonnie woman! it’s brought everything back to your mind.’

‘It did not need the sight of Ailie to do that,’ said Isabel, scarcely knowing what she said. ‘Do things ever go out of one’s mind?’

And she held her child closer than ever, and hid her face in Margaret’s frock. It did not occur to her that she was betraying herself even by the passionate strain of that embrace. Jean gazed at her alarmed, noting every change in her face, the sudden flush and pallor, the inward-looking eyes, the reluctance to meet her own affectionate, anxious gaze.

‘Was she awfu’ changed?’ she asked.

‘Changed—whom?’ said Isabel, with a little start. She had scarcely uttered the words when she recollected herself. Ailie had been driven entirely out of her mind by the after event; the scene which had made so deep an impression on her before she met Stapylton was half effaced from her very recollection. It rose upon her dimly as she tried to remember. ‘Oh, yes, very much changed,’ she said, and stopped short, unable

to revive her own interest in a matter so faint and far away.

‘Do you think she’s happy?’ asked Jean.

Strange to think any one could be so inquisitive! Why should she be forced to pause and recall an experience so distant? ‘I don’t know,’ said Isabel; ‘how can anybody tell? People are happy sometimes when they ought not to be happy, and miserable when they have no reason to be miserable. Am I the judge?—or how can I tell?’

‘But dear me, Isabel, you were awfu’ anxious about her,’ cried Jean, affronted; ‘and would give nobody any peace till ye had been to see her. And now it seems ye dinna care.’

‘Oh, yes, I care; if you would let me rest and be quiet, and not ask me anything now!’

Half offended, wondering, and disturbed, Jean looked at the speaker. It was very clear that Ailie had but little to do with Isabel’s excitement. This sudden irritation and impatience reminded her of the old times before her stepdaughter had been subdued by the events of life, or had learned to control herself. Mrs. Lothian had not been guilty of those movements of temper and impetuous feeling which were so lively in Isabel Diarmid. Was it that some other subtle change had come, setting at nought the work of experience, and bringing back

the original natural condition of the girl's restless, vivacious soul? Jean did not ask herself so elaborate a question, but the substance of it was in her mind. She said no more, but went softly about the room, putting in order things which needed no arrangement, and watching secretly her step-daughter's looks. Isabel took no notice of what she was doing. As soon as she was left to herself she relieved Baby Margaret from the close strain against her breast which had terrified the child, and began to kiss her passionately and pour forth over her inarticulate murmurs of tenderness. Such an outburst of compunctious caresses was as significant as the other strange appearances in her. 'As if she had done the innocent bairn some harm,' Jean said to herself. And what could it mean? Isabel would let no hand but her own touch her child during the remainder of the day. She made no further comment upon her visit to Ardnamore, but occupied herself wholly with little Margaret, talking to her, caressing her, controlling her baby will—having even, for the first time in her life, a little struggle and contest with the child, who perhaps felt by instinct the state of excitement in which its mother was. Jean looked on without interfering, with curious, grave scrutiny and alarm. When the infant was naughty, and cried, and struggled, she kept behind not to put herself in the way. But

many speculations were in her mind, and some of them not far from the truth. Isabel's whole being was jarred and out of tune. All the old restlessness of her youth had come back to her. The soft resignation of her married life, the ineffable content of her motherhood, had given way before the sudden flood of old recollections and old love. Stapylton's eyes seemed to be on her as she sat there silent, trying to occupy herself with her child. His words were sounding in her ears. She had learned, she thought, to estimate him at his right value, and had severed her heart so completely from him that the very remembrance of him had faded from her. And now, at the first word he spoke, at the first glance, what was this flood of ancient folly that rushed back upon her?

She had had no reason to change her opinion; for anything she could tell, he was the same man from whom her heart had revolted, who had slighted her, and even in his love treated her with but a cavalier fondness. He had never taken any steps to claim her promise when she was free. He had left her to Mr. Lothian without a word. He had shown no sympathy for her sorrow, no tenderness for herself. He had tried to persuade her to go away with him, but not in the honourable, straightforward way which alone would have been worthy

of her. She tried to think over everything that told against him, that was most likely to nerve her against his influence; but it was all in vain. Her heart went out to him in spite of herself. It was gone with a leap out of her own keeping to the man who said he still loved her—and whom she loved. Yes! this is how it was; notwithstanding the long quiescence, and silence, and direction to other quarters of her affections, she loved him still. She could not mistake it now. She did not approve of him, nor feel that she was anything but wrong and foolish. She had no trust in him, nor certainty of what manner of man he was. But she loved him. She struggled sorely with herself, representing to her own reason all the defects of his character, all that he had made her suffer, all that might yet be expected from him. And she found that those thoughts carried no weight. They flew across the surface of her being, like a flight of birds. She tried to think of her husband, and carry back her mind at least, if not her heart, to him—and could not. She tried with double ceremonials of worship, with closest tendance and service, to persuade herself that her child still held the first place, and was the centre of her world; and with her idol in her very arms felt her thoughts and her heart go away to this man who was nothing to her. Nothing to her! She repeated the words endeavouring to

impress them on her own mind. He was nothing to her! Once he might have been all, but he had not chosen it. And now what was he—what could he be? The evening went on, and Isabel scarcely knew how it went. She did not hear when Jean spoke to her. Her face had the absorbed, abstracted look of a dreaming creature. By times she would start with a guilty humility, and endeavour to take up the thread of domestic concerns. But these returns showed only the more how far astray her mind had gone.

When little Margaret had gone to sleep, Isabel went, as she had done once before, to the drawer in which she kept her treasures, and took out from thence a letter—the same letter she had read so carefully at the last turning-point of her life. She went out, as she had done then,—it seemed to her, indeed, as if she were repeating step for step every movement she had made on that day, so short a time since, when in her sister's little hillside oratory she had gone to decide what she supposed would be the course of her life. She had done it all then, and had concluded it was over, and everything safely settled for her existence. Was it yesterday she had done it? Was it in a former life? Had she ever done it at all, or only dreamt it? With a curious fascination she repeated that past passage, putting her foot, she could have

thought, on the same closed daisies, weighing down the elastic harebells for a moment as she passed, wondering, wondering within herself which time was real and which a vision. *Then* she had to decide whether she should accept a bulwark and support for her life, a true man's love and succour—or make choice of a dream instead. And now the strange wheels of time had turned, and he that was so sure and true had vanished from her like a shadow, and the chimera had risen again, and stood, looking real, before her dazzled, troubled eyes.

She sat down on the grassy seat where Margaret had sat so often musing of heavenly things, and groped among all those shades that surrounded her. She asked herself—not distinctly in so many words, but vaguely in her trouble—Had Margaret ever been? had Mr. Lothian ever been? had she herself, still so young, with such warm blood in her veins, and tingling imaginations in her heart, formed a part of those lost existences? or was it all a dream? Her brain swam as she thought and pondered. It was not thinking—it was but a rush of unanswerable questions, longings, fancies, through her mind. She was but passive in the matter, though she was not aware of it. She took out Stapylton's letter, the last she had received from him—the letter which she had thrown indignantly from her when she read it in

the light of Mr. Lothian's tender, reverential, adoring love. But now no such illumination was upon it; she had nothing to contrast it with, but only her own treacherous heart to fix upon the words of fondness that were in it, and to ignore all the rest. And the sound of his voice was still lingering in her ears, his eyes had been upon her, lighting up suddenly an unthought-of warmth in her life, revealing to her the hidden thing which had been there all the time, though she had not known it. She did not trust him—did not approve him; doubted, and feared, and trembled—yet loved this man, and could not help it; and had been loving him unawares all these years. The history of her heart seemed to come before her in similitudes without any will of hers. It had been, like the daisies, dormant, and hidden among the grass, till the sun called it forth. It had been, like a smouldering spark, waiting the first breath of air to wake it into flame. When she had thought herself so calm, it was only that he was absent—that winter had benumbed her life. When she thought other loves had taken full possession of her, it was but because her heart was dormant, awaiting its resurrection. And now he had come, and the flower had burst forth in a moment; the lights were lit, the woman awoke at the naming of her name;—with no will of hers! Her heart, thus

awakened, uttered nothing but a cry of painful, feeble resistance. It was necessity, fatality,—anything but choice. She sat aching, crying, trying to struggle. All the soft dignity of her young matronhood; all the love she had for her child; all her satisfaction in the goodwill and tenderness of her friends; the reverence that belonged to her husband—the rights of baby Margaret to a home and provision of her very own—would have to be thrown behind her, if she suffered her steps to be led into this new way. What was she to do? Oh, if God would but help her, sending a special message of indication, as so many believed He did when His servants asked! Oh, if Margaret could but help her here in this spot, where she had so often prayed!

She sat pale, with her hands clasped on her knees, and her heart moaning and crying in the stillness—What should she do? She could not fly and escape the temptation. Circumstances bound her here where no doubt it would be brought before her again and more strongly every day. And how could she resist it? She might refuse his prayer outwardly and keep apart from him, but her heart was gone from her—and that she could recall no more. She might resume the routine of her existence, but it would be a life with all the heart departed from it. At a word, at the sound of his

voice, at his very step on the path, her whole being had gone out to him. Oh, what was this strange love so bitter-sweet over which she had no control, which went from her, leaving her no power of restraint? Heaven gave no sign as she sat sighing, her heart aching, and her very frame in sympathy, on the silent hill-side. The burn tinkled, as it did indifferently summer and winter, whether it was the prayers of a saint or the struggles of a suffering woman to which it sounded its soft accompaniment. And even Margaret out of the shadowy land made no attempt to guide her sister. There was no one in heaven or earth to tell her what she must do. She had to decide for herself.

Then she would recommence the same weary round, going over and over everything:—his words of this day, well-remembered words of former times, her duties to her child and to the good man who was dead, whose name she bore, and who had cherished her so tenderly. Oh, if some one would but stand forward suddenly revealed out of the silence and tell, as by divine authority, what she should do! But no such blessed apparition came. She was left to fight it out by herself; the heavens did not open to relieve her; Margaret was singing her even-song at the foot of the celestial throne, and was no longer touched by a sense of her sister's necessities on earth; and neither

her God, nor her husband, who was there too, rapt in that awful blank of blessedness, seemed to care any longer what should become of her, poor helpless youthful creature, all alone with such a decision to make. And her heart was a traitor, and had flown to him, her old love,—her one love,—the only man in the world to whom it belonged. The more she thought, as she called it—though in reality the process going on within her was not thought—the more bewildered she became, the more confused and dark grew all the world around her. It was not a crisis like the last where a clear, straightforward path was set before her feet and all complications were absent. Now every complication which could add to the difficulty was here. And no one even knew how sorely tried she was, no one attempted to help her. The cry of her uneasy soul went up to Heaven alone, and Heaven was absorbed in some vast celebration of praise or rapture of blessedness, and took no heed. Isabel's tears fell unseen as the evening dew fell, on the soft silent grass, which retained no trace of them, and the soft darkling nature embraced her round and round, sympathetic, yet unaiding, and gave no enlightenment. Oh, how far off was that silent, shining heaven! Oh, how voiceless, how unresponsive, was this dewy earth!

She got up at last, and went home, worn out,

and partially stilled by her fatigue, and lay down by her baby's side, and closed her eyes and tried to sleep and forget. And she did sleep by snatches through the short night, but did not forget. Even in her dreams he came to her like a spectre, and took her child out of her arms—and she woke with a cry, clasping little Margaret wildly, in fierce resistance; and slept again, and saw herself wandering with him across the braes, going further and further away from the cottage in which she knew her baby was, with a frightful, helpless sense of power on his part, and inability on hers to resist his will. The difference between her sleeping thoughts and her waking thoughts, was one which Isabel did not mark much at the time. It was that in her sleep she was a victim, oppressed by him and injured; and awake it was not he but Love that was the tyrant, drawing her to him with a soft force against which she could not contend. Such a strange difference many a distressed and perplexed soul has felt before Isabel. It struck her afterwards, when Time had taken up the parable and made his pitiless explanation, not at the moment when such teaching as was in it might have been of some avail. And thus passed the day and night.

CHAPTER IX.

JEAN had taken fright, though she could not herself have told why. For one thing, she was aware of Stapylton's presence in the parish, and thought of him as of a prowling enemy. But it was difficult for her to associate Isabel's strange abstractions, her passionate devotion to her child, her evening vigil in Margaret's ancient haunt, and all the signs of suppressed agitation about her, with the reappearance of her former lover. Jean had passed the period at which people realize vividly such conflicts of the heart. It seemed to her more likely that Isabel's calm had been disturbed by all the recollections which the sight of Ailie must have brought to her, than that Mr. Lothian's widow could have been agitated or excited by the appearance of any man under the sun. 'Yon English lad' had never been good enough for 'our Isabel' in her stepmother's eyes; and that she could think of him now seemed well-nigh impos-

sible. But yet something was wrong; and as soon as Isabel had left the house, Jean sent her son on an errand across the braes to the Dominie to beg his help and counsel. Jamie was too late to find 'the Maister.' He had gone out on one of the long walks with which, now summer had come, he endeavoured to make up to himself for the want of his friend and companion. But, notwithstanding the failure of this messenger, Mr. Galbraith heard the news more distinctly than Jean could have informed him, or than she herself knew. The smithy was still open when he returned home in the twilight, and had as usual a little band collected in it of men, observers upon humanity and critics of its wondrous ways. John Macwhirter himself, with his shirt-sleeves rolled up, was in front of the group, doing nothing, for it was warm, and it was near even his time for closing. He was rubbing his great hands together, looking meditatively into the summer air; but the observation that fell from his lips was not an original one. 'Women are queer beings,' was all that he said.

'I see nothing queer in it, for my part,' said Peter Chalmers. 'He was well known to be after Isabel afore ever she married the minister; and now he's come back——'

'Who are ye speaking of, I would like to know?' the Dominie said, who had entered list-

lessly, and whom these words had excited in spite of himself.

‘There was nae offence meant,’ said Peter. ‘I ca’ her but as a’ the country-side ca’ed her afore she married the minister. And it was nae secret that ever I heard tell of. I’ve seen them thegither on the braes and on the road. It was kept quiet, I’ve aye heard, out of consideration for Margret, who couldna bide the lad. And syne when Margret died he was sent for hame—and out o’ sight out o’ mind is the way of the world. But now that she’s free, and he’s come back, ye canna crush nature. If they come thegither again, as is to be expected, what’s that to you or me?’

‘Again, I ask, who are ye speaking of?’ said Mr. Galbraith with grim emphasis.

‘Na, na, maister, there’s nae call to be angry,’ said John Macwhirter; ‘he’s a nasty cynical body, but this time it’s true. Naebody thought mair of the auld minister than me,—this one could never hold the candle to him; but he wasna just the man for a young lass. And she’s but young for a’ that’s come and gane; and her lad’s come back——’

‘How dare ye say such a word?’ cried the Dominie enraged. ‘Eh, men, you’re no worthy to be called men, if a lassie like that made a widow as she was, gets no reverence from ye! Poor bit

gentle thing! her only protector gone, and nothing but an infant between her and despair ye may say. I wonder ye don't think shame?'

'That's a' true, a' true,' said the smith; 'but I aye stick up for justice. If Mrs. Lothian should be glad to see the lad she once likit, is that ony sin? Naebody was blaming her. No, no, maister, ye mustna go beyond nature. He was a good man and a clever man; but ye're no so simple as to think that a bonnie young lass should be bound a' her life because she was his wife for a year! Would that be reasonable? I'm no taking one side or another, but as Peter says, "What's the harm?"'

'I ask ye what's the evidence! which is more to the purpose?' said the Dominie.

'Weel, nae doubt it's a slender foundation to build so much on,' said John. 'She's been at Ardnamore the day, and she met him on the road. That's all about it—nothing ye may say, but casting a seed into the ground. Eclin, the lass at Ardnamore, saw them talking, and she came on and tellt the wives; and the wives they've a' made up their minds how it's to be:—ye canna stop the tongues of a wheen women. And I canna say it's anything but natural if ye ask me mysel.'

'It would be hard to tell in what you're better than the women, making a work about such childish clavers,' said Mr. Galbraith with disdain.

‘Well we’re mair philosophical,’ said the smith; ‘they’re a’ at her like hens at a grosset, and no a civil word in their heads. I’m an awfu’ man for justice myself. A young lass is but a young lass if she was a widow twenty times over, and nae doubt before he did such a foolish thing the minister counted the cost, and kent weel that his young widow would wed some other man. Lord bless us it’s human nature! She’s no five-and-twenty yet. She’s no an auld wife to be content with her wean? It’s nature, just nature! I’m neither blaming her nor him.’

‘I advise you to say no more about it, philosophical or no,’ said the Dominic; ‘there are lads and lasses enough in the parish without bringing in them that are out of your way. I say nothing for the rest—but, John Macwhirter, there are inklings of understanding about you, and I looked for better at your hand.’

‘I’ve said nae ill I ken of,’ said the smith, half sullen, half abashed. ‘A woman is but a woman if she was a queen. No but what I have a great respect for Mrs. Lothian,’ he added, with some embarrassment. ‘Lord, Peter, if ye say another word, as sure as death ye shall hae a taste of the Loch, to put ye in mind wha ye are.’

‘I’m no conscious I ever forgot who I was,’ said Peter, with a laugh, ‘nor other folk. Respect be

to a' where respect is due; but as ye were saying, John, lads and lasses are aye the same, be it in a cot or in a palace. The Maister himsel canna contradict that.'

'I'm saying nothing about your lads and lasses,' said the Dominie, severely; 'but, lads, ye can have little feeling in your minds, and ye've forgotten every lesson ye ever got from me, if ye cannot respect the very name of a woman that never did one of ye harm—that has neither father, nor brother, nor husband, to stand up for her—and that is no more mistress who she shall meet on the common road, or who will speak to her, than you or me. There's no a man among you but should have been a lone lassie's defender and guard of honour had ye listened to me!'

With these words Mr. Galbraith started forth into the night, in all the grandeur of indignation, leaving the club of rural gossips much disconcerted. He had taught the most of them all they knew of book-learning, and there were few who had not a certain awe of the Maister who had corrected his youth. There was silence when he went out followed after an interval by a feeble attempt at a laugh. 'The Dominie's mounted his high horse,' somebody said in the darkness; but there was no immediate echo of the sentiment. And what the Dominie had commenced was accomplished tri-

umphantly by Mrs. Macwhirter, the smith's wife, who came forward with her baby in her arms, to sound a note of victory over the discomfiture of 'the men.'

'Eh, but ye've weel deserved it!' she said, 'clashing and clavering like a wheen auld wives. That I should say sae! There's no an auld wife in the country-side that's a man's match for an ill tongue. A' the nasty stories that are ever told in this parish, and mony a parish mair, trace them up, and ye'll aye find they've come frae the smiddy, or the public, wherever there's men meeting. Eh, lads, I would think shame——'

'Gang back to your weans!' said the smith, peremptorily. 'It's late, friends, and time we were a' in our beds. I'll wish ye good night, for it's time to shut up the place. Gang back, I say, woman, to your weans.'

Thus the meeting of the rural convocation was brought to a sudden close. The Dominie heard the sound of the dispersing as he ascended the brae to his own house, and was gratified to feel that his words still had weight. But, notwithstanding his indignation and claim of respect and reverence for Isabel, his mind was very ill at ease. It was all true, though it might be coarsely stated. She was young and had no one in the world 'between her and despair,' as he had himself said, except the baby, who had

rapt her into boundless content for the moment, but who could not for years be any companion to her mind or heart. The Dominie, too, was a philosopher in his way. He had learned to look on with the sober eyes of experience at all the difficulties of human life; and it had been a standing wonder to him how the young soul, full of energy and vitality, and all the natural longings and impulses of youth, should have been suddenly lulled out of grief, out of thought, out of every trouble by the advent of this child with whom there was no possibility of interchange of mind or feeling. It had been a wonder to him. He had stood and gazed at these strangest phenomena, and asked himself what extraordinary difference of nature could there be in a woman which made it possible? To think that an intellectual, reasoning, feeling creature, over whom the wildest storm of conceivable misfortune had suddenly swept, should be in a moment lifted into absolute happiness by the coming of a baby, which had neither intellect, nor reason, nor feeling, but only utter dependence and helplessness to recommend it! He had tried to account for it in a hundred different ways, and he had failed; and finally had taken refuge in the well-worn conclusion that women were inexplicable, and not to be judged by ordinary rules. This want of comprehension made the new event he had just heard of doubly significant.

Here was life coming back to her, life for herself, not the inconceivable absorption into another life which had made her, as she thought, 'happy' with her baby.

The Dominie stood by his own door, looking across at the Manse with the lights in all its windows, and the movement of a large family making itself visible somehow even to the outside world. That very day Isabel had looked at the house which was once her own, and seen its new inmates in it, and felt no pang and no offence. But her husband's friend regarded it with the most irrational sense of offence. How foolishly, strangely, tenderly happy his old companion had been, not much more than a year ago, with the young creature by his side, who might have been his daughter, and was his wife! What a perplexing, touching scene it had been to the spectator's sympathetic, affectionate, wondering eyes! He himself had looked on at all these mysteries of nature with a smile, which was half ignorance and half pity, and yet had a touch of sympathy, if not envy, in it too. No, not envy. Yet the Dominie could not but remember that he had been sorry for himself now and then when he left the soft fools' paradise—the Eden out of date—in which the minister had found shelter; and now all this was swept from the earth as if it had never been. And Mr. Lothian's wife might be Stapylton's, as his church and his house

was now another man's, before many days had passed. The heart of the old man, who had nothing to do with all those cruelties of life in his own person, contracted within him as he stood and gazed as it were, on what had been and what might be. Oh, the pity of it! the wonder of it! One coming and another going—not only life ending, but love ending and happiness; and then beginning again with another—always recommencing, running once more the repeated round; and nothing faithful, nothing steadfast, no remembrance in earth beneath or heaven above.

Youth has the faculty of eclectic belief and eclectic vision; of seeing only the points that suit its fresh and certain theories, and ignoring all that thwarts and destroys. But the eye of experience is more realistic. The Dominie saw everything justly. He felt with instinctive certainty what the result must be, and he did not blame Isabel. She had not loved her husband as her husband had loved her; and yet it partially offended him to think that she had been happy in Mr. Lothian's tender guardianship—she who now would be happy with another man. Was it possible that human nature was made so?—to have, not one life, but two or three lives, as circumstances might guide—to be happy and then sorrowful, and then happy again, knitting up the severed thread as

if nothing had happened? And whose should she be after the resurrection, as the Sadducees asked? Should there be new loves then, and an awful indifference to all the ties of earth? Would it no longer matter to a man whose was his wife's heart? The spectator muttered something, which might have been an oath or a prayer, one could not tell which—and was in reality but an outcry of that despair with which every thoughtful soul is forced at last to turn away from the contemplation of the wonders of the moral world—and went into his lonely little house, and closed the door upon that great, silent, incomprehensible earth. Isabel, with her heart rent in twain, was at that moment trying to close her eyes and sleep by her child's side, and was no more happy, no more satisfied than he was. And the soft summer moon, half visible in the mist of light which hung between the waning and the coming day, looked down unmoved upon both. Heaven took no notice of the new, though it enshrouded the old, but left humanity to solve its own problems, awaiting the grand explanation, which comes only when earth and human life are ended, like a tale that is told.

CHAPTER X.

THE morning rose anxiously over all the personages of this little drama. Isabel, sleepless, fatigued, and unresolved, rose pale to the new day which she felt might bring change incalculable to her life. And Jean woke with her heart aching uneasily with all the renewed sorrows and anxieties which she had so many times discussed with herself. If it had been with alarm that she contemplated the idea of Isabel's first marriage, Stapylton filled her with still livelier dismay. He had impressed a conception of himself upon the country-side in general which might be true or a fiction, but which was not encouraging to a woman in Jean's position. 'He'll leave me my house in peace,' said Jean to herself; 'and it's little he'll heed onything that Margret said about Jamie's schooling. My term day's come, if she takes up with *him*.' She watched her step-daughter with a woman's close and anxious scrutiny during the long morning, and concluded, by a hundred signs, imperceptible to a less close observer,

that Isabel's mind was full, not of the past, as she had at first hoped, but of an agitating present. The way in which she tended her child—now passionately caressing, now thwarting her with almost severity, now dropping into listless inattention, and forgetting for the moment her very existence—her restlessness and inability to keep still, the way in which she stood by the window, gazing and gazing as if she expected some one, all suggested something more exciting than the warmest tide of recollections. Jean, who kept hovering about her, watching with keen attention every movement she made, increased Isabel's suppressed agitation. There was a permanent flush on her face; her eyes were abstracted, and took little note of what was going on. She seemed scarcely aware of the passage of time, and was irritated when she was called upon to sit down at the table and eat, and go through all the ordinary domestic routine. 'Oh, if you would leave me quiet!' she exclaimed, half unconsciously, turning away her face from the scrutiny of which she was only half aware.

'My bonnie woman! you're no weel?' said Jean.

'I am quite well; there is nothing the matter with me. I have—a headache. I don't feel—able to talk,' said Isabel, stumbling from one sentence to another. And then she wound up with the

plaint of weariness, so familiar in its sound, 'Oh, if you would let me be!'

Let her alone—leave her to revolve and re-revolve the questions that were rushing through her mind in endless succession without any answer! Poor Jean did her best to answer this prayer. She went and shut herself up in the kitchen with her children, and gave them their dinner. And then she thought the broth was exceptionally good, and that fasting was bad for a headache; so she got up from her own meal and carried a basin of the family soup into the parlour. 'They're real good the day,' she said, wistfully; 'try a spoonfu', Isabel.'

Isabel was standing at the window once more looking out. She turned round quickly at the sound of the opening door, and a blaze of momentary anger came across her face. 'No, no,' she said, 'I could not eat;' and sat down suddenly, drawing her work to her. Jean stood in the doorway and gazed, holding always the basin in her hand.

'Are you looking for somebody?' she said. 'Oh, Isabel, if you would but tell me!' There's something wrong, but what it is I canna tell.'

