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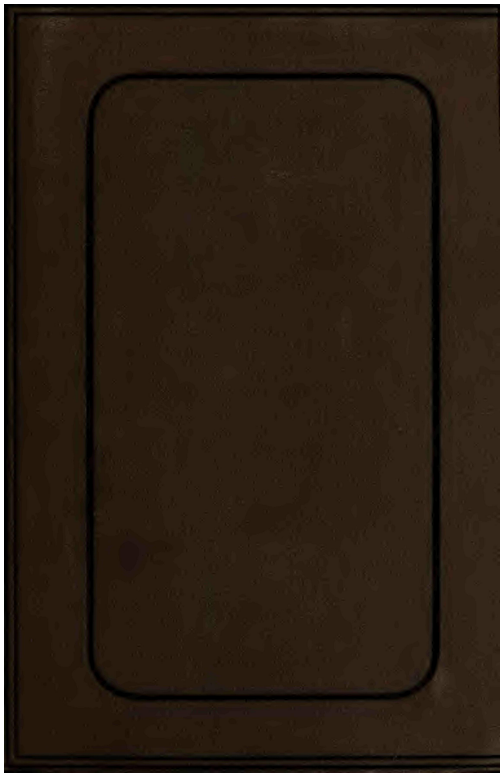

THE WIZARD'S SON

A Novel

BY MRS. OLIPHANT

AUTHOR OF "THE CURATE IN CHARGE," "YOUNG MUSGRAVE," ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES
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THE WIZARD'S SON.

CHAPTER I.

When Walter seated himself beside Oona in the boat, and Hamish pushed off from the beach, there fell upon both these young people a sensation of quiet and relief for which one of them at least found it very difficult to account. It had turned out a very still afternoon. The heavy rains were over, the clouds broken up and dispersing, with a sort of sullen stillness, like a defeated army making off in dull haste, yet not without a stand here and there, behind the mountains. The loch was dark and still, all hushed after the sweeping blasts of rain, but black with the reflections of gloom from the sky. There was a sense of safety, of sudden quiet, of escape, in that sensation of pushing off, away from all passion and agitation upon this still sea of calm. Why Oona, who feared no one, who had no painful thoughts or associations to flee from, should have felt this she could not tell. The sense of interest in, and anxiety for, the young man by her side was altogether different. That was sympathetic and definable; but the sensation of relief was something more. She looked at him with a smile and sigh of ease as she gathered the strings of the rudder into her hands.

"I feel," she said, "as if I were running away, and had got safe out of reach; though there is nobody pursuing me that I know of," she added, with a faint laugh of satisfaction.

The wind blew the end of the white wrapper round her throat towards her companion, and he caught it as she had caught the rudder ropes.

"It is I that am pursued," he said, "and have escaped. I have a feeling that I am safe here. The kind water, and the daylight, and you—but how should *you* feel it? It must have gone from my mind to yours."

"The water does not look so very kind," said Oona, "except that it separates us from the annoyances that are on land—when there are annoyances."

She had never known any that were more than the troubles of a child before.

"There is this that makes it kind. If you were driven beyond bearing, a plunge down there and all would be over——"

"Lord Erradeen!"

"Oh, I don't mean to try. I have no thought of trying; but look how peaceful, how deep, all liquid blackness! It might go down to the mystic centre of the earth for anything one knows."

He leant over a little, looking down into those depths profound which were so still that the boat seemed to cut through a surface which had solidity; and in doing this put the boat out of trim, and elicited a growl from Hamish.

It seemed to Oona, too, as if there was something seductive in that profound liquid depth, concealing all that sought refuge there. She put out her hand and grasped his arm in the thrill of this thought.

"Oh, don't look down," she said. "I have heard of people being caught, in spite of themselves, by some charm in it." The movement was quite involuntary and simple; but, on second thoughts, Oona drew away her hand, and blushed a little. "Besides, you put the boat out of trim," she said.

"If I should ever be in deadly danger," said Walter, with the seriousness which had been in his face all along, "will you put out your hand like that, without reflection, and save me?"

Oona tried to laugh again; but it was not easy; his seriousness gained upon her, in spite of herself.

"I think we are talking nonsense, and feeling nonsense; for it seems to me as if we had escaped from something. Now Hamish is pleased; the boat is trimmed. Don't you think," she said, with an effort to turn off graver subjects, "that it is a pity those scientific people who can do everything should not tunnel down through that centre of the earth you were speaking of, straight through to the other side of the world? Then we might be dropped through to Australia without any trouble. I have a brother there; indeed I have a brother in most places. Mamma and I might go and see Rob now and then, or he might come home for a dance, poor fellow; he was always very fond of dancing."

Thus she managed to fill up the time till they reached the isle. It lay upon the surface of that great mirror, all fringed and feathered with its bare trees; the occasional colour in the roofs gleaming back again out of the water; a little natural fastness, safe and sure. As Oona was later in returning than had been expected, the little garrison of women in the isle was all astir and watching for her coming. Out of one of the upper windows there was the head of a young maid visible, gazing down the loch; and Mrs. Forrester, in her furred cloak, was standing in the porch, and Mysie half way down to the beach, moving from point to point of vision.

"They are all about but old Cookie," said Oona. "It is a terrible business when I am late. They think everything that is dreadful must have happened, and that makes a delightful sensation when I get home safe and well. I am every day rescued from a watery grave, or saved from some dreadful accident on shore, in my mother's imagination. She gives herself the misery of it, and then she has the pleasure of it," cried the girl, with the amused cynicism of youth.

"But to-day you bring a real fugitive with you—an escaped—what shall I call myself?—escaped not from harm, but from doing harm—which is the most dangerous of the two."

"You will never do harm to the poor folk," said Oona, looking at him with kind eyes.

"Never, while I am in my senses, and know. I want you to promise me something before we land."

"You must make haste, then, and ask; for there is Mysie ready with the boat-hook," said Oona, a little alarmed.

"Promise me—if it ever occurs that harm is being done in my name, to make me know it. Oh, not a mere note sent to my house; I might never receive it like the last; but to make me know. See me, speak to me, think even:—and you will save me."

"Oh, Lord Erradeen, you must not put such a responsibility on me. How can I, a girl that is only a country neighbour——"

"Promise me!" he said.

"Oh, Lord Erradeen, this is almost tyrannical. Yes, if I can—if I think anything is concealed from you. Here I am, Mysie, quite safe; and of course mamma has been making herself miserable. I have brought Lord Erradeen to luncheon," Oona said.

"Eh, my lord, but we're glad to see you," said Mysie, with the gracious ease of hospitality. "They said you were going without saying good-bye, but I would never believe it. It is just his lordship, mem, as I said it was," she called to Mrs. Forrester, who was hastening down the slope.

The mistress of the island came down tripping, with her elderly graces, waving her white delicate hands.

"Oh, Oona, my dear, but I'm thankful to see you, and nothing happened," she cried; "and ye are very welcome, Lord Erradeen. I thought you would never go away without saying good-bye. Come away up to the house. It is late, late, for luncheon; but there will be some reason; and I never have any heart to take a meal by myself. Everything is ready: if it's not all spoiled?" Mrs. Forrester added, turning round to Mysie, as she shook hands with the unexpected guest.

"Oh, no fear of that, mem," said the factotum, "we're well enough used to waiting in this house: an hour, half an hour, is just nothing. The trout is never put down to the fire till we see the boat; but I maun away and tell cook."

"And you will get out some of the good claret," Mrs. Forrester cried. "Come away—come away, Lord Erradeen. We have just been wondering what had become of you. It is quite unfriendly to be at Auchnasheen and not come over to see us. Oona, run, my dear, and take off your things. Lord Erradeen will take charge of me. I am fain of an arm when I can get one, up the brae. When the boys were at home I always got a good pull up. And where did you foregather, you two? I am glad Oona had the sense to bring you with her. And I hope the trout will not be spoiled," she said with some anxiety. "Mysie is just too confident—far too confident. She is one that thinks nothing can go wrong on the isle."

"That is my creed too," said Walter with an awakening of his natural inclination to make himself agreeable, and yet a more serious meaning in the words.