'There is nothing wrong,' said Isabel; and for a moment her needle flew through her work, while Jean stood looking at her. Then she roused to impatience again, 'I said I had a headache; if you would leave me quiet, just for a little while——!'

‘I’ll do that, my bonnie woman,’ said Jean; and withdrew regretfully with her broth. But before she resumed her place at the table another thought struck her. This time it was a glass of wine she carried into the parlour. ‘No to disturb you, Isabel,’ she said; ‘but a young thing like you shouldna fast so lang. I’ve brought you a glass of sherry-wine; it’s no ill to take and it will keep your heart——’

‘I want nothing, thank you,’ said Isabel.

‘But you’ll take it to please me,’ said Jean. Just then a knock at the door made them both start. Isabel, without speaking, raised her eyes with a dumb, wistful appeal to the only comforter within her reach. And Jean, in her agitation, spilled the wine as she placed it on the table. ‘It’s maybe naeboddy,’ she said, with sudden comprehension, and with a yearning of her heart over the child about to be exposed to danger and trial.

‘What will I do?’ cried Isabel, clasping her hands.

‘Oh, Isabel, think of the bairn, and the Lord will be a guide to you,’ said Jean, with tears in her eyes. Not a word of explanation had passed between them, but the elder woman came and kissed the younger one with a sudden understanding of the conflict and struggle such as no words could have conveyed to her. Then the

knock was repeated, and Jean hurried away to open the door, wiping her hands with her apron. Her own anxieties and jealousies were all quenched in a moment in that rush of genuine sympathy. 'For she aye likit the lad!' Jean said to herself, feeling by instinct that poor Isabel had traitors within as well as temptations without.

It was, however, not Stapylton, but the Dominie who stood waiting at the door; and the revulsion of feeling was such that Jean could scarcely be civil to Mr. Galbraith. 'Oh, ay, she's ben the house; but she's no weel the day, and I canna have her vexed,' said Isabel's anxious guardian, looking jealously at this new disturber of her repose.

'I'm sorry she's not well; but I have not come to vex her,' said the Dominie. His reception was so strange a one that it was not wonderful if it startled him. When he went into the parlour he met the wistful gaze of Isabel's dilated, excited eyes; but when she saw it was him, and not another, her look changed in a moment, and she fell into a sudden outburst of tears. Disappointment, relief, a strain of feeling which he could not understand, was in the sudden change which came over her face—and the Dominie, being but a man, was not so quick of apprehension as Jean.

'I have startled you, my dear,' he said.

‘ Oh, not startled—’ said Isabel; ‘ but—my head aches; and—I was not expecting you—and——’

The explanation fell into a broken murmur of words; and she dried her tears hastily with an agitated hand. The Dominie had come with the intention of saying some word of warning; though how it was to be introduced, or what kind of warning it was to be, he could not have told any one. He had hoped that circumstances might have led to some remark about the strangers in the parish, and that he would have said something which should ‘ put her on her guard.’ Such warnings seem so much easier to give when the person to be warned is not present. He sat down by her in her little parlour, and found that, so far as his mission was concerned, he had not a word to say.

‘ What would you say to a change of air,’ said the Dominie, ‘ if you are not well?’

‘ You forget I have just come home.’

‘ And so I did,’ he said. ‘ But I do not like these mild inland places like the Bridge of Allan. If you were to go to the sea, or to the hills——’

‘ I am best at home,’ said Isabel.

And then there was a dead pause. She had taken her work, and was labouring against time, her needle flying through the linen, her head bent

down over it. Mr. Galbraith gave a quiet sigh, and felt himself baffled. He did not know how to introduce his subject, and he could not understand the state of suppressed excitement in which she evidently was.

‘There are a great many strangers in the parish just now,’ he said, at last, himself making the remark which he had hoped might have come from her, ‘and some that are not strangers altogether. I hear, Mrs. Lothian, that you’ve been at Ardnamore?’

‘Yes, I’ve been at Ardnamore.’

‘And you’ve seen them *all*?’ asked Mr. Galbraith, with emphasis.

‘I have seen Ailie and—Mr. John,’ she said, raising her eyes to his face. (It seemed to her, as she spoke, that there was another step on the road, and that she could hear it pause at the cottage-door; and in her trouble she betook herself to craft, as was natural.) ‘But you must not ask me about them,’ she said; ‘it was more—than I could bear. It—brought everything back. It is that, I suppose, that has made me so foolish to-day.’

‘It can never be foolish to remember what is past,’ said the Dominie, reassured. ‘Don’t drive the thought from you, as silly folk tell you. The past is precious; sometimes it is all that is left to

us. You are young, and you have your child ; but I doubt if you will ever have such a treasure as yon year. Isabel, my dear, I've seen you a bairn, though you were my friend's wife. Think on him still. There are few such seen in this life.'

'I know that well,' said Isabel, glad, poor child, in unconscious hypocrisy to secure thus a pretence for her too ready tears.

'Ay, think upon him!' said the Dominie. 'You're bonnie and young, and may get the offer of many a man ; but, perhaps, never another like him—most likely never another like him. You should be proud of the past. You have had one of the best men that ever was born ; and if you had been an angel out of heaven, he could not have set you up higher, or made more of you. Isabel, sometimes you must think of that !'

'Oh, I think of it!' said Isabel, with streaming eyes. And the Dominie drew his large hand over the great caves that lay under his eyebrows ; his heavy eyelids were wet, and the muscles quivering about his mouth. He did not attempt to explain to her, nor even to himself, why he was so much in earnest, why he addressed her in so solemn a strain. It seemed natural. As for Isabel she wanted no explanation ; she was neither offended, nor even surprised. The very atmosphere around

her spoke to her as plainly as he had spoken. At such a crisis it was but natural that every one should be moved, even stocks and stones if that could be.

‘And now I must go away,’ he said, rising, with a smile gleaming out under the unshed tear. ‘It’s the hour of the bairns’ dinner, and a kind of necessity was upon me to come and see you. No ; I’ll take nothing. The afternoon school is not so long. God bless you, Isabel ! and guide you aright — in ——’

He broke off in the middle of the sentence, as if (she thought) there was something he could not trust himself to say — and went away without looking round, or adding any ordinary farewell. But his agitation did not wound or even surprise Isabel. She dried her own wet eyes when he was gone, and tried to throw herself back, as he had told her, into ‘yon year,’ — the year of her marriage — when she had been worshipped like something divine, and guarded as the apple of her husband’s eyes. ‘You should be proud of the past,’ her Mentor had said. And Isabel had strained at it, trying with all her might to bring it back to her mind ; but could not. Her imagination rushed instead to that meeting on the hill-side under Ardnamore, to every word, every look, every tone of that strange interview. Oh, how

bitter it was, to be unable to control her thoughts, or turn them as she would, or keep them to matters which her mind could approve. They escaped from her with a leap to go to *him*; and with a guilty pang at her heart, Isabel felt that the bitter was not so poignant, not so irresistible as the sweet.

Baby Margaret woke, and began to cry from the inner room, while her mother sat lost in this struggle. Isabel rose with the alacrity of custom to take the child; but Jean rushed suddenly in before her, and had the infant in her arms before the mother could reach it. Jean was pale, and her eyes were all a-glow with excitement. 'Na, na,' she said, holding the child fast, 'leave her with me. There's ane coming up the brae, Isabel, that ye'll have to see.'

'Give me my bairn,' said the poor young mother, with a cry; and then she sank trembling in a chair, her very limbs failing under her. Half defiant, half sympathetic, Jean stood before her with the baby in her arms.

'It's no fit she should be here. You'll have to see him, and to say what's to be. But, oh, Isabel, dinna forget that you have a bairn!' said Jean, with sudden tears.

'No till I forget myself,' said Isabel, not knowing what she said; and then there was a sudden

stillness round her, and she became aware that she was face to face with her fate.

There are many different kinds of love in this variable world. There is the simple passion which believes and adores—and there is the calmer affection which can understand that its object is not faultless, and yet love all the same; but there is another kind of love, more tragical, more profound, perhaps more irresistible than any of these. It is when a woman knows in her heart that she cannot rely on a man, cannot admire, or praise, or reverence him; knows his weakness, his doubtful character, a hundred lessening things—and yet loves him with a foolish, disinterested passion which she cannot overcome. It is a woman who does this chiefly, though there are men, too, capable of it. Isabel raised her eyes, which were veiled with dreams, yet shining with suppressed excitement, to the face of Stapylton, who stood looking down upon her. The man who had tried to beguile her from her last duty to Margaret,—who had wooed her and tempted her, and almost spurned her on the braes,—who had written that letter,—who had left her for a whole year alone to comfort herself as she might, before she could consent to permit the other truer, generous love to console her in her solitude. All this rushed through her mind as she looked up at him; and at the same moment her heart flew from her like a bird, and took

refuge, as it were, in his breast. She had no power to help herself.

‘Isabel,’ he said, ‘I have come to say what you would not let me say yesterday. Why should we keep apart, you and I? I have not come to speak of the past—not a word. Thank Heaven it is over. It shall never be mentioned between us. You were my Isabel when my father sent for me; be my Isabel now.’

‘How can that be?’ she said, under her breath.

‘It can be,’ he answered, bending down over her; and—it was not self-delusion on her part—there was a softness in his voice, a tenderness that had never been there before. For the first time Isabel felt a certainty that he was thinking of her, how to be most gentle to her, how to please and to move her, more than of himself. ‘I might have looked for you on the hills as I used to do,’ he went on, ‘but I thought it was best to come here to your own home. Isabel, there is no time for courting now. We cannot play with the thought, and quarrel, and make friends, as we used to do. Life is more serious nowadays. We must be man and wife!’

‘You are are not the judge, Mr. Stapylton,’ she cried, with a touch of her old impatience; ‘it is for me to settle that, and not you.’

‘But you will settle it, Isabel. We are older,

we should know our own minds, and the time for the braes is over,' he said. 'Isabel! you have never been out of my heart. I tried to forget you at first, and then—but I said there was to be nothing of the past.'

'You succeeded well,' said Isabel, 'in forgetting me. There was a year—a whole year—'

He sat down by her and took her hand. She had given up the contest when she thus upbraided him; and it seemed to her, as he seated himself by her side, that a strange long dream was over, and that all things were again as they had been when the two had met upon the braes.

'I was not a free man,' he said; 'my father was lying dying, and he would not die. Don't question me of that. Is it not all past? And, my darling, you are mine again.'

'No; oh no,' she cried, with a little instinctive shudder, drawing back; 'there was more, — far more, than that.'

'What more?' he was pale with the suspense and with eagerness. He stretched out his hand again to claim hers, which she had withdrawn. 'Yes, there was more,' he continued, looking fixedly in her face; 'would to God I could forget the rest!'

A flush of shame rushed over Isabel's cheeks. At that moment, when he professed for her a constant love which had known no interruption, what could

she say of her own marriage; how could she even think of it? Was it not treachery, almost vice? The colour came up like flame over her face. She felt their positions changed at once, and she herself put to the bar.

‘I was alone in the world,’ she said, ‘and I had not heard of you,—not a word, for a whole year.’

Now, indeed, he got her hand into his, and triumphed over all her pretence at indifference. She had begun to excuse herself, almost to beg his pardon. ‘We will speak of it no more,’ he said; ‘now my Isabel is mine again we’ll think of it no more.’

‘Oh! hush, hush, I never said that,’ she cried, evading his caress. But he was close by her as in the old days; his voice, so much softened, in her ears,—that voice which had first woke echoes in her girl’s heart; his hand holding hers, and her heart melting, yearning to her first love. How could she resist not him only, but herself? She had no heart to say him nay. After this sudden renewal what would become of her if life settled down again in its grey colours, and he disappeared out of it once more for ever? A month ago that subdued life, with her child in it for sunshine, had been very sweet—but now?

And yet, in the very happiness that thus stole over her, there was a grasp and constriction in her

throat, as of guilt and pain. She was doing something for which she could never have anything but blame from herself or from others—for which she could not defend herself. Her reason seemed to stand by disapproving, regretful, while the poor heart of her made the plunge. The one was no help to the other. Her unity of being was all torn asunder and made an end of. She did not think this in so many words, but was vaguely, dimly conscious of it, as the happiness stole flooding through her, penetrating every nook and corner. ‘Oh, Horace! do you not feel as if it should not be?’ she said, with one last effort to resist.

‘I feel that it ought to be,’ he said, drawing her close to him. ‘If you wish me to have a hope in the world,—if you would not see me perish; not for your sake, Isabel, that are innocent, but for my sake——’

‘Are you not innocent?’ she said, gazing at him with wonder and alarm in her great, tear-dilated eyes.

He put his head down upon her arm, upon the sleeve of her black dress, and kissed that. He had her hand in his, but it was not her hand which he touched with his trembling lips. And she felt that he trembled. For the first time his heart was so touched that the very frame felt the vibration. It was so different from his composure of old, that it moved Isabel beyond expression. When he

answered her with an almost groan, his voice half stifled by his attitude, she leaned over him to catch what he said, as if it had been the most precious utterance. 'Not innocent like you,' he said, sighing, almost moaning as from a heavy heart. And she melted and yearned over him like a mother over a child.

'Oh, Horace, if you have done wrong we will set it right!' she said, unconscious of the vast pledge she took. And thus the contest was ended, and all the struggles of reason made an end of it in one outburst of that enthusiasm of pity and tenderness which raises innocent love to the height of passion. The moment she could escape from him, Isabel rushed to the door without saying a word. She opened it, all radiant yet all tearful, her eyes shining, her face full of soft colour, the lines of her mouth quivering with sobs and smiles. Outside, Jean was walking about, very grave and almost stern, with Baby Margaret lying on her shoulder; hushing, or trying to hush, the child to sleep. But the child had no intention of sleeping; she lay with her head over Jean's shoulder, and two great grave eyes gazing intent into the summer air in that wonderful abstraction of childhood which is so mysterious and unfathomable. To her excited mother it seemed as if the child already disapproved and protested, and was saddened by the event

which she could not understand. Isabel snatched her baby out of her stepmother's arms, who gazed at her like Margaret, and understood better why this sudden movement was. She felt the momentary chill strike to her heart; but did not stop to realize it. Without saying a word, she returned again into the parlour where Stapylton sat surprised awaiting her. He, too, understood her meaning when she reappeared with her child in her arms. She came up to him with two great tears running over from her brilliant, excited eyes; her mouth quivering so that she could scarcely speak; yet smiling. She held out her baby to him without a word. Perhaps it was that he had not expected, had not thought of this little living evidence of the ineffaceable past. He rose to his feet with a sudden hoarse exclamation. The joy in his face sank into a momentary wildness, almost horror; and he trembled as the child's unconscious, solemn eyes gazed at him. Another pang and chill came over Isabel; she had thought he would have taken the child from her, and kissed it, and vowed some tender vow of protection and love. But this, too, was momentary, and passed before she had time to realize it. He did not take the child, but he took the mother into his arms, embracing the bewildered baby also without touching her. 'She shall be my child,' he said.

His child ! Isabel broke away from him, and clasped her baby to her bosom, and sat down apart and cried. Ah, no ! For the first time a distinct sense of the claims of the other who was dead and gone, but who was little Margaret's father, came with a certain sickening pang to her heart. His wife might go from him and be another man's wife: could his child, too, be another man's child, and every trace of him disappear from the earth ? Ah, no !—once more, no !—She said nothing, restrained, even at that moment, by the strange, new, instinctive sense that she must not breathe a word that could suggest prejudice or dislike to the mind of her lover in respect to her child ; but in her heart there rose a certain jealousy of him for her dead husband's sake, a remorse and compunction unspeakable. She had given herself up to him ; she had appealed to him, with moving looks and gestures, to take her child too into his heart ; and yet her whole being roused into contradiction of his claim, into dumb indignant assertion of the real father's right, as soon as he responded to her appeal. She sat apart from him, not looking at him, holding little Margaret to her heart and weeping hot tears with a vehemence which Stapylton could not understand. And she could not understand it herself ; she could do nothing but weep her passion out, already putting restraint upon her tongue,

feeling instinctively that her freedom had gone from her, that she dared not say to him in his moment of triumph what sudden thought had arisen in her mind. Thus it was with poor Isabel, in the moment of what might have been her triumph too, when she gave up her heart and her life into the hands of the only man she had ever loved.

CHAPTER XI.

THEY were married very shortly after — there being no reason why they should wait. Nobody approved of them nor of their match, nor would have been likely to do so had they waited half-a-dozen years. Their little world stood round, as it were, and gazed upon them, declaring it washed its hands of all responsibility. It was ‘their own doing;’ — ‘As they have brewed so must they drink;’ — ‘She has made her bed, and she must lie on it.’ Such were the remarks made in the parish. And yet nobody could have made any decided charge against Stapylton. Somehow he had acquired for himself an ill name in the country-side, even when he was known only as ‘the English lad,’ a comparatively innocent title; but the indignation of the parish was so great and strong against Isabel for being capable of thinking of another husband, that nobody was sorry for her. Miss Catherine was known to be bitterly opposed to it; so were the other Diarmids in the parish who

were connected with Mrs. Lothian; and though such excuses were made among her friends, as that she was young, and her husband had been old, and Stapylton was her first love; yet nobody ventured to defend what she was doing, or to plead that public favour might be re-extended to her. And she was not unaware of this prevailing feeling. In the depths of her heart, indeed, Isabel knew that she, too, would have condemned any woman who had taken such a step; and that the haste with which it was done was unseemly and a shame to her—she on whose head shame had never come before. But what was she to do? She had no one to consult who had authority over her. She had no old tie to break. Sometimes, in the course of her short engagement, it would come into her heart to wish that he had never come back; that her content and stillness had never been disturbed; that she had been left in the silent life which now, alas! seemed to her no life at all. But he *had* come, and the icebound springs had gushed forth, and there was but one thing to be done. Accident (as it now seemed) had parted them before; but nothing could be permitted to intervene when they had thus recovered each other. It might have been postponed had he stayed away; but it could not be postponed now. And the general disapprobation had an effect upon her

which nothing else in her life had ever had : she had never known, never encountered it before—it startled her, and then it irritated and hardened her against all interference. When she found that the world stood apart and gave her no sympathy, she turned her back upon the world. She suffered her love to absorb her ; she turned altogether, with every faculty and thought, to the only being who loved her. The less comfort she had from abroad the more absolutely was she thrown upon him. Her stepmother went about the house as if she were assisting at a funeral—even little Mary turned reproachful eyes upon her. ‘Poor wee baby!—Poor wee Margret!’ she would say, caressing the child. ‘Why is she *poor* baby?’ said Isabel, and little Mary would sigh and shake her head. As for Miss Catherine, she made a formal proposal to take the child under her own care, and leave Mrs. Lothian to ‘her other duties.’

‘A bairn in the house will be an interruption,’ she said. ‘A man with a young wife is often impatient enough of a baby of his own; and ye cannot expect he would be more tender to another man’s child.’

‘She is my child!’ said Isabel, holding her baby tightly strained in her arms.

‘But she is my dear old friend’s child as well,’ said Miss Catherine; ‘and she should not

be brought up in ignorance of her father's very name.'

'Oh, Miss Catherine, you are hard,—hard!' cried Isabel. 'If he was your friend, he was my husband, and knew all, and would never, never have judged me like this!'

'Isabel Diarmid,' said Miss Catherine, sternly, 'it's little more than a year since he was brought home to his house to die, and for a time I thought it was your death-blow too; and now, with your baby in your arms, you are going to wed another man. You should not speak of harsh judgment to me.'

'But I must,' said poor Isabel. 'Oh, Miss Catherine, if you would but think how it all was. Can I put it in words? I was fond—fond of him—and oh! but he was good to me. But you know—the difference; and if you had said a month since,—*He* is coming; let us fly away, not to meet him, not to bring back the past,—I would have gone to the end of the world. I would be—almost—glad—now——'

'Of what, Isabel?' cried Miss Catherine. 'My dear, my dear, come, and I will go with you, and free you from this man!'

'I can never be free of him—now!' she said. 'To say the words is an offence to me. I would have clung to my old life, to be Mr. Lothian's

widow and little Margaret's mother, and nothing more; but now that is all past. If that was what you wanted, why did you let me see the one man—the only man——'

Here Isabel stopped, silenced by her sobs and her shame. She was not ashamed to love him, but she was ashamed to say it in words, to disclose the sacred depths of the heart to any strange eye. She bent her crimson tear-wet face over her child. Poor little Margaret! if she could have known the meaning of all those looks of trouble, and passion, and distress, at which she gazed so gravely with profound baby eyes! Miss Catherine rose up and shook out her dress with an agitated movement, as if shaking the very dust from it, according to scriptural injunction; and yet she had been touched, though she would not admit it, by Isabel's cry.

'You must judge for yourself,' she said. 'All has been said that can be said. I cannot change your heart or settle your life for you, one way or another. You must do as you will. You know what I think, and what a sore blow this is to me; and I can say no more.'

And Miss Catherine swept out of the room and out of the house, leaving poor Isabel with her face hidden and her heart torn asunder. What was she to do? Oh, if he had not come! Oh,

if he had come later, when it would have been less shocking to others, less terrible to herself! She cried out her sorrows inarticulately before God, who, like man, seemed to be hard upon her. She had pondered, and struggled, and decided, as she thought this bewildering life-problem once, not without the painful sacrifice of many a dream. Most women had to do it but once in their lives; but to her the ordeal had come twice, and with so short an interval between! What was she to do? Deny her heart once more, and listen to reason and advice, and what other people thought?—or put it to the touch, for dear love's sake,—for *his* sake—to win all or lose all? Isabel owned to herself that she was not confident and secure, as brides usually are. She could not say, even to her own heart, that it was the best, the highest, the noblest man she was about to wed. Her heart ached with many a doubt, with wonder and uncertainty, and the chilling sense that she was ignorant of what she ought to be acquainted with—not knowing his past, nor his friends, nor any of the many details which clear up a personal history. She did not know what he had been doing for these three years of absence; she had no clue to the meaning of his vague self-accusations. She had none of that instinctive trust in him which might have seemed natural in her position. She

loved him—that was all—better a thousand times than herself; not better, but with a love more *exigéant*, more absorbing than that she bore her child. Life without him *now* seemed to her no life; and he had such need of her. And what could she do?

It did not even strike Isabel as strange that she received no overtures of friendship from his family, nor, indeed, heard of them in any way. Her case seemed too far removed out of the ordinary course of life to leave her any interest in ordinary circumstances. She never thought of his people; all who surrounded herself were hostile or disapproving, and the effect upon her was to make her independent (as she thought) of sympathy. Offended, embittered, cast back upon herself, she took refuge entirely with her lover; and she found in him, what she could never have hoped to find, a certain tender consideration and sympathy for her, which she perceived with fond delight and surprise—unexpected blessings. He had not been used, in the old days, to put her on any pedestal; but now she was grateful to him for his gratitude, for his admiration, for his compassion. She tried to shut out from her eyes the disapproving looks, the constrained courtesies, the cold words she received from others, and to fix all her attention on him and receive all her comfort from him.

The world was hard upon her, and she turned her back upon the world.

And thus it happened that they were married, without paying any attention to the objections and protestations of Loch Diarmid. It was in the beginning of winter when little Margaret was nearly a year old. Margaret's father had been but a year and a half dead, which was the fact that chiefly shocked the parish. 'I'm no saying she should have stayed a widow all her days,' said one of the village wives. 'She was but a young thing and that I would never say;—a widow that's left a widow at three-and-twenty, is no like her that's been a man's wife twenty years or more. I am aye for justice, whatever ye say.'

'If it had been a decent man come of kent folk, and that might have been some credit to her friends,' said Jenny Spence; 'but an English lad no much older than herself, and without a creature to stand for him. Na, na, I'm her connexion by the father's side; but I wash my hands o' Isabel.'

'Poor bit thing!' said a more charitable critic. 'The minister was more like her father than her man. And she's shown a' respect to his memory; and syne when her lad that she likit came back——'

'When a woman's ance a married wife, she has nae right to mind what lad she might have ance likit,' said Jenny, with indignant virtue.

‘Me, would *I* mind upon every haverel that thought me a bonnie lass in my day,—na, no, for a’ the lads in the world; if our John were to die the morn——’

‘You’re no just Isabel’s age after a’. And John and you were a weel-matched couple. It’s nae example,’ said the good-natured friend.

‘Example!’ said Jenny, ‘a bonnie example ye would set before us a’! The man no eighteen months dead, and such a man! And her takin’ up with the first that offered. No eighteen months dead!—It’s that I’m thinking of. Eh, woman, the discredit to everybody belonging to her!—I’ve nae patience to think of Isabel.’

‘She’s but a young thing,’ cried her advocate, deprecatingly; and that was the most that any one could say.

Nor was she less hardly dealt with in the smithy, notwithstanding the superior charity of men for culprits of such a kind. ‘That’s your women!’ said John Macwhirter, with scorn, ‘bonnie creatures for a man to waste his life upon! One or another, it’s a’ the same to them. Ne’er ane of us, if we were dead the morn, but would be served the same.’

‘There’s the sting,’ said Peter Chalmers. He had a sair head this morning after Kilcranion fair;

and the like of that brings it home. 'If you were dead the morn, John, as you say, the mistress would look out a likely lad before the year was done—'

'I would advise you to hold your tongue,' said old Sandy Diarmid, in an under-tone; 'a man may joke, or he may say a bitter word when he takes it in his ain head; but he'll no bear it from another man.'

'I'm no speaking of the mistress,' said John, 'and I advise ye to keep a civil tongue in your head. I'm speaking of women in the abstract. The minister was a real fine man. There was nae sham about him. He was as honest as I am myself, and saw things maybe as clear. And now his wife will be another man's wife, and his wean another man's wean. Lord, that's the worst of a'. I aye likit the lass, and I'm awfu' vexed to change my mind; but to blot out a man's name out of the earth, and give wife and wean and lands and gear to another man! Lord, it puts ye wild to think o't—there's some things ye canna forgive!'

'For my part,' said old Sandy, 'I hope he'll be kind to the poor wean. There was naething else to be expected with sic a young widow: it should be a lesson to auld fools—a man of fifty and a lass of twenty! Ye canna reconcile that to nature, argue as ye like.'

'Nature may gang to—Jericho for me,' said the

excited blacksmith, 'man, we're no a' brute beasts! Is there naething but nature to guide a lass that's been a man's wife, and borne him a bairn? Say love's naething, is law naething, and honour, and credit? A woman's a responsible being after a', though she may be a fool. Is she to blot out a man's name and memory out of the earth, because she's young and light-headed? Na, na, I've lost a' conceit for my part, of bonnie Isabel.'

'She's but a woman when a' 's said,' said Peter Chalmers. 'I agree with Sandy, it was to be expected. I am never astonished at anything they do. I hear he's bought a heap of Archie Smeaton's stock. It canna be to take to England with him. Are they to bide in the parish and brave it a' out?'

'I hope he'll take her a thousand miles out of this,' said the indignant John. But no one could throw any light on that subject. Even Isabel herself, confused as she was and bewildered by a hundred different cares, had no distinct understanding what was to become of them after the marriage which should place so great a gulf between her present and her past. The one detail connected with it which she had power to master was that for the first time she must leave her baby behind her when she went away with her new husband. Even that fact, however, though it came upon her now and then with a sharp, sudden

pang, was thrust aside by the graver preliminaries of the wedding. Isabel Diarmid, with her little patrimony and her cottage, was a different person from Mrs. Lothian made rich by her kind husband, and with her child, and her dependants, to provide for. Naturally it was not until all the convulsions of feeling within her were quieted down by her decision to marry Stapylton, that any thought of other matters came into her mind. But when her new life began to rise before her as an actual, almost present reality,—when the rest of the world turned from her, and left her to feel that she must guide and conclude her fate for herself,—when Miss Catherine swept indignant out of the house, and Jean went and came with averted face, and even little Mary disapproved of her sister, a great revolution took place in Isabel. All at once, even while she wept with a distracted heart, like a girl as she was, over the painful disruption of her life, and asked of heaven and earth what she was to do, and felt that she could do nothing but throw herself into the arms of love open to receive her—another creature, a graver, wiser being, was developing in the young woman's soul. She, too, had felt with a poignant sense of guilt and misery that she was blotting out her husband's name and remembrance from the earth. She had not been able to bear that her lover should call little Margaret *his* child.

And in the many silent hours she had to spend alone, when Stapylton was absent from her, and none of her old friends, not even her stepmother, countenanced her with their sympathy, that sense of her position as a responsible being, which the blacksmith indignantly supposed her to have lost, rose stronger and stronger, more and more painfully, within her. She had her child to consider, she had to think of the little household at the Glebe, confided to her by nature, by Margaret, by kindly home-affection. Jean was too proud now to say a word; not even for her boy's claims would she stoop to remonstrate or make a suppliant of herself. 'If she forgets a' else, she may weel forget me,' Jean said to herself with unbending dignity. She would not yield so far as to discuss any after-arrangements with her step-daughter. Even that would look like approval of her conduct, and Jean would have died rather than have been supposed to approve. 'Ye should mind her of what Margaret aye said about Jamie. Ye should ask her her meaning about the Glebe. Woman, I wouldna let everything gang without a word!' said her advisers in the village, and especially Jenny Spence, who, as a connexion, was doubly wroth that everything which belonged to the Diarmids should pass into the hands of 'yon English lad.'

'No, no!' said Jean; 'we've no claim, neither

Jamie nor one of us. It was her mother's siller, and no the Captain's, as ye ken as weel as me.'

'And if it was her mother's siller!' cried Jenny Spence. 'Lord bless us, what's a woman's siller but for the good of her man and her bairns? and if Jamie's no her son, he's her man's son. Miss Margaret Diarmid, that was this Isabel's mother,—that was the Captain's first wife — was just one of the angels like her other daughter. Ye canna think, Jean Campbell, it would have been her wish to leave you unprovided for in the world with your twa bairns?'

'If she had kent anything about my bairns or me,' said Jean, without any sense of the humour of the suggestion, but yet puzzled by the bewildering confusion of relationships.

'But this one kens,' said Jenny, indignantly; 'and if Margaret had but had the thought to say, if Isabel went wrang that a' the siller was to come to you——'

'Whisht! whisht!' said Jean, impatiently; 'she has a right to do as she likes. I canna say I approve; but the siller is her ain siller, and she has nae call to ask consent from a' the Loch.'

'A lass that respected herself—no to say a married wife that should know better—would take advice from her connexions,' said Jenny, with warmth; 'but to let a' gang without a word, and

Jamie's schooling that you had set your heart on——'

'I can work for my own,' said Jean, with her firm lip trembling; 'but I wouldna ask a sixpence from Isabel,—no to save my life.'

Such was the silence, full of indignant murmurs, full of unexpressed reproach, and injury, and suffering, which surrounded Isabel, Miss Catherine tossed an angry word of advice that she should not altogether forget her child's interest at her, like a stone, during their last interview; but no one else said a word. Poor Isabel, wounded and suffering herself, turned it all over in her mind as she sat alone, with that strange, suppressed, unacknowledged sense of want of confidence in her lover, which ran through the whole of her thoughts like a secret poison, and the result was that she took the first decisive step for herself which she had yet taken in the world. She sent for the lawyer who had managed Mr. Lothian's affairs, and confided to him all her wishes for her child, and for her father's family. Jean might be hard upon her, but she would not leave her unprovided. When Stapylton heard of the proposed arrangements, his face changed a little out of the softness it had begun to wear, and for a moment he was silent, with his lips close shut, and his face darkened, as by a cloud. She watched him

with an intense, feverish anxiety which she could scarcely conceal. And when the cloud cleared off, and his face resumed its new amiability, the relief in Isabel's heart was indescribable. She felt herself justified in her choice, set right before heaven and earth, as it were, by the lightening of his face. When he said, 'You are quite right,' he made her heart sing for joy. It was not that she had thought him mercenary, or believed that he sought her for the sake of what she possessed; but still the doubt that was in her kept gnawing and aching; and from this moment it was relieved and stilled. When he himself volunteered to take the matter in hand, and arranged that the bulk of her father's fortune should be settled on little Margaret, and that Jean should have half of the original little inheritance of the two sisters, the first exquisite feeling of approval came into Isabel's mind. She was more blessed than she had ever hoped to be. She was so happy that she forgave the country-side for its foolish condemnation. She, too, if she had not condemned, had at least doubted Horace; and now to find in him not only the object of her unreasoning love, but a man to approve, to applaud, to be proud of, how sweet it was! Her heart swelled with happiness, and a consciousness of unexpected, unhoped-for joy. And she had not looked for joy in her new marriage; she had

scarcely expected happiness. She had engaged to do it for pure love—love that was not faith, and scarcely was hope. It seemed to her now that her boldness was winning blessings for them both. Actual happiness began to thrill in her heart. There was no more of the old selfishness, the old querulousness, in his manner; but that tender regard for herself which was precious to her, not so much for herself, but as a pledge of excellence in him. She watched him with that close inspection of watchful love which sees every defect, and with a swell of delight said to herself that he was a changed man. With this dawning of new blessedness in her, hope springing high, and timid joy coming in, she stood by his side, not in Margaret's parlour, with all its associations, where her first marriage had taken place, but in the new room which had been added to the cottage, and was married to her first love. Her first and only love—for was not all the tragic brief story which had intervened no more and no other than a dream?

CHAPTER XII.

STAPYLTON took his bride to a pretty sea-side village further down the Clyde where the winter was mild, and where there were no associations to disturb the peace of their beginning. He bore with her in her distress at that temporary parting with her child,—he bore with her anxieties about little Margaret and longings after her, in the little interval which he might have claimed as specially his own. He was thoughtful of her every wish, putting aside his own comfort (she thought) for hers. And Isabel found herself, all unawares, rapt in that dream of happiness which most hearts entertain one time or other, and which so few realize. Out of her doubts she came into a sense of reality which was exquisite to her—and she who had loved her lover without believing in him, grew, with a blessed surprise and delight, which was like heaven to her, to trust as much as she loved. The change was like that from night into the brightest

day. She had reached the heights all radiant with the sun rising, after the valley of the shadow of death.

‘You have been a bride of brides,’ he said to her one day, when a few weeks of this dream had gone. ‘You have never asked me where we were to go, or what we were to do. I wish I could reward you for your trust, my love, and take you to a fine castle, and say you were queen _____,’

‘It was not that,’ said Isabel, ‘don’t praise me too much. It was because I had so much in my mind I forgot. But, Horace, it is trust now.’

‘And that is all I want,’ he said, ‘and we can settle together where we are to go.’

‘But you have your own home?’ said Isabel.

‘I sold that; did I never tell you? I have no ties but you now,’ he said. ‘I meant to have gone to America,—two years ago. Shall we go now? or shall we stay in your own country? or what are we to do?’

‘I have been a fool,’ cried Isabel, ‘to think of nothing all this time. But you must have had plans of your own.’

‘Yes, to disappear out of the world if you would not have me,’ he said; ‘but since I knew you would have me, everything else has gone out of my head.’ And then she clasped his arm with

both her hands, and they walked on forgetting everything, even their plans. Oh, how different it was from the tender quiescence with which she had accepted the minister's love! That had been but a dream and this was life.

They went on together wandering along the beach which was lit up by all the glories of the sunset. She too happy to think of anything; he absorbed in her.

'Oh, Horace, how different everything is!' she said. Her heart was full and spoke out of its abundance. 'If I could have thought this would ever come in those weary days when I looked for you, and you stayed away from me——'

'But you forgot me, Isabel.'

'Did I forget you? Oh, how I wearied for you, Horace!' There was something like guilt in the confession; but the meaning in her mind was different from his conception of it. The time in which she 'wearied' for him had not been that pure, calm, cloistered year of her marriage, when all vain thoughts and wishes had been hushed in the unspeakable quiet. She had not thought of him then. She had been faithful and true as an angel to her father-husband, whose love surrounded her like a dwelling-place, and kept her pure from all the soils of earth. So detached was that period from her life that she did not even remember it

while she spoke. It was a vision, a trance, a world apart. But in the other agitated world of her young lonely life it seemed now as if there had been but one thought, and that was him. 'You left me all that year,—all that weary, weary year, after our Margaret was taken from me,' she said, looking up at him with her tender, shining eyes; 'and I thought I would break my heart.'

'And at the end of it'—he said, 'shall I remind you, Isabel, how you showed your love to me? or shall we let by-gones be by-gones, and speak of it no more?'

'How I showed my love for you?' said innocent Isabel;—innocent, heartless, ungrateful—and yet, in her heart, loyal, after their degrees, to all affections. She looked in his face with genuine surprise. And then, all at once, with a scorching blush remembered what he meant.

'He was so good to me,' she murmured, with downcast looks; 'oh, so kind, like my father! What could I do? It was different. Never, never, could he have been—like you.'

Stapylton drew her to his side with a shudder. 'We'll speak of it no more,' he said; 'I could not trust myself, Isabel; one moment of my life I was in Hell—and it was by seeing you——'

'Seeing me?' she said, aghast.

'With him—more lovely than I ever dreamt

of—in London—at the Opera. My God! when I think of it,' said the young man, with a blackness impenetrable to her anxious gaze, coming over his face.

'Oh, Horace! was it you? Oh, was it you? There was something there that made me miserable. Oh, my Horace!' she said, with pity, and remorse, and terror, clinging to his arm.

'It was Hell!' he said, wiping his forehead, upon which great drops of moisture were standing, 'I had been forgetting as best I could—till then. It was Hell; but this is Heaven,' he added, after a pause, holding her closer. Isabel, terrified and appalled, clung to him, gazing, with her wistful eyes, into his face. He had grown very pale; she felt him even tremble with the poignant recollection. And all the feelings of alarm, and perplexity, and dismay, which had overwhelmed her without apparent cause on that well-remembered evening, rushed back upon her mind. Poor Horace! what must it have been to him to see her thus separated from him, by another man's side. 'Hell,' he said. But then why should he have tried to forget her? What need was there? Was it not his own doing? Isabel checked the thought as it came into her mind; but still it had been there. This was one of the penalties for knowing so little of the man who was now all in all to her. For anything she

could tell there might be valid reasons why he should not have sought her while she was still free. But he had not told her what they were. These thoughts pursued each other through her mind without any will of hers, following the pain of the recollections thus suddenly brought before her. 'It is all past now,' she said, clinging close to him, with her hands clasped on his arm.

'My darling! and this is Heaven!'

They are few who have not, one time or other, in their lives, suddenly woke with a start of dismay and pain to see opening between them, and those dearest to them, a gulf of the unknown, to which they have no clue. It may be innocent as the daylight; but yet the sense of isolation and hopeless ignorance to which the mystery of personal identity condemns us all, always causes a pang. Be it but a moment, be it a year, be it half a lifetime—there you have lost your beloved and are no part of him, cannot follow or know—can but have poor report and history, superficial or half false as all history is. It is inevitable, but it is hard to submit to it. And Isabel, too, had her separate world, in which he had no part. Was it that he did not feel so hardly as she did this penalty of the second beginning? Was it that the man's faculties were less delicate, or the man's passion more overwhelming? But anyhow out of the paradise in which

he thus rejoiced there suddenly gleamed upon Isabel something that looked like a personation of the flaming sword and expelling angel. It was sweet to her, very sweet, that he called it Heaven; but yet the sigh that betrays the mortal Eden breathed, against her will, out of Isabel's heart.

But the days passed on, and were full of sweetness. Stapylton was very much in love with his wife. He had won her after thinking he had lost her, and now rejoiced over her as it is the nature of man to rejoice over any prize that has been hardly won. Her presence and society made even the dulness and quiet of the place palatable to him. She was not an intellectual woman, who might have discovered his want of culture; and she, too, had been long separated from him, had thought him lost, and had found him again; and merely to be with him, to feel his love encircling her all round, was for the moment blessedness enough for Isabel. Yet time and the hour, as it went on, impaired somewhat, as was natural, this primitive delight. They began to discuss their plans together, to remind each other of the world without, which they must shortly face.

One evening, a week later than the conversation we have just recorded, it happened unfortunately that the cry of a child in one of the cottages awoke the heart of the young mother within her.

Her maternity had been slumbering, but was not weakened by absence from her child. 'If I had but my baby!' she sighed softly, half to herself, without thinking—as, indeed, she ought to have done—what an interruption such an exclamation must have been to any young man's love-dream.

He said something—she could not distinguish what; but there was impatience in the tone, and it jarred upon her. He quickened his pace, too, out of the lover's ramble, drawing her along with him. When Isabel thought of it, she saw, with a new-born power of putting herself in his place, that it was cruel to bring in the baby at that moment; but at first it hurt her, and brought a little pang into her heart.

'Cannot you be content with me for a little?' he said; and then there was a pause, and they both turned, by instinct, to their lodgings. It was a winter night; but there are nooks along the coast where the soft west, even in Scotland, cheats the visitor into dreams which would better become the south. The sun was setting behind the Arran hills, lighting up all the horizon with a brilliant wintry glory. The tints were deeper, the gold more dazzling, than in summer; and far away stretched the sea, blue as steel, and brimming over with a rounded fulness, as if it could hold no more. The night air blew somewhat chill in

their faces : perhaps it was that alone which made Isabel so cold and so willing to return.

‘ If we were to go away there,’ Stapylton said, pointing across the steel-blue glistening water, ‘ it would be hard work exposing a baby to such a voyage. Could you make up your mind, Isabel, to leave her at home?’

‘ Leave — my child!’ she cried, with a little shriek; and her joy all at once seemed to die suddenly out of her heart.

‘ I do not say so,’ said Stapylton; ‘ I am only making a suggestion. At her age it would be hard upon her. You could not get milk for her, nor anything. Poor child! If you could trust her to any one at home——’

‘ Oh, Horace, ask me anything but that,’ said Isabel, clinging to his arm.

‘ Well, well,’ he said, subduing his impatience, as her quickened senses could discern, by an effort, ‘ I am not asking you to do it; I am only suggesting what might be for her good.’

And then they went in, and a change came over the heavens and the earth to Isabel. It was not that he had changed: he was as anxious to be good to her, to save her all annoyance, to make her happy, as ever. It was that a note, which jarred upon the perfect happiness she had begun to rise into, had been struck, as it were, unawares.

Had it come at the very beginning, Isabel would not have been surprised. She had taken up her new life with the expectation that there would be thorns in it, and at first there had been no thorns; and now, when all her doubts were lulled to rest, and her hopes rising, and her heart full of gladness, what was this faint discord, inarticulate, inexpressible, the merest ghost of pain, which just showed itself in the perfect existence? She shut her ears and her eyes to it, but it came back and back upon her. Her husband was still her lover, still full of fond delight in her, and eager to please her; but a meaning she could not quite fathom, a purpose which was not made clear to her, seemed to be under his love and his fondness—now more, now less clearly visible from that day. He spoke a great deal of America, pointing out all its advantages to her; and Isabel, who had no dear friends to leave behind her, and of whom her neighbours all disapproved, was not disinclined to think of emigration. But then there were the discomforts of the voyage, upon which he insisted with ever-strengthening force of words.

‘I would never hesitate if we were alone; but the child necessitates a maid,’ he said, ‘and the maid brings other troubles in her train.’

‘But I want no maid; I can take care of my child without any help,’ cried Isabel.

‘And if you did that how much should I see of you?’ he said, with an almost sneer. ‘No, Isabel, I don’t want to be disagreeable, but my wife must be my wife, and not a baby’s nurse.’

‘She will soon be walking,’ said the young mother, trying with anxious wiles to recommend her child. ‘She would soon be—a help to me, Horace, instead of a trouble.’

And he shook his head—that was all; but it was enough to plant unwelcome thorns in Isabel’s pillow. While she was in her dream she had been free of anxiety about her baby. She had quenched any uneasy thoughts by the assurance so often repeated to herself, that Jean would be the safest and most careful of guardians; and that she was herself sufficiently near to be summoned at once should anything happen. But with such conversations going on day by day, the longing to see her child, to possess her once more, to return to common life and its duties, came back with greater force upon her. And she was afraid to say anything, to make any move which should increase her husband’s impatience or turn his heart in any way against her child. Thus the unbelievable happiness of the beginning gradually grew clouded over. She became impatient above anything she could say of their lonely lodgings, the little village, the familiar walks which they took every day. The

steamer which she sometimes went down to watch with Horace when it went or came, was to her a messenger of deliverance. But she dared not say to him, 'Let us go,' or so much as attempt to draw him from the blessedness of the honeymoon; she dared not even let him suspect that she herself had become a little tired of it. In such cases it is not for the woman to make the first move. Thus the idyll, which had been at first so much more perfect than one at least of the pair expected, became translated into a drama of secret struggle and trial. When it rained, as on these coasts it did so often, Stapylton had nothing to do but to hang about her and talk, which, except in simple love-making, was not his forte. And love-making cannot endure for ever. A man gets tired of it who has nothing better to do; and a woman gets tired of it, especially when she has graver thoughts to occupy her mind, and has lived another life, which, after the first delirium, cannot but come in and contrast itself with this. He did not read even, which would have been a relief; he had no work to do,—no amusement even to take him from her side. They were thrown absolutely upon each other, and Isabel could not even see an end to this aimless leisure, nor was able to count the days or the weeks which must still part her from her child. She had some work to occupy her own hands; if

nothing else, 'fancy work,' such as women can manage to cover their idleness with, when nothing better is to be had. But Horace had not even fancy work. He would talk to her of the time when they first met, of their early love-passages and meetings on the braes; but of the time of his absence he never said a word, and evaded all her attempts to lead him to it; and how could she talk of that which slowly began to re-emerge out of the mists, her own experience of a life more satisfying and real than this? It was all associated with the minister, his rival and predecessor, whose name he could not bear to hear, nor any allusion to him. Thus the period most important to them both became a sealed book to each; and all they could speak to each other about was their boy-and-girl love-making, their earliest dawn of independent life.

'I wish you would tell me, Horace,' she said one day, 'about your own folk.'

'I have no folk,' he said, 'except my wife.'

'But that is nonsense. And now they are my folk as well as yours; and you have never said a word to me even about your mother. Horace, couldn't we go and see her? Would she be—disatisfied—do you think—with me—for your wife?'

'I don't see that it matters much,' he said, with a cloud on his face, 'so long as I am satisfied.'

Isabel, don't speak any more about them; my mother does not care for me, and the rest think I am in America. I should have been in America now, but for your pretty face.'

'My face? was that all?' said Isabel, with the fond inquiry of a new wife; and yet with something of a wounded sense that after all it was her face and nothing more.

'What should it be else?' he said, taking the face he spoke of between his caressing hands and kissing it; 'but for that I should have been at the end of the world by this time; but for that——'

'Tell me, is there anything else you would have done?'

'There are things I would have left undone,' he said, turning away from her began to pace up and down the room. Then he returned to her side and took her in his arms. 'If a man does a good many foolish things for the sake of such a sweet face, I suppose they will be forgiven him. I never thought you would turn out so lovely, Isabel!'

'Then if I had been ugly I should have been nothing to you?' she said.

'Not much, probably; is that wonderful? But you are as pretty as ever you can be, and I don't repent. But we must go to America, darling; you would not have me settle here?'

'Wherever you think best, Horace,' said

Isabel, and she felt the moment of decision had come, and looked with an alarmed contraction of her forehead into his face.

‘You would not grudge giving up the Loch, and all your friends,’ he added with a laugh; ‘if you can think they ever would be friends to *my* wife.’

‘I don’t mind where I go,’ she said, terror stealing over her, ‘so long as I have my own with me. Wherever you and—baby are is home for me.’

‘Baby!’ he muttered under his breath; and Isabel, who in her fright did not lose one change of his face, saw something steal over it which had not been there before—something of impatience, anger, fierce dislike, and yet self-restraint. He made a pause and an effort and banished the cloud; but yet she could see very well that an effort had to be made.

‘You must consider it all well,’ he said; ‘it is not just our—your own pleasure that you must think of; you must remember what you owe to the child. She is too young for a long voyage, Isabel; probably she might fall ill—and die. My dear, I don’t want to frighten you—babies so often do.’

‘Oh, Horace, not with my care!’ cried Isabel. ‘God would protect her by sea as well as by land.’

The poor women have all their little children with them. What should happen to my darling more than to the rest?’

‘But it does happen to the half of the rest,’ he said, calmly. ‘I don’t want to frighten you, Isabel; but afterwards, if anything were to happen, you would blame me for not telling you. And then if she lived and grew up she might object to be severed from all her friends and her own country. She has her friends, I suppose,—her—father’s friends.’

‘She can have no friend so near as her mother,’ said Isabel, in a voice which was scarcely audible.

‘What do you say? Of course you are her mother, my dear; but if she were to grow up to feel herself alone in a family, she—did not belong to, one may say—don’t you think she would reflect upon you for taking her from her home? My darling! I did not mean to vex you; I am only saying what you will think yourself when you look at it calmly and see it in a reasonable light.’

‘Oh, Horace, Horace,’ cried Isabel, clasping her hands, ‘did not you say she should be as your own? You would not take your own child from its mother? You would not leave her behind?’

‘Why should not I,’ he said, ‘if it would be for the child’s good?’

For a moment she looked at him aghast, and

then hid her face in her hands. He towered over her in superior virtue condemning her woman's weakness. 'If it were for the child's good It is not our own pleasure we must think of.' The sound of these sentiments bewildered Isabel. Was it possible that her eagerness to keep her baby at any cost or risk was but the selfishness of maternity? Could it be that he would actually be so self-denying as to leave even his own child behind him, if it was 'for its good?' Isabel's heart protested against such virtue, and yet it silenced her indignant cry.

'I believe I have strength of mind enough to do it,' he said, 'if it was for the child's good. Drag her out there with you to undergo all the hardships of a long voyage, to be exposed to disease perhaps, to be parted from her own relations and the country in which her property lies. If she had been unprovided for the case might be different.'

There was a shade of bitterness in his voice. Was he angry that little Margaret's fortune was safe and out of reach, though he himself had taken pains to make all the arrangements? Isabel withdrew her hands from her face, and gazed at him confused by his vehemence. What could it be that he meant?

'But she is very well provided for,' he added, with meaning,—'quite a little heiress. And her friends would never be content that her property

should go out of the country. I see a thousand difficulties in the way. And if I were you, I would choose the most careful guardian I could get for her, and leave her quietly at home, at least till she knows what is what, and can decide for herself.'

'Oh, Horace, do you remember she is my child—my only child, that I love more than my life? If I had to leave her I would die!' cried Isabel; 'but I cannot leave my baby, it would be worse than leaving my life.'

'Which shows you don't make much account of me,' said Stapylton. And then he went out suddenly and left her, leaving all those suggestions to take form and germinate within her. She threw herself down on the sofa in the little lodging-house parlour, and hid her face in the cushions. It would be too much to investigate what her thoughts were at this dreadful moment. A storm raged within her moving heaven and earth. A hundred mocking spirits seemed to come round and gibe at her, and laugh at her vague, splendid anticipations. Was the joy over, and the consolation, along with the honeymoon? And were distress, and distrust, and a consuming terror, to enter in and take possession so soon?

CHAPTER XIII.

WHEN a honeymoon has been thus disturbed the idyll is over, and the only safe thing for the two human creatures who have thus played too long the dangerous drama of Love in Idleness is to get back with as little delay as possible to common life and work. Most frequently it is the woman who retards this salutary change of scene, hoping fondly that the idyll may come back, and fearing the ordinary routine which must separate to some extent the two existences. But Isabel was not in the innocent, primitive position which could render such a delusion possible. She had thought that this alone was life, and that all that went before was a dream; but every day, as it went on, made her more and more aware that the past was no dream, that it could not be severed from her soul, or sink into annihilation, however rapturous and vivid the present might be. She sat at the window of her lodging and did her fancy work, and watched

her husband's moods, and longed to be back. Oh, to be back!—if he were but a labouring man in a cottage going out to his wholesome work, coming in to find everything prepared for him, his wife and his house bright with smiles at his approach—instead of the lounging, the caressing, the vacancy, the fits of fondness and fits of sullenness, and anxious watching of the changes of his face.