"Oh fie!" said Mrs. Forrester, shaking her head, "to flatter a simple person like me! We have but little, very little to offer; the only thing in our favour is that it's offered with real goodwill. And how do you like Auchnasheen? and are you just keeping it up as it was in the old lord's time? and how is Mary Fleming, the housekeeper, that was always an ailing body?" These questions, with others of the same kind, answered the purpose of conversation as they ascended to the house—with little intervals between, for Mrs. Forrester was a little breathless though she did not care to say so and preferred to make pauses now and then to point out the variations of the landscape. "Though I know it so well, I never find it two days the same," she said. None of these transparent little fictions, so innocent, so natural, were unknown to her friends, and the sight of them had a curiously strengthening and soothing effect upon Walter, to whom the gentle perseverance of those amiable foibles, so simple and evident, gave a sense of reality and nature which had begun to be wanting in his world. His heart grew lighter as he watched the "ways" of this simple woman, about whose guiles and pretences even there was no mystery at all, and whose little affectations somehow seemed to make her only more real. It gave him a momentary shock, however, when she turned round at her own door, and directed his attention to his old castle lying in lines of black and grey upon the glistening water. He drew her hastily within the porch.

"It gets colder and colder," he said; "the wind goes through and through one. Don't let me keep you out in the chilly air."

"I think you must have caught a little cold," said Mrs. Forrester, concerned, "for I do not find it so chilly for my part. To be sure, Loch Houran is never like your quiet landward places in England: we are used up here to all the changes. Oona will be waiting for us by this time; and I hope you

are ready for your dinner, Lord Erradeen, for I am sure I am. I should say for your lunch: but when it comes to be so far on in the day as this, these short winter days, Oona and me, we just make it our dinner. Oh, there you are, my dear! Lord Erradeen will like to step into Ronald's room and wash his hands, and then there will be nothing to wait for but the trout."

When they were seated at the table, with the trout cooked to perfection as fish only is where it is caught, Mrs. Forrester pressing him to eat with old-fashioned anxiety, and even Mysie, who waited at table, adding affectionate importunities, Walter's heart was touched with a sense of the innocence, the kindness, the gentle nature about him. He felt himself cared for like a child, regarded indeed as a sort of larger child to be indulged with every dainty they could think of, and yet in some ineffable way protected and guided too by the simple creatures round him. The mistress and the maid had little friendly controversies as to what was best for him.

"I thought some good sherry wine, mem, and him coming off the water, would be better than yon cauld clairet."

"Well, perhaps you are right, Mysie; but the young men nowadays are all for claret," Mrs. Forrester said.

"Just a wee bittie more of the fish, my lord," said Mysie, in his ear.

"No, no, Mysie," cried her mistress. "You know there are birds coming. Just take away the trout, it is a little cold, and there's far more nourishment in the grouse."

"To my mind, mem," said Mysie, "there is nothing better than a Loch Houran trout."

All this had the strangest effect upon Walter. To come into this simple house was like coming back to nature, and that life of childhood in which there are no skeletons or shadows. Even his mother had never been so sheltering, so safe, so real. Mrs. Methven had far more intellect and passion than Mrs. Forrester. It had been impossible to her to bear the failure of her ideal in her boy. Her very love had been full of pain and trouble to both. But this other mother was of a different fashion. Whatever her children did was good in her eyes; but she protected, fed, took care of, extended her soft wings over them as if they still were in the maternal nest. The innocence of it all moved Walter out of himself.

"Do you know," he said at last, "what I have come from to your kind, sheltering house, Mrs. Forrester? Do you know what everybody, even your daughter, thought of me two hours ago?"

"I never thought any harm of you, Lord Erradeen," said Oona, looking up hastily.

"Harm of him! Dear me, Oona, you are far, very far, from polite. And what was it they thought of you?" asked Mrs. Forrester. "Oona is so brusque, she just says what she thinks; but sure am I it was nothing but good."

"They thought," said Walter, with an excitement which grew upon him as he went on, "that I, who have been poor myself all my life, that never had any money or lands till a few weeks ago, that I was going to turn poor women and children out of their houses, out upon the world, out to the wet, cold mountain-side, without a shelter in sight. They thought I was capable of that. An old woman more than eighty, and a lot of little children! They thought I would turn them out! Oh, not the poor creatures themselves, but others; even Miss Oona. Is thy servant a dog—" cried the young man in a blaze of fiery agitation, the hot light of pain shining through the involuntary moisture in his eyes. "Somebody says that in the Bible, I know. Is thy servant a dog that he should do this thing?"