‘Did not you once speak of a farm, Horace?’ she said with a hesitation that was almost timidity, when he had himself burst forth into an angry exclamation about the dullness of the place.

‘I hate this country,’ he said, with impatience; ‘but if you have made up your mind you won’t go to America——.’

‘Indeed I never said so.’

‘No, of course you never did; but it comes to the same thing. And by the way, I bought some of Smeaton’s stock,’ he said; ‘I thought I might have to wait and kick my heels at your door, Isabel, longer than you made me do. You were kinder than I expected. I thought I might have had to wait, and that I had better be doing something. I had forgotten all about that.’

He thought he might have had to wait! The tone in which he said it was not unkind, but there was in it that note of incipient scorn which a woman’s ear is so fine to catch. She had yielded

sooner than he expected. She had been an easy conquest after all his wrongs to her! The arrow went through and through Isabel's heart. Sudden shame and humiliation so penetrated her that all power of speech was gone for the moment. No wonder her friends, the country-side, all who knew her, should disapprove and look on her coldly—when even he——

‘Was it a farm in our own parish you thought of?’ she cried, faltering after a pause.

‘I thought of offering for Smeaton's once,’ he said; ‘but that was on account of you. Now I have got you, it is a different matter; but hang it, Isabel, we can't go on like this, you know. A man is bored to death here. Will you make up your mind, like a brave girl, to come with me directly and get it over, or shall we go back to Kilcranion, or somewhere, and wait till spring? By that time you ought to have made up your mind.’

‘Horace,’ she said, still speaking very low, ‘to every thing but one thing I can make up my mind at once, and that one thing I can never do—never! Don't ask me. I cannot leave my baby behind.’

‘But, by Jove, if I insist upon it, you *must*!’ he cried, with a certain bravado in his tone.

She got up and went to him with a glow as of hidden fire in her eyes. ‘I will not!’ she said.

‘I will do anything — everything else you ask me, but not this!’

With her the crisis had reached the point of desperation. But as for Stapylton, he gazed at her for a moment, and, struck by her passion, turned round with a shrug of his shoulders, and what he meant to be an air of indifference. ‘For heaven’s sake don’t make a fuss,’ he said. ‘I hate women who make a fuss — though I think you’ve always had rather a turn that way, Isabel. Well, never mind. It is better to wait for spring, anyhow. I’ll run over to Kilcranion to-morrow, and engage one of the sea-bathing houses till April. They should be cheap enough.’

‘But, Horace,’ said Isabel, with parched and trembling lips, ‘you must understand — not then nor now, can I leave her behind me. It is but one thing. I will do whatever you wish, — whatever you tell me, except this.’

He stood eyeing her for a moment, as if uncertain how to deal with this obstinacy. Then he turned away with once more that careless shrug of his shoulders.

‘Of course it is the only thing I do ask,’ he said, ‘as is always the way with women. But never mind: May is better for a long voyage than December; and something may have happened by that time to change the circumstances — or you may have changed your mind.’

‘What could happen, Horace? and I will never change my mind.’

‘Well, well, say no more about it,’ he said, ‘and we shall see when the time comes.’

Thus he left her once more, with that sense of total disbelief on his part in her firmness, and careless contempt of her resolution, with which parents sometimes drive their children frantic. He cared nothing for the protestation, ‘I will not,’ which it cost her so much pain to make. She would change her mind, or something would happen. What could happen? only harm to Baby Margaret could have been in his thoughts. Isabel gave a cry as the idea crossed her mind; her heart fluttered into her throat. For five long weeks she had not seen her child; and had it indeed been her own voluntary deed which put little Margaret’s fate in the hands of another? She was startled beyond measure by his assumed carelessness, his contemptuous putting aside of the question as a merely trifling matter, which required only due consideration on her part to show her the necessity of. Was it possible that she could ever come to this pitch—go with him, her old lover, —her new husband, who, whether he was a changed man she had once thought him, or, on the contrary, a soul infinitely less exalted, was nevertheless, in either case, hers to be held by all

her life—and leave her child behind her? When a glimpse of this horrible possibility crossed Isabel's mind, it left her cold and trembling, as if all the blood had suddenly ebbed out of her veins. She had brought it all upon herself, as the people said. She was quite conscious of that, and conscious that her momentary triumph and satisfaction had left her, and that her whole life henceforward might be passed under the shadow of doubt and in a perpetual struggle. And he had breathed something like scorn upon her, too, in the faint, half-uttered, half-implied suggestion that she had accepted him too soon; yet, even *now*, she did not repent of what she had done. What could she have done else? She had foreseen it, even when she was free, and had taken the step which bound her all the same. And so she felt she would do again, did it remain for her to do.

Next day she was left alone to think over all this, and exaggerate all her difficulties in her own silent mind, closed up from all possibility of help or sympathy. Staphylton went off to Kilcranion in the morning, to look, as he said, for a house. He did not ask her to go with him, but took it for granted that she should remain behind with her fancy work, and be ready to receive him when he arrived by the evening boat. When she had watched the morning boat depart which conveyed him away,

and found herself alone standing on the shore in this strange place where she knew no one, Isabel felt herself seized upon by the strangest tumult of feeling. She was free. His back was turned who was dearest to her, and yet whom she had begun to fear. Oh, if she had wings like a dove to flee to her baby! She walked up and down the beach in the chilly winter morning, discussing all the possibilities with herself. It might be possible to take the next steamer, and get as far as Maryburgh, and then hire a boat and pay a stealthy visit to her child, and be back again before he should return. By good luck and careful management such a thing might be accomplished, and her heart beat high with the excitement of the chance. But then another consideration came in. Could she hide it from him? Could she thus openly set it before herself and him that he was no friend to little Margaret? Could she expose herself to all the comments of the Loch, by such a stealthy, sudden visit alone? Would it not increase still more his jealous dislike to her child? Would it not represent him to the world as already unkind to her,—already preventing her, except in this silent, stealthy way, from seeing her baby? She paced up and down, up and down the stony beach, while the village folk at a distance gazed out at her now and then from their doors, and wondered vaguely why she

should stay so long in the cold, in the morning, when most people have some occupation. It was known who she was, and she was not approved of at Ranza Bay more than at home. 'The minister's wife at Loch Diarmid and her new man,' was what she and her husband were called, and the villagers were not quite convinced that the relationship was perfectly reputable. 'Light-headed thing, thinking mair of her own will than of her bonnie little bairn.' 'Prancing about yonder for the view, nae doubt; as if there was naething of mair consequence in this world than a view.' 'Instead of looking after her man's dinner, now she has gotten a new man.'

Such were the comments made upon her. But Isabel was unconscious of them all. She watched the second steamer come into the pier with a struggle going on in her heart. Oh, to go to Margaret! It was her last chance of so employing this moment of freedom. She thought of the baby stretching out its little arms; of the cry of infant glee, the lighting up of the little countenance, and made a rush towards the steamer. And then she paused with the wind blowing cold in her face, and thought how she should meet Horace when he returned. She would be tired and hurried, and he would see it, or even if he did not notice it she could not have a secret from him, could not conceal her expedition as if it were anything to be ashamed

of. 'I —went to see my child,—as you were gone, Horace;' that was what she would have to say. And his face would cloud over, and he would say something which would go to her heart, and probably be more jealous than ever of her darling. With a pang which could not be expressed in words, Isabel stood still and saw the boat, her last chance, go away. No, she must not do it, for Baby Margaret's sake. She watched the vessel wistfully as long as it was to be seen, feeling as if her heart had gone with it to her child, and then turned listlessly away, and went and shut herself up in her little lodging-house parlour, and went over in imagination, with speechless longings and tears, what she would have been doing had she been that day at the Glebe instead of here. How she would have gone and come unhidden with her baby in her arms; how its little smiles would have warmed her through and through; how she would have moved from room to room, gone out and come in, done her pleasant work for Margaret, said here and there a pleasant word to some kindly, homely passing friend, and watched the shadows on the hills, and the dimples running over the Loch, and listened to the wind among the trees, or the soft monotonous patter of the familiar rain. All these sights and sounds, and sweet occupations would have been hers, had she not married Horace Stapylton. Good heavens! could it be that this was

the form her thoughts had unconsciously taken? Oh, no, no! He was her lover, dearer to her than all the world. He was hers, and his heart would grow soft to her, and all would be well. Yet—oh, that things new and old could but exist together! Oh, that one could have and enjoy, both what was, and what had been!

And surely, surely, there was no reason why it should not be so. A young mother's love for her child—what was there in that to offend any husband? The most innocent—the most pure of all loves—which Isabel swore to herself would never make her more careless of Horace, never induce her to put him aside from his place as the first and chief. She would but love him better, be more devoted to him if her other natural tie was regarded. But he did not see it so. A yearning came over her such as she could not restrain. She cried aloud, as the sheep do on the hill, in mournfullest bleating, for the lost lambs. Oh, her baby!—her nursling, taken out of her bosom! not by God, which must be borne; but by a caprice—a mistake—the unkind will of a man.

‘Will he no be in to his dinner?’ said the landlady, coming with a sharp knock to the door, and disturbing all Isabel's thoughts.

‘Not till the evening,’ said Isabel, hastily drying her eyes. ‘Mr. Stapylton is coming back by the last boat.’

‘But ye’ll hae your dinner yoursel,’ said the woman. ‘Fasting’s ill for a’ body, especially for the like of you. Eh, but you’ve red een, Mrs. Stapylton! Him and you have had a little tiff afore he left.’

‘No, indeed—nothing of the sort,’ said Isabel, indignantly. ‘And I don’t want anything, thank you. I shall not want anything till Mr. Stapylton comes back.’

‘I never heard of a couple yet but what had a tiff whiles,’ said the landlady, with philosophical calm; ‘especially when the man is about the house a’ day, and naething to do. You’re no to think too much o’ ’t. But dry your een, like a bonnie leddy, and gie him a smile when he comes hame.’

‘Indeed you are quite mistaken, I assure you,’ cried Isabel, half crying in her excitement, but trying to smile.

‘I have seen an awfu’ heap o’ couples in my day,’ said the woman, shaking her head in the composure of superior penetration. ‘And the fonder they are of ilk ither, aye the more like to have a tiff; but you’ll see it will a’ be blown past if ye gie him ane o’ your bonnie smiles when he comes hame.’

If there is anything which can intensify the gloom of one of those tragic contentions which sometimes rend man and wife asunder, it is this

gleam of kindly, consolatory ridicule from without, throwing over the deadly combat the *fausse air* of a lovers' quarrel. Poor Isabel could not cry after this interruption. How far had she floated beyond the light and pleasant time when a lovers' quarrel, with its fond offence and fonder reconciliation, was possible! She took up her worsted work, poor mortal rag into which she had woven so many painful fancies, and sat down by the window, and tried to make out for herself some plan of action. But her thoughts went away from her like so many deserters, some to follow Horace, and wonder what intentions might be in his mind in respect to the future, and what his feelings really were towards her child; some to haunt the well-known place in which the baby was, and imagine every little detail of its existence. The little rooms at the Glebe came before her like an island of calm in the stormy ocean upon which she had launched herself; should she ever recover that peace, or such peace as that—should she ever come to have any security in her life again? And then her mind, which was so running over with thought as to be incapable of thinking, suddenly turned and caught at the poor landlady's homely bit of philosophy: 'Dry your een, like a bonnie leddy, and gie him a smile when he comes hame.' Yes, she would give

him a smile; she would crush down every suspicion — every terror; she would take it for granted — absolutely for granted — that he meant all good and no evil. She would smile upon him, and ignore everything that was not love and kindness — and surely love would conquer in the end.

This she said to herself, with a pathetic smile, wiping away the moisture which would come to the corners of her eyes; and then went out anxious, abject, ready to put herself under his feet, to meet the lord and master whose yoke she had wilfully taken upon her. She took a walk first against the wind with the unconscious craft of weakness, until the colour was kindled in her cheek, and the light brightened in her eyes. He was more fond of her when she looked best. This strange, half-flattering, half-humiliating fact, Isabel had already found out. And she must use every weapon now for the struggle which was a matter of life and death.

The effort was rewarded. When she went to the boat, like any Odalisque, having done all she knew to heighten the effect of her simple beauty, she perceived by her husband's first glance that she had succeeded. He looked at her with a fondness which had begun to die out of his eyes. 'What have you been doing to yourself?' he said;

‘you are looking quite lovely. You have not suffered much from my absence. It is nice, after all, to have such a little wife to come home to. Come, and I’ll tell you all I’ve been about.’

And they sauntered down, arm in arm, towards their lodging, feeling, after all, as if it had been only a ‘tiff.’ Only a lovers’ quarrel! was that all? and no harm in the heart of the fond young husband, nor fear in that of the wife?

Every word he said, every look he gave her, seemed to favour this blessed thought. He told her of the house he had taken, and described it to her, outside and in, with the details which women love, and how it was handy for the steamboats so that he could go and come and look after his ‘business’ without leaving her alone too much. She was so grateful to him for every tender word, so thankful for this allusion to his business, which seemed to her to imply a settled life at home, that there suddenly came to Isabel all those soft arts of flattery and subjection which are to some men the chief charm of women. They had been somewhat wanting to her hitherto. In her past experience she had been the queen, sure to please, whatever she did, always right and always appreciated by simple divine right of being Isabel. And her love had wanted that touch of grace, that anxious endeavour to please, the unconscious cajolery which belongs

to the love of a slave and inferior. Now out of her mortal terror she had caught this last grace which was agreeable in Stapylton's eyes. He felt it was the natural attitude of a wife. He liked to see her watch the motion of his lips, the look in his eyes, to have her elude every subject that was of a dangerous kind, and assent to whatever he said. Yes, he had subdued this proud creature; and being still, and in reality, very fond of her, Stapylton felt that he could now grant her attentions which he would have resisted had she claimed them as a right.

'Shouldn't you like to go to the old place?' he said, 'first? You can go if you like while I settle some other affairs. I'll take you to-morrow if you like, and bring a gig for you to take you to Kilcranion in the evening. Will that please you? You see I am not so bad as you thought.'

'Oh, Horace, as if I ever thought you were bad; as if you ever were anything but good to me, and full of love and kindness!' said Isabel, like a slave, trembling and glowing with happiness and with tears in her eyes.

'You may be sure that is what I always mean,' he said, in his lordly, condescending way; 'and now you know how to make me do anything you like. Look as lovely as you are looking now and be sweet to me, and you can't think how much I'll do to please you, my pretty darling!' He looked

down upon her with such glowing eyes that Isabel was confused with the sudden revulsion. Could she doubt him after this? She clasped her hands on his arm and lifted her face to his, full of beseeching, flattering, appealing tenderness. If that was how to win him, then it should be that way; and if there was a little vague pang of she knew not what mingled with the sweetness, why then it must be herself who was to blame? Thus the transition from the old minister's princess to the young husband's 'pretty darling' was made in a confusing, bewildering sort of way. Unchanged into Scheherazade or Zuleika all at once, without any preparation, no doubt would have felt the change bewildering. And so did Isabel. But he was very tender to her and full of caressing fondness, and she was to be taken to her baby to-morrow. Was not that happiness enough to obliterate all lesser evils?

CHAPTER XIV.

THE morning came so much wished for, in a blaze of wintry sunshine befitting such a joyful day. Kilcranion was a village on the other side of the hills from Loch Diarmid, which lived upon the summer visitors to 'the saut-water,' and shut up its houses all the winter through, so that Stapyhton had been hailed as an angel of light, when he offered to take one of them, and had every difficulty smoothed out of his way. He was to go there when he had taken Isabel to the Glebe, and complete the necessary arrangements about the house, and would come for her, he said, in the evening to take her home. When Isabel first saw the brightness of the morning she had given vent to a burst of happiness at the prospect of going home and seeing her baby, first frank utterance of her thoughts which had momentarily escaped the burden of the previous day's experience. But when she looked to her husband for sympathy she perceived a certain cloud over his face; and all her discoveries,—her experiments,—

her painfully acquired knowledge, had rushed back upon her in a moment. This was not how to prosper; frank utterance and frank response were delights of the past. She had her part to play, and must not forget it. Such was the vague consciousness that thrust itself into her thoughts. She loved him, and you will say it could be no such hard part to play, to watch the indications of her husband's face, to have the air of following only where he led, and accepting from his kindness every good thing that came in her way. Even the visit to her child had been put out of its natural place as an inevitable fact, and must bear the aspect of a special manifestation of his tenderness. You may say it could be no such very hard task; but yet it was hard because it was unnatural, and because Isabel felt the unreality there was in those expressions of her gratitude to him, which she forced herself to clothe in double warmth of language. She felt herself false when she turned her simple exclamation of delight at the beauty of the day, and the pleasure of going home, into thanks to him for taking her. The latter expression was that which pleased him best. He liked it to appear that everything came from his grace and pleasure; that he was to give her everything as to a child or a servant. He disliked to hear of her own will at all, except in the guise of wishes which he could satisfy, earning

sweet thanks and flattering praise. There are many men who are of the same way of thinking, and many women honestly able to content them. But Isabel's training was against her. To change her simple resolution to do, into a helpless desire to have something done for her; and to convert her simple satisfaction in an event which would increase her happiness into thanks to him who had permitted that event to come about, was contrary to all her instincts. Her sense of justice was wounded, her faith cruelly mortified. She felt herself a traitor making those grateful speeches, which in point of fact she could not feel. But she had an awful game at stake, and could not shrink from the conditions of the struggle. Better even to be false with the honeyed words that pleased him, so far as her faltering lips would go, than to stand upon her own rights and feel that he hated her child. She gave herself another lesson in sophistry as, with a heart heavier than at her awakening, she put on one of her pretty marriage dresses, and prepared for her journey. If he had not wanted those thanks, almost insisted on them, how much more grateful she would have been! If he had let her take her own natural way, what genuine praise, what ever-increasing adoration she would have given him in return! But he did not divine that. What he exacted was that she should have no rights,

no independence of action, but should flatter him into granting all her desires, and flatter him for granting them, making herself sweet for his eyes, and submissive for his pleasure, looking up to him with anxious desire to please him, with wistful waiting upon his looks, as a slave to a Sultan. With a certain despair, yet steadfastness, Isabel saw and accepted the position. Not Una as of old,—not a princess to be worshipped, more like a harem wife dependent altogether on her master's approval, and fooling him to the top of his bent to gain her ignoble will. Was this what she was reduced to? And yet with her heart torn in twain, loving him, loving her child, she accepted the *rôle*, and tried as best she might to play it out.

Her heart beat so loudly when once more the steamer carried her up Loch Diarmid, that the very power of speech seemed to forsake her. This time there was no kind, homely face looking out from the pier to welcome her. No one knew she was coming. The village folk gave her a gruff 'good-day' as she passed, with a look towards her husband, half of scorn, half of disgust. There was no sign of life in the windows of the House, as they passed Lochhead together. People on the road stared at her, and then turned round and stared again, disapproving of her, unfriendly to him. Isabel had known it all, and believed that she had

accepted it, half in scorn, half in resignation; but she felt the difference when it was thus brought before her. And Stapylton's face had clouded over the moment they set foot on the shores of Loch Diarmid. A sullen shadow came over him. He walked with his eyes cast down, saying little to her, taking no notice of anything around.

'I hate the place!' he said, with angry energy, 'if you had taken my feelings into consideration you would never have asked me to come back.'

'Oh, Horace!' cried poor Isabel, faltering, 'let me get my baby, and let us go wherever you like! I will never more ask you to come back.'

'Always that baby!' he said, with something that sounded like an oath; and thus all the flutter of joy was stilled in her heart as they went up the hill.

But when she entered the familiar house, and, rushing in all eager and breathless, found herself by the side of the homely cradle in which little Margaret was sleeping, the young mother's heart felt ready to burst with delight and misery. She fell softly on her knees beside it, and worshipped. Soft tears gushed to her eyes, a soft transport filled her. 'Oh, my baby, my darling!' she cried, putting down her head upon the little coverlet, with other inarticulate cries, like the cooings of a dove. When she recollected herself, and looked

up with a sudden pang of terror, she caught her husband's eye bent upon her with that look of incredulity which goes to a woman's heart. He thought it was a piece of acting for his benefit. He did not believe in the reality of any such overflowing of the heart over an unresponsive child. He would have been, indeed, more offended had he thought it real, than he was by the supposed simulation. The one would have proved his wife to be capable of loving something else as well as she did himself; the other was but the homage of weakness to power. 'You think you can take me in with all this,' he said, with a laugh. 'It is very good acting, Isabel; but I know better than that.'

'Acting?' she said, rising slowly to her feet, with wonder so great that it almost overwhelmed the pain.

'Yes,' he said, taking her into his arms. 'Do you think I don't know that not for all the babies in the world would you risk parting with me?'

She gave a little cry, which he did not understand; and all the sages in the world could not have explained to Horace Stapylton the nature of those tears which his wife shed on his shoulder, with her face buried in her hands; the anguish—the despair of ever understanding, he her, or she him; the sudden fiery indignation, the bitter dis-

appointment, the struggle of love with love, and blame and pity. Oh, that he whom she loved could feel so! Oh, that he could be so little, so——, and then she stopped herself even in her thoughts, and moaned aloud.

‘Well, well,’ he said, superior and compassionate, ‘don’t take it so much to heart, if I’ve found you out. I’ll go now, and at four o’clock I’ll come back for you; but mind you are ready, for I don’t want to be driving about the country in a moonless night.’

When he went away, Isabel felt that she drew a long breath of relief. She was glad, and yet how miserable it was to feel herself glad! She dropped wearily into a chair, and sat and gazed upon her sleeping child. The dimpled, rosy creature lay among its pillows, flushed with sleep, with its little arms thrown over its head in baby grace. So helpless, so soft, so sweet a thing, appealing to every human eye by its very weakness and dependence, by the perfection of its rosebud beauty, by every natural plea that could be addressed to the heart; was it possible that any one could resist it? any one, the hardest even, or the most cruel—not to say him to whom its mother had given her heart and her life? The light swam in Isabel’s eyes as she sat and gazed at her child. The very room surrounded her with silent looks of reproach, with

heart-breaking appeals to her recollection. There stood the old-fashioned sofa, on which Margaret had died; there hung the pretty bookshelves, the pictures the minister had hung with his own hands to please her; and there was his child sleeping in her innocence, with her mother sitting by like a visitor come to see her for an hour, not knowing whether she so much as dared to call her, her own. This was the one awful penalty of her second marriage, which Isabel had not foreseen. She had expected all the disapproval, and even the revulsion of feeling in her own mind; she had expected sadly to find her husband no perfect being; but she had not looked for this. That a thought of separating her from her child should occur to any human mind had never once entered into her thoughts. She was thus seated in a kind of stupor, gazing upon her sleeping infant with eyes blinded with tears, when Jean came into the room. Jean had been mollified, in spite of herself, by the care her stepdaughter had taken to provide for her. Even such a benefit could not purchase her approval of the marriage; but that and Isabel's absence, and a certain something in her eye, which did not speak of perfect satisfaction in her new lot, had touched Jean's kindly heart.

‘Isna she a picture?’ she cried, placing herself behind Isabel with uplifted hands of worship;

‘and as thriving and as firm as heart could desire. Eh, Isabel! I thought she would have broken her bit heart the day you went away. There would be aye a look at the door, and stretching out her arms to every one that came nigh, and aye another wail when the poor infant was disappointed. I got an awfu’ fear that it might bring on something—but sin syne she’s been as good and as bonnie as you see her now.’

‘My little darling!’ was all the young mother could say.

‘Hoots, dinna greet: it’s meeting and no parting now,’ said Jean, with a keen look of inspection. And then there was a pause. Isabel had not the heart to move nor to speak, nor even to take her child into her arms.

‘If it had been me I would have had her afore now! Hoots, never mind waking her; whisht, my bonnie lamb! Your little bed’s saft, but no so saft as your ain mother’s bosom. There she is to ye,’ said Jean, putting the rosy, half-awakened child into her mother’s arms. The good woman stood and gazed at the group with a cordial, kindly pleasure. ‘Poor lass! poor bairn!’ she said to herself as she watched the mother’s passion of kisses and tears and unintelligible words: vague suspicions were creeping about Jean’s mind. This close strain of passion, those

tears which did not dry up as they ought to have done, or give place to smiles, filled her with alarm—an alarm, it must be confessed, not unmixed with satisfaction, for had not she, in common with all the country-side, declared that of such a marriage no good could come?

‘Mr. Stapylton, he’s away to Kilcranion?—ye’re to bide there, I hear? but what for could you no come hame, Isabel, to your own house?’

‘It is your house now,’ said Isabel, with an attempt at a smile.

‘Na, na, only the life-rent,’ said Jean, ‘of my ain end; and I’m awfu’ thankfu’ to have that. Am I one to come ben to the parlour and set up for a leddy? No, my bonnie woman, it’s hers and yours a’ the days of my life, as well as when I’m dead and gone. Him and you might have been as comfortable here as in Johnny Gibb’s house at Kilcranion. There’s nae accounting for tastes—but sure am I there’s no a room in it equal to the new parlour here in the Glebe.’

‘It is only for a short time—a month or two,’ said Isabel.

‘And where are you going then, if ane might ask?’

‘We were talking of going to America,’ said Isabel, under her breath. The child had relapsed into sleep again with its head nestled against her

breast. Your baby asleep on your knee, its rose cheek pillowed on you, its little hand clasping your finger, its whole sweet helpless being embraced in your encircling arms—after you have been parted for weeks from sight or hearing of it—can there be anything more sweet? Isabel bent down her head over little Margaret, and in her heart said softly to her God in a transport of sweetness and anguish that was insupportable, ‘Now let me die.’ To go a step further would be to plunge into darkness, and chaos, and night.

‘To America!’ said Jean, ‘Eh, Isabel! that’s an awfu’ change to think of—and the bairn?’

‘What of the bairn?’ cried Isabel in a sudden wild panic of terror; and gathering up her child’s rosy, dimpled limbs in her arms, she rose and confronted her stepmother as if there could be any meaning or power in Jean’s unconsidered words.

‘Na, Isabel, I’m meaning nothing,’ said Jean, falling back in dismay; the sharp misery of the young mother’s tone, her desperate attitude, the sudden mastery of her excitement over all her motherly care not to disturb the baby, came like a revelation to her stepmother; with a woman’s wit she seized upon the sudden pang which had come to herself, to comfort with that, the unknown and deeper misery which thus erected itself before her without a moment’s warning. ‘It’s just that my

heart will break to part with the darling,' she cried, putting her apron to her eyes.

And then Isabel calmed down and took her seat again, and shed a few silent tears, trembling meanwhile with excitement, and the secret something which Jean could see was 'on her mind' but could not divine. She made no complaint, however, and no disclosure, but quieted herself with a power of self-command which the homely but close observer standing by perceived to be new developed in her. When she spoke again it was about little Margaret's 'things,' that they might be packed up and ready when the gig came for them at four o'clock.

'Will ye take her away with ye?' said Jean; 'it's awfu' sudden; will ye take her this very night?'

'Do you think I would give my darling up again?' cried Isabel, with her cheek pressed against the child's cheek.

'If you're sure it's for the best,' said Jean, whose mind was really disturbed and anxious for her stepdaughter. 'Isabel, my bonnie woman, I'm meaning no slight to him; but men are queer creatures. They're no fond whiles of a little bairn that takes up the mother's time, even when it's their ain bairn; and she'll no go to strangers. And ye canna have her with you at night as ye

used to have her. My dear, if I was you I would take time to think.'

'I will never part with my baby again!' said Isabel. In the quietness her old nature seemed to come back to her. The spell of Stapylton's presence began to lose its fascinations. She began again to feel that it was still lawful for her to judge and decide for herself.

'But if it was to make any—dispeace. I'm meaning no offence. She's well and safe, and ye can trust her with me. My bonnie woman! you must not do that in haste that you'll repent o' before the day's done.'

'How should I repent of it?' she said, hastily, but would not yield. She had made up her mind entirely how it was to be done. She would say not a word to her husband, but take it for granted as a thing inevitable. Even, if she saw that to be expedient, she would cover up her baby under her cloak, until the *trajet* was accomplished. In one way or other, howsoever she might be baffled, she had determined to take the child with her. All that Jean, who saw the practical difficulties better than she did, could succeed in settling was that Jenny Spence's eldest daughter, at present 'out of a place,' whom little Margaret knew, should go with her to Kilcranion, to take care of her, and

relieve the young mother from constant attention to the child. Jean sent off her boy instantly to warn Nelly Spence that she must make ready. 'If she goes by the afternoon boat, she'll be at the house as soon as you,' said Jean; and when that was fairly accomplished, it was, as she said, a weight off her mind.

Meanwhile, Isabel, sat sunk in a quiet which was almost stupor; the past days had been very agitating days. And now the stillness and the soft sleep of the child, and the embracing of the old kindly house which seemed to stretch its arms round her with a forgiving calm, and Jean's kindly accustomed ministrations lulled her very soul within her. The good things she had lost came back and floated round her, bringing something of their own peace into her heart; and all that was disturbing and novel had passed away for a moment like a dream. She felt as if she could have slept like the baby.

'Sleep, my darling, if ye can,' said Jean, compassionately, 'you've been doing more than you were able—it's the cold air, and then the fire——'

'No, no,' said Isabel, rousing up. 'Instead of that, if you will pack up her things, I'll take little Margaret out for a walk, while the sun is so warm on the braes.'

'Weel, weel,' said Jean, 'ye'll come to nae

harm there *now*.' Not now, all the harm was over and done. 'And that she's no happy is written in her face,' Jean continued, as she watched her straying out into the sunshine, with a spark of natural wonder that she should take that way of spending the short day. But she was mollified when she saw that Isabel crossed the road to the spot on the hill where it had been Margaret's custom to pray. 'And she'll maybe get good there, poor thing, so ill as she has done for herself,' the sympathetic woman said to herself, looking out from the door. She had watched wilful Isabel so often taking her wayward course from that door; sometimes to meet her 'lad,' as in the old times upon the braes; sometimes demure and stately to join Miss Catherine in some long longed-for pleasure; then leaning on her husband's arm, the serene minister's wife; then mournful in her widow's weeds. 'I understood a' but this,' Jean said, meditatively, to herself. 'But that she's no happy is written in her face.'

The child was now awake, smiling upon her, after the first momentary blank of forgetfulness, and had made her heart leap by saying, or stammering, 'Mamma,' the accomplishment which all this time Jean had been labouring to teach her. Little Margaret danced and babbled in her mother's arms, and stretched out her hands to the

running burn and to the bare branches of the other Margaret's rowan-tree, when Isabel paused beneath it. She had meant to bring her great trouble out with her there, and to ask God's counsel, when she left the cottage; but the baby's mirth beguiled the poor young mother. She sat down on the grassy seat, and forgot everything, and played with her child. What good would thinking do her? What good (she had almost said, and stopped herself with a pang of reproach) would prayer do her? Oh, if she could but pray! and then, in her agitation, she caught at the momentary delight that was nearest to her, and played with her baby, and on the edge of the precipice forgot her terror. Then, as softer and softer thoughts gained her mind, Isabel rose up again, and, half stealthily, went past her own door and up the hill-side to the spot where she had so often met her lover under the little birch-tree. The grass and the heather were heavy with wintry moisture, but she was unaware of it. And again her head grew giddy, and everything looked to her like a dream. Was it Stapylton's wife who was standing there under the tree, where he had been so fond and so cruel? Was this his child in her arms? Was her life one and indivisible, or a thing of shreds and patches, broken into fragments? She stood and grew giddy with the thought, looking over the

wintry braes, while little Margaret caught at the drooping branches of the birch, and laughed at the shower of dewy spray which they scattered over her. Her baby laugh seemed to her mother to wake echoes all over earth and heaven—echoes that reached the churchyard, where *they* were lying who would have defended the child—which might reach the child's enemy on the road miles away, and put evil thoughts in his mind against the innocent, unconscious creature. And her child's enemy was her own lover and husband—could such a misery be?

She was standing thus as in a dream, when a voice in her ear made her start, and spring aside in mortal terror. She could not have told what she was afraid of. Something—anything—ghosts in the daylight; and what she saw was not unlike a ghost. It was Ailie in her white dress, with a shawl over her head—Ailie, who had fallen as entirely out of Isabel's self-absorbed musings as if she had never been.

‘What are you doing here, Isabel Diarmid?’ she said, ‘your courting's past, and you're married to another man. You have chosen this world, and you're satisfied. What are you doing here?’

‘Oh, Ailie! you frightened me,’ said Isabel, holding her child fast in her arms.

‘Many a time I frighten mysel,’ said Ailie, ‘I come and go, and I carena where. I am seeking the Lord and I canna find Him. Something says in my heart Lo here and Lo there—but there’s nae sound of His coming, though I’m aye listening night and day?’

‘And are you no better?’ said Isabel, in her bewilderment; ‘and is there no word of Mr. John?’

‘Oh, ay, Mrs. Lothian, she’s better,’ said old Janet Macfarlane, coming forward nimbly from among the heather. The old woman was worn with anxiety and excitement, but kept her undaunted courage. ‘I beg your pardon, I canna mind your new name; they’re awfu’ fashious thae English names. Mrs. Diarmid’s a hantle better, since the letters came from Ardnamore. He’s in Paris, he’s among his grand friends. I canna understand what it’s a’ about myself, but he says it’ll be in the papers if he shouldna hae time to write; and if your goodman should get an English paper, maybe you would let us hear. She’s real weel, and taking her walks, her and me, like the auld times,’ said Ailie’s champion. She met Isabel’s eye steadily, as she told this lie of pride and love. Ailie for her part took no notice. She was standing by Isabel’s side, looking with wistful eyes on the wild landscape, and seeing nothing;

a creature distraught, and torn out of all the common woes and rules of life—but not mad, though even her mother thought so,—at least not yet.

‘I was never ill,’ she said softly, ‘I want but one thing, Isabel, but that I canna get. I would be as well as you, and as light-footed, and as ready to do whatever there was to do,—if I had but light from the Lord.’

‘Has it never come back?’ said Isabel, wistfully, not knowing what to say.

‘Whiles I think it will never come back,’ said Ailie, shaking her head, ‘and whiles there is a glimmer of hope. My mother’s aye at my side night and day; and if she is that kind, would He break His word? Isabel, it’s an awfu’—awfu’ trial! What are your trials to that? To be disappointed in your God! But if *she* is that kind, would He break His word? I never was a mother myself. But if you were tempted with a’ this world could bestow, would you give up your little bairn?’

A cry burst out of Isabel’s heart. She clasped her child closer, and sprang apart from the strange questioner.

‘Oh, no never,—never! not if I should die.’

‘And you’re but a young thing, and she’s but an old worldly woman,’ said Ailie, with solemn calm, ‘and would He break His word that’s above a’?’

Isabel’s heart, which had been momentarily still,

beat so loudly at this unthought-of anticipation of her inmost struggle that she could not speak, but only gaze with awe and troubled wonder, while Ailie glided away as she came without another word. She passed along among the heather, threading her way by instinct, a strange, ghostly white figure, with her mother like a shadow beside her. Thus the shuttle which wove out one of those lives, shot across the other once again, making a mystic connexion between them. Isabel went home, hushed and silent, after this strange encounter. The wonder of it overpowered her, and silenced her own thoughts.

‘You have told me nothing about Ailie,’ she said, when she was once more seated in the little parlour before the cheerful fire.

‘She’s taken to wandering far and near,’ said Jean, ‘aye, in her white gown. Some say she’s clean daft, poor lass; but I canna think it’s as bad as that. She awfu’ good to the poor folk, and whiles will stop and say a word—if you’ll believe me, Isabel—mair like our Margret’s words and mair comforting and reasonable than when she spoke in *the power*.’

‘But her heart is broken,’ said Isabel, with a sigh, which came from the depths of her own.

‘And there’s something, they say down by, in this week’s paper about Mr. John. But you’ll

hear better than me. Some awfu' business there's been in France about killing the king. They say he's one of thae revolutionaries. But I havena seen the paper myself,' said Jean. 'I'm thinking I hear the wheels of the gig coming up the brae.'

Isabel gave a hurried glance up in her face, and another at her child. A glance not of suggestion, but of speechless, bewildered appeal.

'Go out and meet your man, my bonnie woman,' her stepmother added hurriedly, 'and give me the bairn.'

Not another word was said between them on the subject. 'There was no confidence made, no counsel asked. But Isabel understood that her stepmother saw vaguely, yet truly, what was in her heart. The wintry afternoon was growing dark; the stars were already half visible in the frosty sky.

'Make haste, for it is getting late!' Stapylton shouted from the door. Isabel put on her own outdoor dress with trembling hands, while Jean dressed her child. Then she took little Margaret into her arms under her cloak. Her face was deadly pale with excitement, and resolution, and terror. She put up her white lips to her stepmother to kiss her, though such salutations were rare between them,—and then went out firmly with her precious hidden

burden,—her heart bounding wildly against her breast.

‘Make haste, Isabel!’ her husband shouted from the gig. He did not get down to help her into it, having already begun to glide out of the habits of a lover. And, after an awful moment of fear, she found herself seated by his side, without remark on his part. The baby moved and struggled under the cloak, but Stapylton took no notice. ‘What are you putting in now to delay us?’ he cried to Jean, who was placing the child’s little basket of ‘things’ behind. He was full of impatience to be off, and thought of nothing else for the moment. ‘It will be quite dark before we get home,’ he said, with almost a scowl at the delay.

Jean stood and gazed after them as they darted from the door. ‘Oh, canny, canny, down the brae!’ she cried. She had not shed a tear over the parting, but her heart was heavy and sore. ‘She’ll repent it but once, and that will be a’ her life,’ she said to herself, as the black speck disappeared over the hill, ‘and it’s begun already. I aye said it, if that were ony satisfaction; but she never would listen to me.’

CHAPTER XV.

THERE was no moon, and the night grew speedily dark ; and the road was no smooth, level highway, but a road up hill and down dale, as was natural to the country. Staphylton was so absorbed with its difficulties that he took no notice of the little traveller whose presence could not long be concealed.

‘What is it?’ he said, when little Margaret with a struggle made herself visible from under the cloak.

‘It is only the child,’ Isabel answered in the easiest tone she could attain to, though her very lips were trembling with excitement, and resolution, and alarm. What he said was lost in the night breeze which swept past them as they flew on against it. She thought he too had taken little Margaret’s presence for granted, and her heart seemed to go back with a leap to its natural place in her breast. But the fact was that Staphylton’s mind was at the moment too much occupied to have time to think of the child. When she looked up at him again, she saw

that his brow was contracted, his lips firmly set together, a look of oppression and almost terror in his face.

‘This confounded country of yours!’ he said, ‘it is bad enough in daylight, but it’s horrible in the dark. Why did you keep me waiting so long at that infernal cottage-door?’ But he did not seem to notice the answer Isabel made in her dismay. And they swept along through the dark with nothing visible but the pale stars in the sky, and the great shadows of the hills, and glimmer of the larger loch on the other side of the braes to which they were descending; and nothing audible but the sharp din of the horse’s hoofs on the road, and Baby Margaret’s little murmurs as she nestled to her mother’s side. The curious oppression in Stapylton’s face made Isabel, too, hold her breath, though otherwise she would have felt no alarm upon the well-known way. But past agitation had unstrung her, and the thought of the struggle to come. ‘Would you give up your little bairn?’ Ailie’s words were still ringing in her ears, and she kept repeating to herself over and over, ‘Never, oh, never, if I should die!’ While this was going through her mind, Isabel, seated by her husband’s side, trembled with the question, What would he think if he knew her thoughts? What might he be thinking even now, so close to her that she could not

move without touching him, so far off that her profoundest skill could not fathom what was in his mind?

It was thus that they reached the first place which in their new-married life they could call home. With a relief which an hour before she could not have believed possible, Isabel placed her baby in the hands of Nelly Spence, who was waiting for them at the door.

‘You’ll take great care of her,’ she said, whispering, as she put the child into her arms.

‘Eh, ay, I’ll take awfu’ care of her,’ was the answer.

And the young mother was glad to be thus relieved, to go to her husband, and do her best to conciliate and please him. The child by itself and the husband by himself, she would have given her life twenty times over for either—but together the conflicting claims tore her asunder. Suddenly as the lightning gleams through a storm it occurred to Isabel that there would be a certain frightful advantage and ease to herself could she be capable of doing as her husband said. No, it was no thought of hers; it was a devilish arrow shot into her mind like those that in the awful valley were thrust into the mind of the pilgrim, blasphemies presented to him as if they were thoughts of his own. But that brief moment since she had re-

gained her child into her own possession had taught Isabel more of the practical difficulties of her position than years of thinking could have done: her heart was still palpitating with the joy of seeing her baby again, and being allowed without remonstrance to bring it away; and yet she was glad to leave little Margaret in kindly hands, and to feel herself free to go to her husband. But for Jean's kindly forethought what could she have done? She would have been obliged to take the baby with her, a constant interruption, and to make it positively obnoxious to the man upon whom everything depended. A hot flush came over her when she thought of the danger escaped. And she had been unconscious of it until this very hour.

The fire was burning brightly in the little bare dining-room, and the table spread; and Horace, still with cloudy looks, sat in a great armchair thrust back into the shadow. It was not home, but yet it was more like home than the honeymoon lodgings. It was, at least, their own house. She had come to him giving up her baby, feeling that such a sacrifice was his due; and, perhaps, she expected that some special word or look of tenderness should reward her. But it was soon evident that his mood was very far from lover-like. He burst out when she came up to the fire and stood with her face turned towards him in the full glow of the

firelight. Her agitation had roused all the dormant expression in Isabel's face. Her eyes looked larger, and were full of light and shadow. A tremulous colour went and came on her cheek. Her mouth was all trembling and eloquent with suppressed feeling, and the glimmering of the firelight gave a certain increase of effect to the whole. He did not even look at her at first, but suddenly burst out:—

‘I hate this country of yours! I always did hate it! I don't know what made me such an ass as to consent to stay. By Jove! I wonder if any woman was ever worth——’

‘What, Horace?’ she said, trying to laugh.

‘The things we do for them,’ he said. ‘You are a kind of demons with your pretty faces. You tempt us to do a thousand things that if we had our wits about us——’

‘Horace, we have surely something more than pretty faces? Is that all you care for?’ said Isabel.

‘Well, never mind,’ he said, coarsely; ‘if you were plain, you would not ask such a question; but if you had been plain, Isabel, you should never have been my wife.’

He expected her to be pleased with the rough compliment: and, pleased himself, roused up a little out of the shadow, and suffered his face to relax and looked at her as at a picture. ‘No,’ he said, ‘you

should never have been my wife. I never thought, even when I admired you most in the old times, that you would have turned out so handsome, Isabel; and when I look at you I don't mind——'

'What is it you don't mind?'

'All you have cost me,' he said, falling back into the shadow. 'By heaven that night at the Opera, when I saw you dazzling,—you whom I had been persuading myself to believe was only a pretty country girl. And there you were like a queen of beauty. I shall never forget how I felt that night.'

'Oh, don't speak of it!' she cried. 'I cannot bear it; don't remind me of that.'

'If I could bear it, you may,' he said, with a certain tone of contempt; 'but I don't mind, you are worth it all, my dear; and now let us have some dinner. I have got you in spite of everything, and at least we may be jolly to-night.'

So they sat down to their dinner, which Stapylton himself had taken the trouble to order; and not a word was said about the child. He had accepted it as a natural part of their household, she thought; and Isabel's heart grew a little lighter with every word he spoke. He had forgotten, no doubt, all that had been said in a different mood; and she began to flatter herself it had been but a

passing moment of ill-temper ; and that now the child was under his roof, there would be no further comment upon it. A feverish gaiety took possession of her as she caught at this thought. She made a conscious effort to amuse him, stirring up all her dormant powers. She told him of her meeting with Ailie, and did not wince at his rude comments upon the woman he had no understanding of. She was so anxious to please him that she could have borne anything he chose to say. She was lowering to his level, though she did not know it; a certain pleasure in the fact of being able to make him laugh, and turn his thoughts from more serious matters, took possession of her. Oh, if she could only have gone on telling him stories like Scheherazade, and occupying him with any romance or trifle till they had embarked on their voyage, and little Margaret under her shawl had been conveyed into the ship unnoticed ! It was the first piece of practical falsehood she had ever attempted, and it had been successful beyond her hopes ; and in the haste and agitation of the moment it seemed to her that this was the soundest policy, and that there was no other course before her to pursue.

‘ That woman was always mad,’ said Stapylton, ‘ I could see it from the first ; but, by Jove ! she must be cunning, too. To get that mad fellow to marry her and make a lady of her, as they say,

was the cleverest thing I know. What a fool he must have been, to be sure !'

'Oh, Horace! you don't understand Ailie,' said Isabel.

'I understand her a great deal better than you do, my dear; though I believe in your heart, if you were to tell the truth, *you* saw what she was at all along. Depend upon it, there is always some meaning in those got-up things. When I remember how you were all taken in, and expected your sister to get better too—when anybody with half an eye could see she was going as fast as she could go.'

'Oh, Horace! don't speak of that,' cried Isabel. 'They say there is something in the papers about Mr. John—something that has happened in France. There is the newspaper lying with your letters, will you open it and see?'

'Time enough for that,' he said, drawing his chair to the fire. 'By Jove! he must have been a fool—a bigger fool than even I am, to come down here and bury myself in this hole, all for the sake of you! You ought to be a good wife to me, Isabel, instead of setting up your silly little notions. You never were as happy in all your life before, I know. You never had any one to pet you before, and make a little idol of you. And yet you go and vex me and spoil all our plans for some foolish

notion about a baby, that cares as much for the first country lass that makes a fuss over it as it does for you. Yes, it is a true bill, my darling. You know what a naughty little rebel you are. Now acknowledge that in all your life you never were so happy before?’

It would be safe to say that at this moment, with her husband’s arm round her, and his eyes glowing upon her with admiration and fondness, Isabel had scarcely ever been more unhappy, more torn by painful struggles. ‘Oh, Horace!’ she cried, faintly, hiding her face in her hand. The question humiliated her. She was ashamed, mortified, offended; and at the same time stung to the heart by the contrast between the state of her feelings and his opinion of them. Happy! was there any meaning in the word? But, fortunately, no thought of this crossed Stapylton’s mind. He was full of the comfort of his dinner and his rest, and the indigenous toddy which steamed by his elbow. Ease and that genial influence had mollified him, and made him complacent. He took Isabel’s confusion for the evidence of a shy rapture.

‘You were always a shy little fool,’ he said, kissing her; ‘but I know you were never so happy before. Trust me to know it. You have never told me the secrets of your prison-house,

but I can guess them. By Jove! you should be grateful to a man when you find yourself delivered out of that tomb, and brought safe off here, to be made a pet of. It's all very well to pretend, and to make up a pretty little scene, like that you treated me to this morning; but *I* know you can't care for that brat of a baby, nor put it in comparison with me.'

'Oh, Horace, let me love my child!' cried Isabel. 'I will love you all the better—don't take my little one from me! I will serve you on my knees—I will study your every look, if you will but consent that I should love my own child.'

'And what should you do if I did not consent?' he said, with a smile. 'You would cry very prettily, Isabel, I know, and make a scene as all women do, but you'd give in at the end. Now, why not give in at the beginning, and save yourself all the trouble? Do you think there is any doubt, my love, who would conquer at the last?'

'Yes,' she said, in a voice scarcely audible, trying to free herself from his arms. 'There is a doubt—for I might die.'

'What has your dying to do with it? No, my love. You'll give in to me and do your duty, and we'll be as happy as the day is long,' he said, and with another kiss let her go free. 'Now give

me the paper, and I'll read you the news. All sorts of things have been happening, and we have been too happy to mind ; but now, you know, it is time to think of our duties, now we've come back to the world.'

It was with a relief which frightened her that Isabel felt herself set free. His very fondness, which a little while ago had made her so happy, seemed suddenly to have grown an insult and degradation. Her heart was bleeding from a hundred wounds: the life before her seemed to darken visibly before her eyes. But she sat down, placing a chair opposite to where he sat in his slippered ease, and took out that dreary fancy work, not daring to cross his mood or rouse his anger. Now and then a faint sound, as of her child's voice, went through and through her. But she dared not take any notice that little Margaret was there, or do anything which could direct Stapylton's attention to her. Poor little Baby Margaret, hitherto absolute mistress and queen of hearts, was now banished to a distant room on sufferance—her very mother putting her out of her arms with a sense of relief, and only longing, praying, listening, in an agony lest the little voice should be heard. Isabel sat like a creature in a dream, hearing her husband read out the bits of news that pleased him, making stitches in her doleful embroidery, by times saying some-

thing in reply to him, she knew not what; asking herself, Was she dreaming,—was she awake,—was this herself that sat here, or some spectre playing her part? Her first evening in her own house! Her husband still so lover-like; her child under the same roof—and she so miserable. Was it a dream, or could it be true?

CHAPTER XVI.

A DAY or two passed in idleness, not unlike the honeymoon idleness of Ranza Bay. Stapylton lounged out and saw the steamer come and go, and lounged back again with nothing to occupy him, sometimes lavishing caresses upon his wife, sometimes sullen to her, complaining of the delay and the time he was losing, and of being buried alive in 'such a hole as this.' Sometimes he would go out fishing on the loch, and already these intervals had become a relief to Isabel. She had managed to keep her baby out of his way. When he was gone, she would rush to the room in which the child and her attendant had been placed, and take little Margaret to her bosom, now and then forgetting herself in the baby's 'flichterin' noise and glee.' Her husband had not even as yet remarked the addition of Nelly Spence to the household. The child and its nurse thus lived ignored, their presence known, but not acknowledged,—a position which could not last, and which

at once humiliated Isabel, and made her wretched. Why should she see her baby by stealth as if it were a sin? Why should she be afraid to keep the child in her arms when she saw him coming? She reproached herself with cowardice and meanness a hundred times in a day; yet always shrank and put her darling down when Stapylton was seen approaching, with a feeling which was partly pride and partly fear. But it was evident that this state of things could not last.

One morning, about a week after their establishment at Kilcranion, a message came to Isabel from Janet Macfarlane, begging her to go to Ailie. It was while they were seated at breakfast, that the message arrived. 'Eelin,' the 'lass' who had been witness of the first meeting between Mrs. Lothian and her former lover, was Janet's messenger. 'Eh, mem, there's word frae Ardnamore,' said the young woman; 'you'll have heard of a' that's come and gone. Eh, I would have brought ye the paper if I had thought ye didna ken. He's joined thae radicals that are aye plotting; and it was some awful plan to blow up the king. And Ardnamore he's been blown up himself instead, and it's no thought he'll live. And there's been letters. You wouldna have thought the mistress was that taken up with him, when he was here; but she's ta'en her bed, and we dinna

ken what to do. And auld Janet—I'm meaning Mrs. Macfarlane—has awfu' confidence in you. If you were to come, she thinks maybe Ailie—eh, Gude forgive me, I'm meaning the mistress—would mind what you would say.'

'If you'll wait a little, Helen,' said Isabel, 'I will see what I can do.' She went back to her husband with a little excitement. 'You never told me,' she said, 'that there was something in the papers about Mr. John. And now they say he is dying, and I am sent for to Ailie. Poor Ailie! she scarcely said goodbye to him when he went away; and she will feel it now. Horace, will you get the gig and drive me over the hill, or must I wait for the boat?'

'Neither the one nor the other!' he said. 'Why should you go to every Ailie in the countryside when they send for you? Nonsense! You have no official position now, Isabel. You are my wife, and I won't have you go!'

'But, Horace, I must!' said Isabel, quite unsuspecting that this was the voice of authority. 'Poor Ailie! I had to do with her marriage, though I did not wish it—and I was there when he went away. And I am Margaret's sister. There is nobody she will speak to like me. I will stay as short a time as possible, but I could not refuse to go.'

'By Jove! but you shall refuse to go,' he said,

‘when I say it. If that is what you think your duty, it is not my view. Tell the woman I’ll see her at Jericho first! *My* wife trotting about the country to every fool that sends for her! No, no. Don’t say anything, Isabel. I tell you, you shan’t go.’

She stood gazing at him with amazement so complete that there was no room for any other feeling. Obedience after this fashion had never so much as entered into Isabel’s conception of the duties of a wife. Her mind was incapable of grasping this strangest new idea. ‘I am sorry you don’t like it,’ she said; ‘but, Horace, you know—I can’t refuse.’

‘I don’t know anything of the sort,’ he said; ‘you *shall* refuse. Here, Jenny, Mary—whatever your name is—Mrs. Stapylton can’t come. Do you hear? Tell your mistress, or whoever it was that sent you; she has got something else to do than dance attendance on the parish now. Mrs. Stapylton is not going; do you hear? Now, take yourself off and shut the door!’

‘If the leddy will tell me herself,’ said Eelin, standing her ground. Cæsarism of this description was unknown on Loch Diarmid, and naturally the very sight of a rampant husband awoke the spirit of the female messenger. ‘Oh, mistress,’ she added, turning with sudden softening to

Isabel, who sat dumb with crimson cheeks and downcast eyes, 'dinna forsake us in our trouble. There is no one on a' the Loch that can be of any help to us but you.'

'Go ben to the kitchen and get a cup of tea after your long walk,' said Isabel; 'and I will come and speak to you, Helen. Go now and sit down and rest.'

Her voice was very low, she did not raise her eyes; but the woman understood and had compassion, and obeyed her without a word. A sudden harsh assumption of authority is a dangerous matter in any relationship, and perhaps most dangerous of all in that difficult transition from the love-dream to the ordinary conditions of life. Isabel's proud and delicate spirit had never yet received so strange a shock. She sat dumb for the moment, quivering so painfully with the blow that she was unable to speak.

'You may say what you like to her besides,' said Stapyhton; 'but this you must just make up your mind to say, my love,—that you shan't go.'

There was a certain air of smiling insolence in the young man's face. He was making his first experiment in the matter of sovereignty—beginning as he meant to end, he would have said.

'Is this how it is to be?' said Isabel, with

quivering lips. 'I—don't understand. It never came into my mind before. Oh, Horace, is this how it is to be between us? It could never be any pleasure to me to do what you don't like; but is it to be you who are to judge always, and never me?'

'Didn't you promise to obey me, you little rebel?' he said, still with artificial playfulness; 'and, of course, I mean to be obeyed. You may trust me not to give up my right.'

'But not as a baby obeys,' said Isabel, in a voice which was scarcely audible.

He got up with a laugh which jarred on all her excited nerves.

'I don't mind how you make it out,' he said; 'but I mean you to do what I like, and for this once you had better make up your mind. You shan't go!'

It was at this moment—moved by what evil suggestion it is impossible to tell—that Nelly Spence, who had gradually been growing to a fever point of indignation at the little notice taken of her baby, suddenly opened the door of the room in which such a momentous discussion was going on. They both turned round, and for a moment nothing was visible; then little Margaret, staggering in her first baby run, came swift and unsteady through the open door, her

attendant appearing behind her, stretching out sheltering arms. 'She's walking!' said Nelly, with a shriek of delight. And Isabel, for the moment forgetting all her wounds, gave a cry of instinctive joy, and, turning round, held out her arms. Stapylton turned away with an oath. He went to the window, turning his back on the scene,—so pretty a scene!—the young mother melting into a sudden transport out of her first hard passage of beginning life; the young nurse, half frantic with exultation, the little fairy creature rushing into the arms held out for it. Never was happy household yet, in which such a moment does not detach itself from the blank of years like a picture—sweet, evanescent, innocent delight! But here the bonds of nature were twisted awry. Isabel took her child into her arms with a throb of happiness, and then signed to its nurse to go away, and turned round with a deeper pang of pain. It banished even her own humiliation out of her mind. She gazed wistfully at her husband, not knowing whether to speak to him or remain silent—longing to say, 'I will be your slave, only tolerate my child.'

'Do you want to drive me mad with that man's child?' he said, turning round upon her with a look of hatred and horror which struck her with consternation; and then went out of the

room, out of the house, without another word. She saw him go rapidly past the window while she still sat thunderstruck, holding her baby. Poor Isabel! And this conflict was to last all her life.

She did not know how long she sat thus silent, with a thousand thoughts passing through her mind. She was not thinking; she was stunned, and incapable of any mental action. Her thoughts came and went independently, presenting their arguments before her like so many unseen pleaders. Little Margaret slid from her arms to the floor, and sat there playing with anything that came to hand, gurgling with sweet rills of laughter, sweet murmurs, and those attempts at words which mothers know how to translate. But she took no notice. Slowly the invisible advocates delivered their pleas, and set forth all their reasonings. There rose before her a vision of what must be done, of what it was impossible to do. She was his wife; she had counted the cost and taken the risk, and now the forfeit was required of her. The time had been when she was little Margaret's mother before all; but she had willingly, consciously, taken up another responsibility. She was his wife. Life must be transformed, must be so arranged that it should be practicable with him and not another. Isabel took the baby up from

the floor and pressed it to her heart with a despair which could find no words. Thus it must be. She had drawn her lot with her eyes open, knowing she must pay some hard price for it, though not this price. The decision to be made was so bitter and so terrible that it quenched down even her impetuous, passionate nature. She could not be angry as she would have been had the occasion been less trivial. She was beyond anger. There was in her whole being the silence of despair.

The whole day passed over her in a hush like that which comes before a storm. She framed the softest message she could, and sent Eelin back with it, declaring that it was impossible she could come. And she occupied her mind with schemes for her baby's comfort, and for keeping some trace of her own recollection before the child when they should be parted, perhaps for ever and ever. For ever and ever—that was most likely—with the great ocean between them, and life more bitter than any ocean. Jean would be good to the child she knew, and Miss Catherine would keep a watchful eye on her—and— Only the mother would have no part—no part in little Margaret's life. She could not shed any more tears, they were all dried up, scorched up out of her eyes; but she sat all day by herself, and

thought, and thought. Yes, this was how it must be. Her own life was decided and settled by her own deed ; and Isabel would not say even to herself what a prospect she felt to be before her. But to expose Margaret to the hatred of the man who ought to stand to her in the place of a father, to make her little life subject to such storms, to give her no happy home, full of love and tender freedom, but a nook on suffrance in the house of 'another family'—better let the mother's heart break once for all, and the child be happy, caressed, above all criticism. Thus it must be.

When Stapylton returned that evening his mood was changed. Perhaps he was ashamed, and felt that he had gone too far. Perhaps it was a natural revulsion towards the wife he was still so fond of, that he was determined to have her all to himself. He never mentioned little Margaret or made any reference to her, but he was very tender to Isabel. 'I am an ill-tempered fellow,' he went so far as to say ; 'and if I make myself disagreeable sometimes, my Isabel must forgive me.' And Isabel, for her part, was worn out ; much emotion had worn her as great fatigue might have done. She yielded her soul to the sweetness when it came. She laid her head on his shoulder when he drew her to him, and cried, and despaired, and yet was consoled. She would

make her sacrifice still ; perhaps it was natural that he should feel so,—he, a man to whom Margaret's father had been a rival and an enemy. She would make her sacrifice, and if she should die in his arms afterwards there might be consolation in her end. Thus Isabel did as wives have done from Eve's time downwards—was wounded to the heart, and then was comforted, and felt her wounds heal when the cloud blew over ; and flattered herself that it would not come again, or at least not in this way ; and felt her love through all, raising its head like the daisies after a heavy footstep—often crushed, and ready to be crushed again, but between whiles believing in the bright skies and the healing dew. Even, perhaps, the sacrifice might not have to be made. That hope sprang in her heart when the morning followed the night, and the cloud had not come back. Perhaps the sacrifice was not necessary ; perhaps the footstep that had crushed her was but a passing footstep—accidental not habitual—and might never come again.

‘ I am going to Maryburgh fair,’ he said to her next morning. ‘ Smcaton has written to me to fetch away the cattle I bought. But I don't want them now ; so I must sell them if I can. I shall be back by the last steamer at dusk.’

‘Then that is farewell to all your thoughts of settling here?’

‘Farewell was said long ago,’ he said, ‘unless, indeed, there was something very tempting—No, no, don’t look at me so eagerly; I don’t mean to raise any hopes—America is the place for you and me. But, of course, if there was any great temptation ——’

‘Oh, Horace, if I might hope it would be so!’—cried Isabel, with her heart leaping to her mouth.

‘Well, well, wait and see what will happen,’ he said cheerfully; and in that sudden gleam of comfort she hung about him, feeling all her fears and sorrows melt away like mists in the sunshine. She kissed him with her very heart on her lips before he left her. Isabel had been bred in all the reticence of a grave Scottish maiden; her kisses were few, and very rarely bestowed, but in this moment of revulsion, her heart smote her for all the hard things she had been thinking. ‘Dear Horace!’ she said, hanging about him, ‘I am always so hasty; but every day I will know you better.’

‘And every day you grow sweeter,’ he said with a lover’s looks—and thus they parted; he to the boat which should carry him to Maryburgh, she to little Margaret’s room to dance

her baby, and sing all manner of joyful ditties to the child. 'Oh, my bonnie darling, shall I keep you after all?' was the burden of Isabel's gladness. She sang the words over and over in her joy, as if they had been the *refrain* of a song; and little Margaret crowed and clapped her baby hands in reply, and the whole was like the blessed awaking from a bad dream.

When Isabel had exhausted herself with enjoyment, she sat down at length, having ordered the daintiest dinner she could contrive for his comfort when he should return, and began to her wifely work, sewing on buttons and putting her husband's 'things' in order. It was pleasant to be engaged about his 'things' at such a moment. She said to herself that she had done him injustice, and her heart in the revulsion went back to him with a warmth beyond the fervency even of her first love. The cloud had blown past, —surely for ever. She had misconceived him altogether. While she had supposed him to be so harsh and unsympathetic, was it not evident that all the time he had been overcoming his own prepossessions, bringing himself to acquiescence in her desires? Her heart uttered confessions of her sin against him, and praises of his goodness, while she put the buttons on his shirts. And little Margaret played at her feet, and the sun-

shine came in and lighted on the baby's golden head, and for almost the first time since her marriage Isabel's heart was light, and her happiness was unclouded as the day.

It was about two o'clock in the afternoon when the messenger whom Stapylton had sent from Maryburgh reached the house. It was one of the men upon the pier, whom Isabel knew. He brought her a little note, written in pencil, from her husband, sending the key of a desk of his which he always kept locked.

'I want some money,' Stapylton wrote. *'I see something here I can buy with advantage, but I have not money enough. Open the right-hand drawer above the pigeon-hole; be sure you don't touch anything else—and send me a pocket-book you will find in it. Remember not to touch anything else, for there are things in it which belong to other people, and I can't have my papers interfered with. Lock it up again as soon as you have taken out the pocket-book, and send me back the key.'*

Isabel was a little startled by the note, anticipating evil at the sight of it, as women instinctively do. And she was a little fluttered by the haste of the messenger, who had to return by the boat in half-an-hour, and was very pressing. She gave little Margaret over to Nelly Spence, and put aside her work and hastened upstairs to her room where

the desk was. The very fact of his wishing to buy something, whatever it might be, was an additional proof that he did not mean to go away, but was thinking in earnest of remaining at home. She ran lightly upstairs, and went to the old-fashioned, brass-bound desk which had so often roused her curiosity. She did not remember ever to have seen him open it. It had belonged to his grandfather, he had once told her, and had secret drawers in it, and all kinds of wonders. It was, however, commonplace enough when it was opened. One side folded down to form the slope for writing, and the other was filled with a little range of drawers exactly alike. The right-hand one, however, was quite unmistakable; the pigeon-hole below was clear of papers, and distinguished it from all the rest. But it was stiff, and cost Isabel a great deal of trouble to open it. She had to pull and pull till the little ivory knob came off, and then her task was more difficult than ever. While she was trying her best to get it open, with the thought in her mind that the messenger was waiting all the time, and the boat ready to start, and her husband fretting for the man's arrival, her finger suddenly caught something below, which came out with a little rush and click as of a spring. It came upon her hand and hurt it, which was the first thing that at-

tracted her attention. Then it occurred to her that she might now get a better hold upon her obstinate drawer; and putting her hand in behind, she at length pulled it out triumphantly, and found the pocket-book, the object of her search. No curiosity was in Isabel's mind as to the other contents of the desk. She shut the drawer hastily, and only then looked at the smaller one below, which she had involuntarily opened. It would not push back again in haste, like the other. She stooped over it to adjust the spring, thinking of nothing. Next moment she uttered a low cry of horror. The pocket-book fell out of her hand on the floor. She stood paralysed,—immovable; her lips dropping apart like the lips of an idiot, her face blanched as by a sudden whisper of Death.

‘I must go!’ said the man below stairs; ‘he’ll be that rampaging I’ll no daur face him. Gang up the stair, my woman, and ask the mistress if I’m to bide here a’ day.’

‘The boat’s aye late,’ said the servant-woman out of the kitchen. ‘Take patience, man; she’ll no keep you waiting, unless there’s some reason for it; and I’m busy wi’ my cakes, and canna stir, rampage as muckle as ye please.’

‘Then, lassie, gang you,’ said Stapylton’s messenger. ‘She’s been half-an-hour up the

stair—half-an-hour, as I'm a sinner!—and her man cursing and swearing a' the time on Maryburgh pier. Rise up and ask, like a bonnie lass! Tell her—answer or no answer—I maun away.'

'Oh, ay, I'll gang,' said Nelly Spence; 'but give me my wean. Now she's walking she's mair trouble than when she was carried. She's away, half-way down the passage before ye ken.'

'Rin first and speak after,' said the man. 'Lord, woman, maun I gang up the stair to the mistress mysel?'

Thus stimulated, Nelly Spence, with little Margaret in her arms, went upstairs to the bedroom door. She knocked, but there was no answer. She called softly, then louder, getting frightened; finally, she opened the door and looked in. Isabel was standing in the same attitude, like a creature suddenly congealed into ice or snow. Her side face, which was visible to Nelly, was so ghastly white, and so like the face of an idiot, that the girl was dumb with panic. She went quickly forward, making a noise which at last seemed to catch Isabel's ear. Her action, then, was as extraordinary as her looks had been. She turned suddenly round, and placed herself between the new-comer and the

open desk, going back upon the latter and putting her hands behind her, as if to conceal it.

‘What do you want?’ poor Nelly supposed her to say; but it was a babble, instead of words. She was like the old people who were paralyzed.

‘Oh, Isabel,’ cried Nelly, in her terror forgetting all conventional rules of respect, ‘Oh, Isabel, dinna look at me like that! I’ll rin for the doctor. You’ve had a stroke!’

‘No!’ Isabel said, with an imperative gesture; and then, though her look did not change, she struggled into utterance.

‘What do you want—what is it?’ she said.

‘It’s the man,’ cried Nelly; ‘he’s wanting his answer. But, oh, you’re fitter to be in your bed. I’ll rin for the doctor, and tell him you’re no able. Oh, what will we do?—a young thing like you!’

‘Tell him,’ said Isabel, regaining her voice by degrees—‘to tell—Mr. Stapylton—there’s no answer. You hear me, Nelly: there is—no answer. That is what he is to say.’

‘But, eh,’ said Nelly, with anxious kindness, ‘he’ll be awfu’ angry. If you would let me help you, and find it, whatever it was——’

‘Hold your peace!’ said Isabel, harshly. ‘Go and tell him. There is—no answer. And leave

me to myself. I have something here I want to do.'

'Is she going to kill herself? Does she want him to kill her?' Nelly said, talking to herself as she went down the stair. When she was gone, Isabel, with unsteady step, came across the room and locked the door. She caught a glimpse of herself in the glass as she passed, and wondered vaguely who it was. Then she went back to the open desk, and took out the little secret drawer, and carried it, staggering as she went, to the window. There was but one thing in it;—a little brooch set round with pearls, with hair in the centre, attached to a long gold pin. Adhering to the pin were still some ragged threads of the cambric in which Isabel, with her own hands, had placed it one June morning, not yet two years ago. This was the treasure shut carefully away in Horace Stapylton's secret drawer.

CHAPTER XVII.

THERE are times when a great shock paralyses the whole being, and makes it incapable of action; and there are other circumstances under which it stimulates every power, sends the blood coursing to the heart, and fills the mind with such promptitude of despair, as renders thought unnecessary. At this awful moment both these effects were produced on Isabel. She was paralysed. The sight of that terrible token changed her into stone. In one second of time her warm, young life, the eager mingling of fears and hopes which had been tingling to her very finger-points, died in her, and she with them, as if she had been shot to the heart. The effect was as instantaneous as complete. All trembling with anxiety, suspicion, and hope, conscious of life's sweetness, conscious of its bitterness, trembling, hoping between the two, with no power to settle her own fate, an expectant, eager creature, de-

pendent on the decision of another—and the next moment as dead and still as if she had been a marble statue—shot, stabbed to the heart. She might have been standing there for an age like a dead woman, when Nelly's entrance brought her to life again. But the resurrection was as complete as the murder had been. When she once more became aware of the changed and horrible fact of her own existence, a supernatural energy seemed to have poured into Isabel's veins. It was not produced by thought, or by any effort of hers. This, like so many other processes, seemed to be wrought independent of her, in the secret places of her mind, by means not in her control. The convulsive trembling of her figure steadied gradually as she stood by the window looking at that terrible evidence of what had happened to her; and, as it did so, a sudden, swift, indescribable sense of what she had to do swept through her mind—not what she had to suffer; that was swept out of sight for the moment; besides she was dead, and there was no sense of suffering in her; all she was conscious of was what she had to do.

She took the fatal little drawer first, and locked it up in a box of her own, but walked over the pocket-book on the floor in utter unconsciousness, having lost perception of everything that

did not concern the one frightful subject-matter of her thoughts. Then, with hasty hands, she put on her bonnet and cloak, and hurried out to little Margaret's room, leaving Stapylton's desk open. She took the baby out of Nelly Spence's arms, and began to put on its out-door dress. She had got over her trembling, but her face was ashy white, paler than Nelly had ever seen any living creature before. 'Oh, where are ye going? Oh, let me take the wean! Oh, mistress, ye're no fit to be out of your bed!' wailed Nelly in her consternation. Isabel made no reply. She was even so far mistress of herself as to be able to smile a ghastly smile, and nod her head at the baby as she put on its wraps. 'I shall be back before—dinner,' she said as she went away. 'Before dinner!' Could anything be more horrible than to think of the household table, the common daily use and wont, in face of such a tragical conclusion? But Isabel took no note of her own words. She took the child in her arms; she repeated the same explanation to the maid in the kitchen; and, passing out, took the way across the hill to Loch Diarmid. Little Margaret, in her infant unconsciousness, babbled sweetly over her mother's shoulder, pulling Isabel's veil and bonnet with her dimpled hands, and smiling radiantly at the unaccustomed pleasure. Her little

voice ran on, with now and then a half-articulate word, in broken rills of baby exclamation, wonder, delight, amusement—the little, loving, broken monologue, which is so sweet to kindred ears; and Isabel, without a look round her, without a pause, pressed on. It was a lonely, long, dreary road, over the hill. She had never carried such a burden before, and the baby was lively and happy, and not to be kept quiet. The only conscious thought in the mother's mind was, Oh, if she would but go to sleep, and relieve the tired arms in which she danced and frolicked. Once or twice Isabel sat down for a moment on the roadside, but dared not prolong her rest, she had so much—so much to do. The early winter twilight was fading when she went in breathless to the Glebe Cottage, and sank, without a word, into the great old high-backed chair in the kitchen. Jean, with joy and wonder, and then with wonder and consternation, rushed forward to take the child, and overwhelmed her with welcome and astonishment. ‘Eh, my wee darling—eh, Isabel, my bonnie woman! Where have ye come from so sudden? There’s nae boat at this hour!’ Jean said in her amaze. And then the delight of the child’s return fortunately occupied her, and gave Isabel a moment’s breathing-time. Breathless, fainting, weary to death, she lay back in the great chair.

Her arms ached, her head ached, her heart was panting with the effort for breath. She seemed to require rest only—nothing but rest. The warmth of the fire, the quiet, the familiar objects round her, lulled her as if they had been singing a cradle-song. A confused longing came over her to end here and stay, and go no farther. Alas, how was she ever, ever to retrace that weary, darkling path over the hills!

‘You’ve never walkit all the way?’ cried Jean at last. ‘It’s enough to have killed you, Isabel, my woman! You’re awfu’ white, and ye dinna say a word. Is there anything ails ye? and what has brought ye walking with the wean ower the hills? Eh, I’m feared something’s happened! Bide a moment, my bonnie woman, till I get you a glass of sherry wine!’

The wine restored Isabel a little to herself. It brought back the energy which had begun to fail her. ‘I have brought you Margaret,’ she said. ‘It is nothing. I could have sent Nelly, of course, but it was—pleasanter—I mean I liked better—to bring her myself. She is fond of you—you’ll be very, very good to her—whatever happens!’

‘Oh, Isabel! what should happen?’ cried Jean.

‘One never knows,’ said Isabel, drearily. ‘That

is not what I meant to say ; I mean, you'll take great care of my baby ; she is all I have. Except for her, what do I care what happens ? Nelly will come, you know, with her things. I will send her as soon as I get—home.'

'But, my bonnie woman, there's no boat to-night,' cried Jean. 'Walk ! na, I would never hear of that. Ye canna walk a' the way to Kilcranion ower the hills.'

'I must go at once,' said Isabel. And then, again, the thought, Must she go ? came over her. Could not she stay here in her own house, where she had taken refuge ? Were there not her old friends, who would arrange everything for her ? A sudden sickening of heart came over her ; and yet her whole being was so confused, that she was not sure whether it was the mere walk, or what would come after that walk, which overwhelmed her most.

'Oh, if you would hide me !—Oh, if ye would take me away !' she cried, in the misery of her soul.

'Hide ye ! take ye away ! Oh, Isabel, has it come to this ? Ay, I'll hide ye—ay, I'll defend ye !' cried Jean, roused up to sudden wrath.

Trust to me, my bonnie woman. Nae man, were he the king, shall come rampaging here !'

These very words, which expressed the deepest evil Jean could dream of, and which yet were so trifling, so shallow, compared to the facts, awoke Isabel fully to a sense of her position. She rose up, composing herself as best she could.

‘Hush!’ she said. ‘I must go back. I was speaking—like a fool. I have a great deal to do. The only thing is, that you’ll take care of little Margaret; you’ll never let her out of your sight. My bonnie darling! let me kiss her, and I’ll go.’

‘No this night—oh, no this night!’ cried Jean. ‘Ye’ll drop down on the hill, ye’ll be that wearied; it’s enough to be your death.’

‘That would be the best of all!’ said Isabel under her breath. When she was in movement she was not conscious how weary she was; but as she stood thus, with the child holding out its arms to her, with the old home wooing her, with a possibility, it might be, of escape and flight thus presenting itself before her, her limbs ached, her heart failed. But no, no; that which had to be done could be done only by herself.

‘I must be going now,’ she said, faintly. ‘Don’t ask me any questions. Let me kiss her once again. Oh, you’ve been a kind woman to

Margaret and me! Promise me that you'll never—never, forsake my little bairn!’

‘Isabel, dinna break my heart. How could I forsake her, the darling, that was born into my very arms?’

‘And you'll never let her out of your sight?’ said Isabel. She was gone again before Jean could say another word. When she rushed, with the child in her arms, to the door, the young mother was already almost out of call, speeding up the hillside like a shadow. The sun had set even beyond the western hills, and had been out of sight here at the Glebe for three-quarters of an hour. ‘Though it's longer light on the other side of the hill, it'll be dark night before she gets home,’ said Jean to herself. ‘Oh, did I no aye say it was to her destruction she was taking that English lad?’ She stood and watched as long as the retreating figure was visible, with thoughts of rushing after her, of appealing to Miss Catherine or the Dominie, or some one who could aid. ‘But wha can interfere between man and wife?’ Jean said to herself, with homely wisdom, shaking her head as she went back to her fireside with the child who had been thus suddenly dropped into her arms. ‘My wee pet! at least she may be easy in her mind about you,’ she said, with tears, kissing the little creature, who could give no

explanation; and thus accepted the mystery on which, for this night at least; it appeared no light could be thrown.

Isabel had reached the middle of her homeward course before she awoke to any sort of consciousness of what was before her. To go on, to conquer the aching, the weariness, the sinking of her heart upon the long dreary road, was all that occupied her at first. And it was only at the very height of its dreariness, when she suddenly looked round her, and saw herself surrounded by the moor, with the night wind rustling through the withered heather, and the dark shadows of the hills inclining towards her, like so many stooping giants, that the reality of her position actually burst upon her. The one indispensable necessity of putting her child out of danger, had, until it was accomplished, delivered her from all the questions that remained to be settled. That was the first thing to be done; and the haste, and speed, and motion, and weariness, and little Margaret's voice in her ear, had kept her from any possibility of thinking. Now, in the darkening night, on the summit of the solitary path, the rolling clouds hanging heavy over her, the road stretching lonely without a passenger visible, no house near nor sound of human creature—nothing audible but the sighs of the wind, the rustle of the

heather, the low distant moan of the loch against its shores—as if a floodgate had been opened, the power of thought rushed back upon her. It came upon her like a flood, taking away her breath and her strength. All at once she sank down on the roadside, not from weariness—though every nerve was tingling with the physical strain—but rather to resist the sudden sweep of the torrent, which threatened to carry her away. She sat down, and leaned her head upon her hands, and tried to think. But she could not think; she could but crouch there, and let the tide of wild imaginations, associations, fancies of all kinds, rush over her. Was it on such another night as this—darker still, more cloudy and stormy—that one man had struck another down, and wrenched from his breast that little token of innocent affection and tragic misery? O God! could it be? Then she saw herself at the Opera, with that fatal eye upon her; she recalled the sense of something malign regarding her, of which she had been conscious in the Manse garden the night before the minister's death. These recollections and impressions came one by one, each thrusting her through with a sharper and a sharper dart. She tried to escape from them—to think what she ought to do. Something there was that must be done. She was going back to him—her hus-

band, her husband's slayer—to him who had dared to take her into his arms, knowing the awful ghost that stood between them. Isabel hid her face, as if some accusing eye had looked at her, and cried aloud, in the agony of her shame. How was she polluted!—she who was Margaret's mother and the minister's wife! He had come to her with that blood on his hand, knowing his own guilt, and plucked her like a flower—taken her in spite of herself—made her his, to bear his name, and bound her to him for ever and ever. She writhed upon that sword as she sat and rocked herself on the dark wayside. It seemed to her as if some cruel, avenging angel—as if God himself—had put the bitter weapon through her heart, and held it there, despite her struggles, keeping her to a sense of the deepness of her misery, preventing her from thinking rather what she must do. What was she to do? Oh, if she could only think of that question, instead of writhing and aching, and stabbing herself through and through with this!

But the night grew darker, and the wind moaned louder, and Isabel started with a thrill of natural terror. She stood on the highest point of the road, feeling that there was still a choice before her, for one wild moment. She might turn, and fly back to the Glebe even now.

She might shut fast the doors, and send for her friends, and barricade herself from the approach of the murderer ; her husband's murderer—that was what he was ! She stood with her breath coming in sobs against the wind, all alone in heaven and earth, to make her decision. Oh ! she could so easily gather a body-guard to defend her !—friends that would hold her fast, and her baby, and keep her from all fear. What need had she to go back, to see his dreadful murderer's face—to be touched by the hands which—— Isabel turned and made a rush downwards on the side of Loch Diarmid to her safe and silent home. Then she paused, and painfully retraced her steps. Her heart was gashed and cut in two by that awful sword, which God would not withdraw for a moment. She was the wife at once of the slayer and the slain, God help her ! If she sent for her friends to avenge her husband, would not that be to kill her husband ? Kill her husband ! She walked up and down like a wild creature on the top of the hill. The clouds seemed to be drooping over her, so near they rolled in their great, tumultuous waves ; big drops of rain fell from their skirts, like something cast at her out of the heavens. The storm was rising from Loch Diarmid as if to hunt her before it down to the gloomy shores

of Loch Goil. Over there, in the west, there was a pale glimmer that seemed to direct her—Where? To him who, no doubt, was now waiting for her—the man whose name she bore—whose wife she was; her first love—her worst enemy. Was she to devote herself to him, loathing him as she did? Was she to denounce him, loving him as she did? What, oh! what—was there no counsel in heaven or earth?—was she to do?

When she arrived at the house Isabel was drenched with the torrent of rain which had swept her before it down the dark slope of the hill. The blast had been so violent, and the feverish strength of excitement was so great in her, that she had made up for all the time she had lost on the summit by the swiftness of the descent. And when she reached home she found that her husband had not yet returned. 'The boat's no in yet,' said the maid from the kitchen; 'and, oh! mem, but you're wet; you'll have time to change your wet things afore the maister can be back.'

'And where's the bairn?' said Nelly, open-mouthed.

'You must pack up all her things,' said Isabel, collecting all her powers, 'and take them on to the Glebe. I left her at the Glebe with ——

Mrs. Diarmid. If it is too late to-night go to-morrow morning. I don't think I shall have her here again.'

The maids were in a panic, alarmed for her sanity. They looked at her with suspicious looks. 'Mrs. Stapylton,' said Nelly, with an effort for breath, 'you're sure you ken what you're saying. Oh! dinna be angry, if you're *yoursel*. You're sure you've done the wean no harm?'

'Me! harm my darling!' said Isabel, incredulous that the fear could be real; and then a blaze of momentary indignation came to her aid. 'Go to your work both of you,' she said; 'and don't take it upon you to criticize what I do. Stand aside, Nelly, I am going up-stairs.'

They let her pass them with momentary bewilderment, not knowing what to do. 'But I'll tell him as soon as he comes in,' said the elder woman; 'a man ought to know.'

'You'll do nothing of the kind,' said Nelly, who had a spirit. 'She's mair like a living creature now, and no so like a ghost. Bide, and let him find out for himself.'

'But, woman, the bairn!'

'Never you mind the bairn. She's safe in the Glebe, I dinna doubt, with Jean. They've had some quarrel about her,' said Nelly, with precocious insight, 'and this is the upshot. Let

us haud our tongues, and see what will come o' 't. Eh, woman! a' body said ill would come o' 't; and ye see it was true.'

'As she has made her bed so must she lie,' said the other, sententiously; and she went back to her kitchen to see after the dinner, which was being prepared all the same, whatever tragedies might come to pass. Nelly stole upstairs after Isabel; but dared not follow her to her room, much as she longed to do so; and lights began to be visible in the windows, and everything was made ready for the husband's coming home.

Isabel had come to herself; her thoughts had lulled as the wind lulled, for no reason she knew of—perhaps out of weariness. When she went into her room she perceived the desk standing open, the pocket-book lying on the floor; and had so much possession of herself as to put them away, restoring the book to its place and closing the desk. She could do this with a certain calm, feeling as if her discovery had been made years ago, and since then she had had time to face the idea and accustom herself to it. She took off her wet gown, and dressed herself as usual. All this she did mechanically, in a sudden hush, scarcely thinking, scarcely feeling anything. When she heard his step coming to the door there arose within her a tempest just as

sudden. Should she go down to meet him, or let him come here? Should she wait till he assailed her, or should she announce her awful discovery at once? None of these questions could Isabel answer for herself. She had to act mechanically, not knowing in one moment what she would do the next. He came in with an angry inquiry about 'your mistress,' which she could hear where she was. His voice was louder than usual; his very step betrayed irritation. But what was his irritation now to her? It even struck her with a curious sense of wonder that he could take the trouble to be moved by trifling causes to trifling passion—he who, as he and she knew—— Mechanically still, and quite suddenly, as if some spring had been touched in her of which she was unconscious, she went down, and went into the room. He had placed himself with his back to the fire, full of wrath, which was evidently ready to burst forth the moment she entered. The table was spread for dinner. An air of homely comfort was about the place; the light was dim, to be sure—but it was as much as they were used to; and the candles brightened the white-covered table with its gleams of reflection, and the ruddy, quivering firelight filled the room. All these calm details of ordinary life encircled the two at this dreadful

moment with that hypocrisy of nature which cloaks over the fiercest passion; and in the kitchen the dinner was preparing, not without much serious anxiety on the part of the maid lest the fish should be spoiled; for Stapylton was 'very particular' about his dinner, and prompt to wrath when anything impaired its perfection.

'Well,' he said, when Isabel came into the room, 'I hope you have something to say for yourself. What did you mean by sending me such a message to-day? I wonder if you are mad, or if it is only pride and obstinacy. No answer? How dared you, when I had sent you my directions, send back such a message to me?'

'Because I was stunned,' she said, 'and did not know what I was saying. Let us not speak of it till you have eaten. Wait till then. I have much—much—to say.'

'Much to say!—a great deal too much I don't doubt,' he said; 'if you think this sort of thing will do for me, you are mistaken, Isabel. You may as well know at once. I am not the man to be trifled with. My wife must obey me—do you understand? I can't have two wills in my house. My wife must obey me!' he went on, striking his hand against the table. 'I have borne as much of your self-will as I mean to bear. My wife must have no will but mine.'

Isabel looked at him as from some height of knowledge, feeling no movement of anger, no irritation at his words. Oh! to think he should be occupied about matters so trifling at a moment so terrible! To get his wife to obey him! Could he care for that, when this life was over, blasted in a moment, and nothing remained for either of them but a blank existence of despair? Her heart bled for him, making himself angry thus at the merest trifles, not knowing what was to come.

‘The dinner is coming,’ she said, wondering at herself that she could form the words, ‘and the woman will be in the room. Would you wait till it is over? And you must want food and support,’ she added, with an ineffable pity. It was not the pity of love. It was the compassion with which she might have fortified a criminal with food and wine, before telling him the awful news of his approaching execution—a human sentiment of pity for a weak creature in unconscious peril, about to be strained to the utmost, and unawares of it. He gave her an angry look, to see what she meant, but could not divine it, so wrapt was she in the unconscious elevation and tragic seriousness of the crisis. He did not know what a crisis it was. And he could not understand the strange superiority of her calm.’

‘And then the inconsistency of it,’ he said, moodily placing himself at the head of the table. ‘You pretend to want me to stay, and when I begin to entertain the idea, and was actually in treaty for some land, you step in, in your perversity, and break it off by disobeying my orders. What did you mean by it? What reason could you have? By Jove! if I had gone off at once and never come near you again, it would have served you right.’

Oh! if he had done so, Isabel murmured within herself; but the servant was in the room, the dinner being placed on the table, and nothing more was practicable. She sat there happily concealed by the cover of the dish placed before her, and made motions as though she were eating, and listened to all his grumbling over the indifferent meal. The fish was spoiled; the meat was badly roasted; the vegetables were uneatable. ‘If you would give a little more attention to this sort of thing, and waste less time over that precious baby, it would be more to the purpose,’ he said, ‘that woman is an idiot; so are all these Scotch women; and, by Jove! I was the greatest idiot of all to come and settle myself down here.’ Isabel made no answer. That he should be on such a brink, and yet be disturbed by the arrangement of the grasses on the edge of the precipice! She had

no inclination to reply to him, or to take offence. She gazed at him across the table wistfully, with a compassion that was almost tender, and yet felt she could not go to him, could not touch him, or bear his touch, not for all the world.

Then there came the moment when the table was cleared and the door closed, and they sat looking at each other with the two candles lighting the little white space between them. There was perfect quiet in the house. The maids were in the kitchen, frightened, not knowing what might happen, with the door shut between them and their master and mistress. Outside, the little world was hushed; not a sound, except an occasional blast of rain on the windows, or melancholy plash of the loch on the beach, breaking the utter silence; still as the grave, which seemed to rise up between the two as they looked at each other in the pause before the storm.

‘Well?’ said Stapylton.

Isabel had made no preparation of what she was to say. She did not know what words would come to her lips. She felt herself passive, not so much an actor as the spectator of this scene. The only thing she had done was to bring down with her, wrapped in her handkerchief, the little secret drawer of his desk containing the awful token she had found. When he looked across at

her, demanding with contemptuous defiance her apology or explanation, she gazed back at him for a moment without a word to say. Words would not come to her aid. She took up her enclosure and unfolded it with trembling hands. She began to tremble over all her frame, even to her lips, which refused to move articulately. He sat looking on unsuspicious, surprised, and scornful, while she fumbled with the handkerchief. Then she rose up and held it out to him. Her face was as pale as death ; her eyes dilated ; her hands, in both of which she held it, shaking wildly, 'Look what I found !' she cried, with her eyes fixed upon him. They were the only things steady about her. Her voice was inarticulate ; her arms powerless. All her life had retreated into her eyes.

He sprang up to his feet at the same moment, and swore a great oath, bending over the table to see what it was. Then he fell back in his chair again, as pale as she was, trembling as she did. He was taken by surprise. 'Good God, Isabel !' he said, 'Good God, Isabel !' stumbling at the words almost as she did, 'what do you mean ?'

'Look, and see,' cried Isabel, with her lips suddenly opened ! 'look and see ! oh, man ! was there no other woman in the world that you should make me vile and make me miserable ?'

Was there no other spot in the world, that you should come to shed blood here? You had eaten his bread and drunk his cup. You had taken my heart's love and the flower of my youth. Could you not have been content? We were thinking you no harm, doing you no harm—and ye came and killed my man, my blessed man! And even that was enough. What harm was I doing you, a lone creature with my bairn, that you should come again and pollute me, and put his blood on me? Oh, look and see! Ye took me to your arms with that horror in your mind. How dared you do it, Horace Stapylton? How dared ye put yourself with that blood upon you, between the dead and me?’

He had recoiled and shrunk away from her, pushing back his chair. He had been so taken by surprise that his very wits failed him. ‘For God’s sake, don’t scream at me,’ he cried, with a thrill of terror. ‘Do you know they are listening? For God’s sake, woman, speak low, whatever you have to say.’

Then she gave a sudden low cry, and sank back into her seat. She had not said it to herself. She had never permitted herself to think it; and yet at the bottom of her heart there had been a hope that he would deny, that somehow he might be able to disprove even what that silent

witness said. But he had not attempted to deny it—it was all true, true! And she lived and he lived, with *that* between them. She could not stand, her limbs failed her; but she kept her hand upon that terrible evidence of his guilt, and kept looking at him with her dilated eyes.

‘Well,’ he said, getting up after a terrible pause, ‘so this is your story—this is what you have made up. You think you can ruin me with it—perhaps you think you can kill me. But it is all a mistake. Throw it into the fire—that is the wisest thing that can be done both for you and me.’

‘Not yet,’ said Isabel, under her breath.

‘Not yet! Do it of your own will, that will be wisest. Don’t drive me to compel you to do it,’ he said, pacing up and down; and then he came to a sudden pause before her. ‘One word, Isabel, before things go too far. You know what accusation you are bringing against me? You can’t prove it. *That* is no proof. Do you understand what I say? And more, it is not true.’

‘Oh!’ she said, clasping her hands, ‘Say it is not true! Say you found it—or bought it—or—Horace, say it was not you!’

He paused a moment, gazing at her with an evident struggle going on in his mind whether to seek his own safety or to gratify his feelings.

‘I neither bought it nor found it,’ he said at last, under his breath, with a glance of fury in his eyes; and then he added with a sudden shudder, ‘but what killed him was the fall from his horse.’

‘And you—oh, tell me a lie rather—tell me a lie! You!’ cried Isabel, ‘struck an old man, a defenceless man, when he was down?’——

‘Who told you that?’ he cried, sharply. And then with another flash of fury,—‘How much more evil had he done to me?’ he exclaimed, throwing himself into his chair again with great drops of moisture standing like beads upon his forehead. And there was a pause like a lull in a storm.

Then the gust rose again, menacing and sudden. ‘You think I am making a confession,’ he said, ‘but I am doing nothing of the sort. You cannot harm me. I am safe, at least from the wife of my bosom. You can’t bear witness against your husband, though you had ten thousand proofs. Thank the law for that. If all this passion were not a pretence to start with! Was there ever a woman that quarrelled with her lover for anything he could do for her sake?’

‘For *my* sake!’ said Isabel, with a low cry of horror.

‘Yes, for what else? for your beauty and your love? Did I know what a cold-blooded phantom

you were? I swore to have you when I saw you by his side! Curse him! And I have had you. Do what you will, you can't alter that—you are my wife now, and not his.'

'Oh, don't make me loathe myself more than I do,' she cried, wildly. 'Don't make me more hateful than I am to myself.'

'But it is true,' he said, once more approaching her; 'you are mine, and you are harmless against me. I have had my desire, and I have disarmed my enemy. And look here, Isabel, you may as well hear reason,' he added, coming up to her and grasping her shoulder, 'you need not think of putting it into other hands. If I did *that* for your sake, what do you think I should be capable of for my own?'

She looked up and their eyes met, and they gazed at each other for one awful moment—he like a tiger ready to spring—she pale and resolute as an image of death.

'Of killing me,' she said, never turning her eyes from him, 'as you would kill a fly.'

'Yes,' he said; 'you are right—as I would kill a fly; if you put me in danger, or threaten my life.'

The voices of both had sunk into absolute calm. The anxious servants in the kitchen concluded that the storm was over. 'They're

talking as quiet as you and me,' Nelly Spence said, with a sigh of relief, as she came back from an anxious vigil at the door. While the husband stood by his wife's chair, with his hand on her shoulder, speaking to her in a voice as quiet and subdued as if the words had been the tenderest words of love.

'It is well you should know what you have to expect,' he said. 'Submit, and I will forgive all this, and take you back to my heart. Shudder if you please, but my arms are the only ones open to you now; I will take you back, notwithstanding that you mean to betray me; but if you keep your own way, Isabel, understand that I will crush you like a fly.'

She kept looking at him, undaunted, not moving a hair-breadth back, nor changing her position. Her shrinking youth, her womanly tremor, all extinguished in an emergency more terrible than any death.

'Would I care?' she said softly, as if to herself; 'now that life itself is dead and gone? You cannot frighten me now.'

'Like a fly!' he repeated, as if he liked the image, closing his hand as if upon it; 'you, and that child you make your idol. Ah, I touch you now!'

'She is safe out of your reach,' said Isabel,

though not without a tremble. And he, too, started slightly. The duel was to the death, and his opponent was unencumbered, free to beard him to the last extremity. Every moment the position became graver. An awful calculation ran through the man's mind. It is not easy to crush a resolute, watchful human creature however feeble, like a fly; and a man may threaten, a man may even have struck a sudden blow in the frenzy of jealousy and rage, who could not, with deliberation, in his own defence take a helpless life. And then, he loved her, even now, with passion, which was of the meanest kind, and yet was passion still. He went away from her, and made a circle round the room, feeling his brain reel, and the world around swim and fail. He had her, yet he had lost her; he had lost his power over her. He could not crush her will, any more than he could reclaim her love. He could kill her if he liked, and suffer for it; was that all he could do? Her eyes defied and mastered him, filling him with a sudden despair. He could kill her, but no more. And that he had never meant to do.

‘What do you want?’ he asked abruptly, seating himself in front of her. ‘In all this I suppose you mean something. What do you want of me now?’

Then it rushed upon Isabel in a moment what she ought to say.

‘You are in danger,’ she said; ‘you were seen that night. At any moment they might remember it was you. And I know. And never more,—never, never more can you and me be as we have been. Never more! Sooner, I would die!’

The shudder in her voice thrilled him with wild irritation; but he gave no sign of it, waiting for what she had to say.

‘What I want of you is, that you should leave me,’ she went on. ‘Leave me—that is all! Go where you were going when we met. Hear me out! I will give you everything I can give you; all I have you shall have; but save yourself, Horace, and go.’

‘Is it for me you are thinking?’ he said; and suddenly his heart melted, and he tried to take her hand.

‘Let me be! oh, let me be!’ cried Isabel, shrinking from him. ‘It is for you, too. How could we live and face each other, now I know? I would speak; it would burn out my heart, till, sleeping or waking, I would speak. And—they—would remember it was you. But never will I breathe your name when you are gone. Never will I say a word—never one word of

blame. And I will—forgive you!’ she said, with a sudden cry.

She was capable of no more.

The servants hearing no sound that alarmed them, began to move about in the house going to bed. The sound of the door being locked, and the shutters closed, roused the two from their deadly argument. After a while, one of the women came in to close the windows for the night, and see if anything more was wanted. This sudden breaking in of the ordinary and common-place, intensified beyond all power of description the tragic misery of the scene. It might have lasted through the whole night but for that. It might have led to any horrible conclusion. Isabel rose and went up to him, while the maid barred and bolted, and made all fast. ‘I have said all I have to say,’ she whispered in his ear with white, quivering lips. ‘Now, it is in your hands.’

It never occurred to him that these were her last words. When he looked up from his moody reverie and found her gone, it did not even strike him as strange. He followed her upstairs slowly after an interval of thought. The room was empty, a light burning, his pocket-book lying on the table, and all traces of his wife gone. The house was all silent, dark, and motionless.

Then for the first time horror and fear came over him. He did not dare make a commotion in that stillness, or call for her to come back to him. Whatever might happen, the woman whom he had loved after his fashion had disappeared for ever out of Stapylton's life.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE night was a winter's night—long and dark. Stapylton sat down in his solitary room, and tried to think. He would let her alone, was his first thought; he would leave her at peace. No doubt she had gone away to the baby who was her idol. She must have told him a lie when she said it was gone. But he would leave her to herself: he had plenty to think of, Heaven knew. He sat down and tried to think; and then a sudden restlessness seized him, and he got up and gazed out of the window into the black night, of which nothing was visible, except now and then a blast of rain. That dark world, full of the sound of waters, the loch dashing on the beach, the rain rushing through the mirk midnight, the awful silence, overwhelmed his soul. The darkness hid a spot on which one scene was going on perpetually, for ever.—The old man lying on the road—the horse's hoofs ringing down the hill—the sound of that blow. It was not one event

which had happened and was over; was it not going on perpetually—always being repeated under the dark wings of the night? ‘It was not I that killed him,’ he said to himself, as he had said a thousand times before. Oh, the intolerable night! so silent, so full of horrible suggestions; and that aching void into which all in a moment any horror might spring. He took up his candle, in his misery, and went wandering all over the house, trying every door. He went to the door of the room in which the servants had locked themselves, and heard them rustling in their beds, and whispering to each other in their panic; and he went to another door from which came no sound—‘Isabel, Isabel, come back to me!’ he said, and a sigh seemed to breathe through the house, but no answer came. He wanted her not so much to return to him and resume the common life, as to come and protect him at that awful moment, to keep spirits and appearances away from him. He had hours of darkness to get through, and how was he to live through them by himself? It was this panic that made him try the doors; but it sent a deeper panic into the hearts of the three women who listened to his movements in the silence. Isabel, alone in the room where her child had been, believed in her heart that he had come to kill her, as he said,

and wound herself up in her misery to bear whatever she might be compelled to bear ; and yet trembled and wept, in a stillness as of death.

For seven or eight awful hours of darkness this torture continued. No one closed an eye in the agitated house ; and yet save when Stapyhton went or came, a horrible silence reigned in it, unbroken by any complaint or appeal for help. The world outside was asleep and at rest. Who was there to appeal to ? They were all silent as death, not knowing what they feared, trusting in their locked doors and in their noiselessness ; all but Isabel, whose spirit was wound up to any fate. She sat fully dressed in the furthest corner through the long shivering hours of unbroken darkness. Sometimes there would be an interval of quiet, and broken sleep, the slumber of exhaustion which stole over her against her will ; and then would come the footstep in the passage, the hand shaking the door, the gleam of light underneath, and Isabel drew herself together and prayed God bless her child, and awaited, with the blood rushing to her head and her heart beating loud in her ears, the event which was to follow. All this was repeated again and again, and was enacted in a darkness horrible as of the grave, in a stillness which exaggerated every sound ; the night creeping and rustling round, as if full

of ghostly spectators. It was not daylight at last which aroused her from that century-long vigil, —daylight did not come till about eight o'clock, when the morning was far advanced. It was the first sound of early life outside, which came like a voice from heaven to Isabel. When she heard it she rose up softly from the cramped position she had maintained all night, thrust up into the corner, and very quietly, with trembling hands and heart, utterly unnerved by the horrors of the night, prepared to make her escape. She could bear it no longer. She had faced the man who had threatened to kill her, with dauntless resolution, on the previous night, feeling almost that such a conclusion would be as desirable as any other. But the night had taken away all her courage and force. She trembled like a leaf and could not command herself. Before her, like a vision of heaven, appeared that little room at the Glebe, where her child no doubt was sleeping. If she could but reach that palace of peace! Stealthily, that no sound might betray her, she bathed her hot forehead, and put up her hair, and drew her cloak round her. It was more difficult to open the door without noise, and steal down the stairs, which creaked under her, soft as her steps were. When she stepped out at last into the darkness, which was no longer

night but morning, and felt the chill air on her face, and heard behind her sounds of the early world beginning to stir, a certain excitement of hope rose in Isabel's mind. She thought she had escaped. Dark as it was she took the road upwards to the hill, thinking of her old home as the only refuge in which she could trust. The road was long and solitary, and black as night. The wind blew strong in her face, still blowing in the same direction; now and then it brought with it a blast of stinging hail and rain. It might have been midnight, so hopeless was the gloom. But terror had taken possession of Isabel. Her face was haggard with her awful vigil: she had no thought but to escape.

But her husband had heard her movements, soft as they were. He, too, had been watching all the night through, turning over a hundred schemes in his mind. Sometimes he had been overpowered by superstition and remorse, and a helpless sense of terror; and then it was, seeking help, and not with any murderous intention, that he had wandered about the house, in hope of some human fellowship to save him from himself. Then he had dozed and dreamed, and formed inarticulate plans. At first he would not believe that she was in earnest. He had too much self-estima-

tion to believe it possible that a woman whom he loved should be able to separate herself from him, for any reason in the world. She had been horrified for the moment ; that was only natural. But when she should find that she must get the better of her horror or else part with him for ever, it would be a different matter. Eventually, however, a dreadful doubt stole over his thoughts. A hundred trifles came back to his mind, which, by degrees, convinced him of the difference between Isabel's way of thinking and his own. She had yielded to him when he required her obedience with a wondering incredulity, not of anger, which could have been got over, but of amazement and incomprehension. And then her child. Never more, he felt assured, would she trust her child in his hands. He would have been less severe on that point could he have known ——

Then vaguely in his dreams there stole over him a longing for freedom ; freedom from all those associations of pain and terror : from the place where the deed had been done, though he had been bold enough to face it ; from the woman who knew about the deed done ; from all evidences and recollections of it. He would forget it if he were not here. One chance blow, what was it, after all, that a man's whole life should be clouded by it ?

And to be free and away with a new life before him! — Stapylton had no desire to preserve the unity of his life. He had not imagination or intellect enough to feel that a man cannot break off and reknit again the threads of existence at his pleasure. He saw no difficulty in ending here; or recommencing elsewhere if he set his heart on it. All that was easy enough. And then was not he getting tired of the conflict of wills; of a wife who did not content herself with looking beautiful for his pleasure and returning his caresses, but who met him with unintelligible eyes of meaning, which went beyond his meaning, and thoughts, in which, perhaps, she scorned him? Why not take her at her word, and escape from her Puritanism, her startled looks, her incredulous submission? To have a woman look at you as if you were a creature of an unknown species; to see her eyes glance upward when you issued your commands with as much wonder as if you spoke a different language; that was not pleasant. Curse her and her pride! But then, she too would escape. She would gain her freedom now as he gained his. She, too, might make a new beginning. He ground his teeth at that thought. And then he gnashed them together in the darkness with a sudden sense of the failure and blunder of it all, and wild desire to take

vengeance on some one. It was at that moment he heard the stealthy sounds of Isabel's escape, and divined what they meant. He was fully dressed as he had been on the previous evening, and, like her, feverish with passion and want of sleep. He took out a pistol from the box in which it reposed beside his desk. The pistol was old-fashioned as well as the desk, and he had been in the habit of calling the weapons curiosities. He charged it hurriedly in the dark, not knowing what he did, and put it in the breast-pocket of his coat, and rushed out after his wife into the rain and wind.

She was half-way up the lower slope towards the Loch Diarmid road, when she heard his step behind her, and felt, with a sudden leap of all her pulses, that not yet—not yet, had she escaped her fate. It was no surprise to her when he came up and laid his hand on her shoulder; the first far-off sound of his step had made it evident to her that there was still a struggle to come.

‘You are flying from me,’ he said to her breathless. ‘Do you think I will let you escape from me like this without another word?’

‘I was not thinking of escape,’ said Isabel, faltering. ‘I could not bear it longer. I could not bear it. That was all.’

‘And yet you think I am to bear it,’ he said,

making a clutch at her arm. 'False accusations and abuse and scorn, and desertion, and all your hard words and contempt of me. You think I am to bear it all!'

'Alas!' she said, 'when did I ever show contempt of you? But, oh! let me go. What can we do but weary each other with vain words? If we had quarrelled we might talk and talk and mend it. But that which is between us, is beyond help. Let me go.'

'No, by God!' he cried, holding her fast, 'after the price I have paid for you. No! What is to hinder me from killing you as you say I did—*him*? I will not be left alone to think. You shall stay with me and share with me, or, by God, I will make an end of you!'

Isabel felt that her last hour was come. It was so dark that she could with difficulty see his face. There was silence and blackness round them—not a human creature from whom to ask help—and if there had been a thousand, she would have asked help from none.

'It must be as you will,' she said, with the sudden calm of despair—'as you will!' and waited, wondering, would it be a knife or a bullet, or the more horrible agony of his hands and blows—his hands, which had embraced her so often—at her throat? She closed her eyes

instinctively, as if the darkness was not enough and stood waiting, waiting for the touch of the death, which was so near.

‘And you have not a word to say for yourself,’ he said, his breath burning her cheek. ‘Not a word? Have you nothing to offer me for your life?’

The bitterness of death was upon her; his grasp upon her shoulder was like iron. ‘Let it be quick!’ she said, with a shudder. ‘Maybe it’s best so—Maybe it’s best.’

‘And that is all?’

‘Oh! do it and be done,’ she cried, falling at his feet, ‘or leave me living for your own sake—for your sake. Is my life worth struggling for *now*? but for yourself let me be——.’

‘Is that all?’ he said again. And then drew something from his breast, and a cold mouth of iron touched Isabel’s cheek. An involuntary cry burst from her by instinct. Now it had come. Suddenly she heard a report, and started aside from the sudden flash in the darkness, and fell back, but not wounded. She had been so sure of death that her safety threw her into a convulsive fit of horror and fear; there was an awful moment in which she could not tell what had happened, if it was he who was killed or any one. Then there was a movement, a swing

of his arm—his dark shadow was still standing beside her—and the pistol was thrown high over her head, and went dashing down over the rocks, into the black invisible loch, which raged and beat upon the unseen shore.

‘Isabel,’ he said, ‘give me a kiss before we part.’

Oh, awful darkness that enclosed them round and round ! Oh, awful nearness and separation ! Her heart melted and sunk within her at that last prayer.

‘Oh, Horace, let me die !’

She would have fallen, but for his arms round her ; but even at that supreme moment he did not know why she would rather have died than have been thus enveloped for the last time in his embrace. The melting of her heart, the old love rising up within her like a giant, the struggle of faithful nature which could die, but could not forsake and abandon, wrung Isabel’s whole being, body and soul. But not his ; he kissed her, and he let her go. He stood for a moment in the darkness before her, and then he turned and went away.

It was all over. She called after him faintly, ‘Horace !’ in a voice swallowed by the wind, and sank down on the cold ground, prostrate, covering her face with her hands. She could

hear his steps going down the hill and count them, each echoing on her heart. It was all over. Death, and danger, and love, and strife, and happiness, had all departed from her. Oh, had he but gone without those last words, without that kiss, which in the midst of horror and despair, awoke love like a giant to defend his own! The darkness covered Isabel like a mantle, so that no one saw her crouched together on the cold wayside; and the sounds of nature surrounded her—the loch moaning on its shore, the wind shouting from the hills, the rain dashing down in gusts of stormy tears—and drowned the cry with which in the madness of her misery she might have called him back. She sat there she did not know how long in the awful morning gloom, then rose and made her way slowly, sadly, a creature benumbed, up the hill, and knew no more of herself, or what had happened to her, till the grey ghostly daylight suddenly looked her in the face, up among the heather on the summit of the road. It had been stealing round her and she did not perceive it, until, pausing instinctively to take breath, she saw all the hills and the waters suddenly revealed in the colourless light of the morning, and knew that life was over—and that life had begun.

As for Stapylton, he no more comprehended

her in that last struggle than he had done through all those years. He kissed her with a sullen renunciation and left her, without *arrière pensée*. He was a little ashamed of the pistol, and the ineffectual threat. No, he had never intended that; why should he kill her? Why should he kill himself? The world held more pleasant places than Loch Diarmid—more women than Isabel. Here the game was over—but there it might begin again. ‘Come on!’ he said to himself; and so went away to look after his clothes and his money, and all that remained to him—since he had no longer any wife.

It was nearly noon before Isabel, stumbling at every step, reached the Glebe Cottage, the aim she had been vaguely struggling to—was it for hours or days? She went in with her haggard face, so changed and drawn with suffering, that Jean gave a cry of terror, and did not know her. She had not even a smile for her child, nor any interest in her. ‘Let me rest! Let me rest!’ was all she could say. Jean put the baby down on the carpet in the parlour, and gave all her care to the young mother thus come back to her for pity and consolation. ‘Ye’ve been caught in the storm, my lamb!’ she said, tenderly. But Isabel gave no explanation. She suffered

herself to be undressed and laid in her own room, —the little chamber she had occupied for the greater part of her life. Nothing but a murmur of thanks, or a sudden shudder, or a sigh, came from her as her stepmother tended and caressed her. When Jean questioned her, she shook her head and made no answer. The good woman was driven to her wits' end. To her limited perceptions it was apparent that there had been a quarrel between the husband and wife about little Margaret; that Isabel, after leaving her child in safety the previous night, had come back again to see her, and had been caught in the storm, and that at 'any moment' Stapylton himself might appear to claim the runaway. 'He never could think she would take it to heart like this,' Jean said to herself. But the strange thing was, that Isabel took no notice of the baby after suffering so much for her. When Jean could bear the mystery and responsibility no longer, she sent a mysterious message to Miss Catherine: 'My mother says, if you ever cared for our Isabel, you're to come now, and lose no time,' said little Mary, who was the messenger, and in whose hands the mystery lost none of its power. 'Lord bless me, is your mother mad?' was Miss Catherine's forcible reply. But notwithstanding, she made haste to get her great waterproof cloak

and her umbrella, and set out as soon as there was a pause in the rain to ascertain what grounds there might be for so strange an appeal.

‘There is nae love lost between him and me,’ Jean explained, when Miss Catherine had been introduced into Isabel’s room, and had looked horror-stricken at the change in her face, without, so far as they could see, being recognised by the sufferer. ‘But I couldna bear to expose the family; what am I to say to the doctor, if I send for him? When a woman is as ill as that, she should be in her ain house.’

‘Say!’ said Miss Catherine. ‘It may be life or death—let him see her first, and tell us what is to be done, and then we will think what to say. Let Jamie go at once—if I am not mistaken there is more here than meets the eye.’

‘I kent they never would ’gree about that wean,’ said Jean, with her apron to her eyes. ‘Eh, the darling, that I should speak of her so; I aye said there would be dispeace about wee Margaret. It would have been better to have left her with me.’

‘If there had not been dispeace about that, it would have been something else,’ said Miss Catherine; ‘nothing good could have come out of it—nothing good was possible—it was what we all said.’

‘She was well warned,’ said Jean, ‘if ony-

thing could be a comfort to remember at sic a time ; but, poor thing, it must never be cast up to her now.'

'And where is her man?' said Miss Catherine.

This question was repeated over and over again in many a tone of wonder ere many hours had past. The fact that he did not come to inquire after her all that evening, that no search whatever was made, but the runaway wife suffered to sink into her old home without protestation or appeal, bewildered everybody about. The doctor, and Jean Campbell, and Jenny Spence, and by degrees all the village, and even the parish, grew aghast with wonder. A quarrel about the child was a comprehensible thing, and was received by everybody with many shakings of the head, and declarations of their own foresight. 'I aye kent how it would be,' said one after another, and for the first moment it would be vain to say that it was anything less than a sensation of triumph that burst upon the Loch. But when the husband did not appear to make friends, and when it began to be rumoured about the parish that 'bonnie Isabel' was lying ill in a fever, altogether alone and deserted by the man for whom she had separated herself from her home and her friends, pity began to take the place of this self-gratulation. This was carrying matters too

far. The next day in the afternoon Nelly Spence came over the hill carrying her own bundle and little Margaret's, and with a scared and agitated face. Her story ran like wildfire round the Loch. She told the tale of the first night of terror till the gossips' hair stood on end. She told of the exit of both parties in the early morning, of Stapylton's re-entrance, of his commands to them to keep quiet and wait for their mistress's return—commands which woke in their minds the frantic thought that he had thrown her into the Loch in the darkness, and that she never would come back. They had been too much frightened, however, by Stapylton's presence and looks to do more than make furtive little excursions round the house, and furtive questions to the neighbours, none of whom had seen Isabel. He had taken his meals as usual, cursing Nelly's 'neebor' for her bad cookery, and had occupied himself packing all the day long; and at night he had gone away, neither of the terrified women having strength of mind to stop or to interrogate him. It was too late after his departure to take any further steps. They sat up half the night in their terror still thinking it possible that Isabel might return. That morning they had roused the village and made all sorts of frantic searches for her, and at last had ascertained that she had been seen on her

way to the Glebe. Such was the story which Nelly told with unbounded fulness of detail. It left the public in more profound ignorance and wilder wonder than before. He had gone away taking everything with him; he had not even asked for her before his departure, and she was too ill to afford any explanations. The women at the doors discussed the matter for hours together, questioning Nelly upon every particular till the girl was driven into partial idiocy; and the men at the smithy took up the tale and gave it a thousand fantastic explanations. But the two were silent who alone had the *fin mot* of the enigma—he who had disappeared into the distance and darkness, and she who lay unconscious in a stupor of exhausted nature, not even aware of her own position. The wonder grew into mystery and sank into silence before Isabel was able, had she been willing, to lend a word of elucidation. And still the Loch keeps the story to be told at intervals with many a wild guess at its meaning—a tale without an end.

It was when Isabel was just beginning to wake into faint gleams of returning life that the visit was paid her which made so much commotion on the Loch. Everybody had learned by this time that Stapylton had ‘taken it upon him’ to refuse permission to his wife to visit Ailie at

Ardnamore. And when Ailie, herself pale as a spirit and so weak, that she had to be lifted out of the carriage, passed through the village on her way to the Glebe, the whole population stirred with a hope that now at last the explanation was to come. The cottage was unusually full at the time, of nurses and attendants. Miss Catherine herself rarely left the little parlour where she waited the chances of Isabel's strange disorder; and Nelly Spence was in charge of little Margaret, and her mother came and went helping Jean to attend upon the patient. It was thus into a little community, with all grades represented, that Ailie came leaning on her mother's arm. She was worn to a shadow, and so weak that she could scarcely keep upright; over her white dress she wore a large veil of black crape, for she was now a widow. Her appearance was not less extraordinary than before, but her visionary eyes had lost their wildness, and a softened expression had come over her face.

'I am dying mysel,' she said to Miss Catherine, 'and I would fain see Isabel before I go. Ye needna fear me now. I would like to tell her just that I'm reconciled in my mind. She has seen my sore trouble. No, I'll say nothing to disturb her; I'm dying myself, as you may see.'

'Hoot no, my bonnie woman! hoot no!' said

her mother who supported her ; ‘ when the bonnie weather comes, and you get your feet on the May gowans—Ye see, Miss Catherine, it’s a’ the grief and trouble she’s had, and poor Ardnamore taken from us so sudden at the last.’

But to Miss Catherine there was nothing sublime in the spectacle of the dauntless old woman supporting on her arm the dying creature who ought to have been the support of her old age, and facing the world courageously with her pathetic fictions to the last. To her, Janet was no champion-mother, but a worldly old woman, bent upon elevating the social position of her child. ‘ I am not afraid of you, Ailie,’ said Miss Catherine, ‘ why should I be ? Isabel, poor thing ! has her reason, though she’s weak. Sit down, and I’ll ask if she can see you. You are far from strong yourself.’

‘ I am dying,’ said Ailie, softly, with a smile which lit up her face. ‘ Eh, and when I think upon Margaret ! She will be *my* sister where I’m going. Tell Isabel that. Life has been a burden and a trouble, though I thought it was so good. Tell Isabel. It has been hard on her, too.’

‘ Oh, how hard ! ’ Miss Catherine said to herself, with an involuntary tear, as she went into the inner room. ‘ Two young creatures, still so young,

one overwhelmed in the conflict, and about to die and escape from it; the other fated, perhaps, to remain and live and bear the scars and the brand of it for years. Was it not well with Margaret, who, of all the penalties of living, had only death to bear? The old lady bent over Isabel in her bed, and kissed her forehead with unusual emotion. 'Can you see Ailie, my dear?' she asked, and a little gleam of eagerness came into the sufferer's eyes. Miss Catherine ushered the visitors into the room, but would not stay to listen to the strange conversation that passed between them. It was not that she was wanting in curiosity, but that the pity of it was too much for even her strong nerves. She returned to the parlour with a flood of impatient tears coming to her eyes. They had been to blame. Ailie had married for—what? This severe judge said for ambition—a man incomprehensible to her, whom she did not, and could not love, and who sought her only in the madness of disappointment and grief. Such was the common-sense view of the matter; and the end was, as might have been expected, misery and despair. And Isabel; Isabel had done worse than Ailie. She had sinned against her womanhood—her dead husband, her living child. She had loved, she had taken her own way, and misery was the result. Miss Cath-

erine, looking back into her own experience, could remember a time when she too had wanted her own way, and had given it up proudly, and sacrificed her heart. Was she the better for it? This long calm of hers, or Isabel's brief fever—which was the least like that vision of joy and strength which the imagination calls life? A few hot tears fell from her old eyes. It was hard to pronounce any judgment, even now.

Ailie tottered to Isabel's bedside, supported by her mother's arm. 'Since you canna come to me, I have come to you,' she said. 'Isabel, I've come to tell ye I am reconciled in my mind. He sent me over word before he died that *yon* was no message from the Lord; it was his own mad will, and no my God that said it. We've sinned, and we're punished; but His word stands fast. Eh, but I'm content!'

'Oh, Ailie,' said Isabel, looking wistfully from the bed, 'I cannot follow what you say.'

'Never mind, it will come back some time,' said Ailie; 'and I'm come to bless you, Isabel Diarmid. I was uplifted in my mind, and deceived myself, but you, a simple lass, spoke the truth. Ye were right when ye bid me not to wed, and ye were right when ye bid me say farewell to him that came back nae mair. He

perished with the sword, as I said; and now I'm going after him, and to Margaret. Margaret will be *my* sister. O Isabel, rouse up in your mind! Give me a word to say to Margaret; I'm going to her now.'

The tears came in a flood to Isabel's eyes. All this time they had burned with fever, neither sleep nor tears coming to refresh them. 'O my Margaret!' she cried; and then Jean interposed in terror, not aware how great a relief to the patient's brain was this outburst of tears.

'She canna bear it,' said Jean. 'O Ailie, my woman, come away.'

'Jean,' said old Janet, fiercely turning upon her, 'that's no a way to speak to Mrs. Diarmid of Ardnamore.'

Thus the tragic and the trifling met together as everywhere. Ailie took no notice of either. She stooped over the bed, and kissed, as she had never done before, the face of the woman who had been so strangely connected with her life.

'I'll tell her a' you say,' she cried; 'I'll carry her a' the love in your heart; and the Lord bless you, Isabel. 'You're no like her, and you're no like me, but the like of you is best for this life.'

'O Ailie, my bonnie woman,' cried Jean, unmoved by the mother's remonstrances, in the

height of her own anxiety, 'she canna bear it; come away!'

'Life's an awfu' riddle—an awfu' riddle,' said Ailie, 'and her and me we've guessed wrong; but the Lord will set a' right.'

These were Ailie's last words so far as concerned the inmates of the Glebe. When she died, some time after, her death-bed ejaculations became the property of the parish, and were repeated far and wide, and finally made into a book. It was said that the power returned to her at the last, and that she prophesied and ended her existence in a blaze of spiritual triumph. These last utterances of exulting faith were heard by many, and could not be gainsaid. But this was the end and sum of her testimony so far as concerned Isabel and her own life.

CHAPTER XIX.

ISABEL's recovery was slow and tedious. The strain, both of body and mind, had been so great, and her spirit was so broken that it was often in doubt whether the uncertain balance would be for death or life. But youth at length carried the day, and gradually, slowly, without knowing it, her soul floated back to the life which had, as it were, revolted her and driven her away. For days and weeks, when she was scarcely able to speak, and when it was not even clear that the power of thought had returned to her, she had lain, turning over and over in her mind all that had befallen her. And as soon as she was able to pay attention to external things, the after facts of which she had been ignorant had stolen in upon her—she could scarcely tell how. No one had said to her in so many words that her husband was gone; but she knew it somehow and all its details. He was gone, leaving no trace behind him. And it was for

ever. Many a wild battle was waged within her as she lay there silent making no sign. Should she have gone with him according to her vows—for better, for *worse*? But could it be possible that such a *worst* as this could ever have occurred to any mind. And then love would rise up wild, and cry and struggle. Perhaps it was well that he had taken her so utterly at her word, and left no sign by which she could trace him;—and then life came back by degrees, and the common round re-commenced, and all things were as if Horace Stapylton had never been.

The parish had waited, after the first flash of wonder was over, with patience scarcely to be looked for, for the explanation which might be expected on her recovery. And the little circle round her had specially cherished this hope, as was natural. Miss Catherine, in her higher degree, and Jean Campbell and her friends, waited with calm, knowing that the revelation must first be made to them. ‘Don’t weary yourself, my dear,’ said the former. ‘I will wait your own time.’ But Isabel made no reply to this insinuated question. She ignored their wonder with a silent resolution which it was difficult to make any head against. ‘When you have anything to say to me, you know I am always at your service, Isabel,’ Miss Catherine added, a week.

after she had first signified her readiness to listen. 'Thank you,' Isabel had said, faintly; but she said nothing more. Then Jean made an attempt in her own way.

'My bonnie woman,' said Jean, 'eh, it's pleasant to see ye in your ain house again, as I never thought to see you! But you'll no bide? I canna expect it, I ken that. And, oh! how we'll miss you, the bairns and me.'

'I mean to stay if you will let me,' said Isabel, whose pale cheek always flushed when this subject was propounded. 'Margaret and me.'

'Let you!' cried Jean: 'and dearly welcome. As if it wasna your own house and hers, the bonnie lamb! But it's mair than I could expect that you should stay.'

Isabel made no answer. She treated Jean's artful address as a mere remark, and no question. Her face would be a shade sadder; her eye more languid all the evening after—but that was all.

Other gossips assailed her in a more open way. 'I hope the little Miss is thriving, and I hope Maister Stapyhton was weel the last time you heard.' 'I hear it's to America you're gaun; and, oh! I hope—you'll excuse me—that your man will come for you; and no leave you to make such a journey your lane.' 'I'm thinking

he'll be away to prepare,'—one and another would say. And Isabel, with some hasty word of vague reply, would make a rush at any subject of conversation. She never mentioned his name; she never alluded to him—nor to her brief life with him—nor to their parting. She spoke of everything around her as if she had never left the Glebe; she resumed all her old avocations. It had been in December they were married; and February had just begun when she came 'home' in her misery. Of that interval she took no notice, and of her husband said never a word. She was called by his name—that was all; and when any one addressed her by it suddenly, she had been seen to shudder. But not a word of explanation came from Isabel's lips. The time of her absence was as if it had not been.

And, perhaps, of all the eager, curious people about her, the one most difficult to silence was the Dominie, who had taken to coming across the braes every evening while Isabel was so ill, and now found it difficult to give up the habit. He would sit opposite to her in the little parlour while the spring evening lengthened, and watch her words and her looks with an inquisition which he could not restrain. 'It's like old times

to have ye back,' the Dominie would say; and a faint smile would be Isabel's answer. She was always at work now—reading much—trying to teach herself a variety of new accomplishments, labouring at a dozen different pursuits with a pathetic earnestness that went to her visitor's heart.

'What do you want with all these books?' he said, as he sat at the parlour window looking out upon the darkling loch.

'To learn,' she said. They were some of the minister's old Italian books, of which he had been so fond.

'To learn!—what for? It's an accomplishment will be of little use to you,' said the Dominie; 'unless it is *there* you are going when you leave here.'

'It is for Margaret,' said Isabel, with a quivering lip—'I would like her to learn when she is old enough what her father knew.'

'Ah, that's a good thought,' said the Dominie, taken by surprise; and then he added, 'But you cannot give your life to little Margaret—nor carry such things about with you through the world.'

'I will have time enough here,' she said, under her breath.

‘But, my dear!—we cannot expect you will be here all your life—that would be good for us, but ill for you.’

‘And why should it be ill for me?’

‘Isabel! I must go back to your old name,’ said the Dominie; ‘I cannot call you by that lad’s name. Are you another man’s wife, or are ye no?’

And then the self-sustained creature, who had resisted so many attempts to penetrate her secret, fell into a passion of sudden tears.

‘I am his wife,’ she cried, ‘but I will never see him again. Call me Isabel, or call me by my good man’s name; and ask me no more.’

Strong as the Dominie’s curiosity was, he could not persist in face of this appeal and of the tears which accompanied it; but he carried the news to Miss Catherine, who day by day became more perplexed and more anxious to know the real state of affairs. His partial success inspired the old lady. Next day she went up to the Glebe, determined to show no mercy.

‘Isabel,’ she said, solemnly, ‘it’s time, for your own sake, that your friends should know. I am not speaking of the world. You may keep silence as you please for them that’s outside, but your friends should know. I saw ye married

with my own eyes; there could be nothing wrong about that?’

‘There was nothing wrong,’ said Isabel.

‘Then, my dear, tell us—tell me—what *is* wrong? Has he gone to America, as they all say?’

‘So far as I know,’ was the answer, spoken so low that the inquisitor could scarcely hear.

‘And do you mean to go after him, Isabel?’

A shudder ran through her frame. ‘Oh no, no—nevermore!’ she cried, hiding her face in her hands. If it was longing or loathing, Miss Catherine could not tell, but she thought it was the former. Whatever it is, she is fond of him still, was what she said in her heart.

‘Is not that giving up your duty?’ Miss Catherine continued, pitiless. ‘Isabel, there is no love lost between him and me; but I could not counsel you to abandon your duty for all that.’

‘Oh, ask me no more questions,’ cried Isabel, with a gesture of despair; and that was all that could be torn from her whatever any one might say.

When she was well enough to go so far, she made a secret pilgrimage to her husband’s grave. The whole parish knew of it before the week was

out, and drew its conclusions; but nobody suspected why it was that she sat so long, wrapt in musing and solitude, in that spot where the minister and Margaret slept side by side. 'God grant her her wits, puir thing!' said one of the village gossips. 'There she sat among the grass; and every bit weed that caught her eye, and the moss on the tombstone, all cleared away. You would have said it was a gardener in a garden at his work.' Some thought it was penitence for her sin against him, and some that it was a compunctious regret for her 'good man.' Nobody knew that Isabel had buried in her husband's grave something more than her grief and remorse for her infidelity—another token more awful than anything so trifling could be supposed to be. She worked at it unseen with her slender, trembling fingers, making a place for it deep under the sod, and there hid the innocent present of her first affection—the little brooch, which had been plucked from the dead man—the fatal sign which had made her existence a desolation, and rent asunder her heart and her life.

And common life crept up round her, like the rising tide on the beach, and set her softly afloat in the old habits, the old routine, the current of the past. Little Margaret rose once more to be

the chief object, and occupation, and interest of the quiet days. There was a long struggle with her own heart and her fate, and all the thousand suggestions which besiege a living soul in an uncertain position. Her thoughts and her wishes dragged her one way, and dragged her another way, and tore her like wild beasts out of the wood. But yet that anchor of necessity was good, and saved her from some evils. And her child grew, and the tide crept round her, and moved her into the familiar stream. Within the first year there came a claim upon her, of which her lawyer informed Isabel, and which oozed out through the district after a while by those invisible channels which make everybody's secrets known. It was a bill drawn upon her from a far distant corner of America, which she paid without hesitation, though it cost her many sacrifices. The same thing was repeated several times within the course of a dozen years; and then there came a letter to her, in a strange handwriting——

No one had mentioned her legal name for a long time before that. She saw only those who called her Isabel. But after the coming of this letter, it happened to her by chance to encounter the old Laird, Miss Catherine's brother, come upon a rare visit to his own country. 'So this is

Isabel,' he said to her kindly, patting her head as if she had been but still a child. 'Mrs. —, Mrs. —, I forget the name.'

'Lothian,' she said, distinctly, before the servants, as was afterwards remembered. And from that hour was called by her old name.

And little Margaret lived and grew. A woman cannot be utterly wretched, whatever tragedies may have happened in her life, so long as she has a woman-child to make her live anew. She was even happy in her way, developing into a hundred gracious forms of being, which Stapylton's wife could never have known; and had her life after life was over, like the most of us—the one, an existence brief and full with sorrow and joy in it, and a crowd of events; the other, long, tranquil, with no facts at all to speak of, marking the passage of the years—nothing to tell: but yet, perhaps, the life that bulks most largely in the records in the skies. 10

THE END.

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