"Oh, my dear!" cried Mrs. Forrester, in her sympathy, forgetting all distinctions, and only remembering that he was very like her Ronald, and was in trouble, "nobody, nobody thought you would do that. Oh no, no, fie no! nobody had such a thought. If I could believe it of Oona I would not speak to her—I would—no, no, it was never believed. I, for one, I knew you would never do it. I saw it," cried the kind lady, "in your eyes!"

Though Walter had no real confidence in the independent judgment which she asserted so unhesitatingly, yet he was consoled by the softness of the words, the assurance of the tone.

"I did not think such things ever happened in Scotland," he said. "It is Ireland one thinks of: and that it should be supposed I would do it, has hurt me more than I can say—a stranger who had no one to stand up for me."

"That was just the way of it," said Mrs. Forrester, soothingly. "We think here that there is something strange in English ways. We never know how a thing will appear to them—that is how it was. But I said all through that it was impossible, and I just wrote to you last night (you would get my letter?) that you must not do it—for fear you might not have understood how it was."

"But there is another side to it," said Oona, "we must not forget, mother. Sometimes it is said, you know, that the poor folk can do no good where they are. We can all understand the shock of seeing them turned out of their houses: but then people say they cannot live there—that it would be better for themselves to be forced to go away."

"That is true, Oona," said her mother, facing round: "it is just a kind of starvation. When old Jenny went there first (she was in my nursery when I had one) there was just a perpetual craik about her rent. Her man was one of the Frasers, and a well-doing, decent man, till he died, poor fellow, as we must all do: and since that I have heard little about it, for I think it was just out of her

power to pay anything. Duncan Fraser, he is a very decent man, but I remember the minister was saying if he was in Glasgow or Paisley, or some of those places, it would be better for his family. I recollect that the minister did say that."

"So, Lord Erradeen," said Oona, "without being cruel you might: but I—we all like you ten times better that you couldn't," said the girl impulsively.

"Ay, that we do," said her mother, ready to back up every side, "that we do. But I am not surprised. I knew that there was nothing unkind either in your heart or your face."

"There was no time," said Walter, "to think what was wise, or take into consideration, like a benevolent tyrant, what could be done for their good, without consulting their inclinations: which is what you mean, Miss Forrester——"

Oona smiled, with a little heightened colour. It was the commencement of one of those pretty duels which mean mutual attraction rather than opposition. She said, with a little nod of her head, "Go on."

"But one thing is certain," he said, with the almost solemn air which returned to his face at intervals, "that I will rather want shelter myself than turn another man out of his house, on any argument—far less helpless women and children. Did you laugh? I see no laughing in it," the young man cried.

"Me—laugh!" cried Mrs. Forrester, though it was at Oona he had looked. "If I laughed it was for pleasure. Between ourselves, Lord Erradeen (though they might perhaps be better away), turning out a poor family out of their house is a thing I could never away with. Oona may say what she likes—but it is not Christian. Oh, it's not Christian! I would have taken them in, as many as Mysie could have made room for: but I never could say that it was according to Christianity. Oh no, Lord Erradeen! I would have to be poor indeed—poor, poor indeed—before I would turn these poor folk away."

"There would be no blessing upon the rest," said Mysie, behind her mistress's chair.

"That is settled then," said Walter, whose heart grew lighter and lighter. "But that is not all. Tell me, if I were a benevolent despot, Miss Forrester—you who know everything—what should I do now?—for it cannot stop there."

"We'll go into the drawing-room before you settle that," said Mrs. Forrester. "Dear me, it is quite dark; we will want the candles, Mysie. There is so little light in the afternoon at this time of the year. I am sorry there is no gentleman to keep you in countenance with your glass of wine, Lord Erradeen. If you had been here when my Ronald or Jamie, or even Rob, was at home! But they are all away, one to every airt, and the house is very lonely without any boys in it. Are you coming with us? Well, perhaps it will be more cheerful. Dear me, Mysie, you have left that door open, and we will just be perished with the cold."

"Let me shut it," Walter said.

He turned to the open door with a pleasant sense of taking the place of one of those absent boys whom the mother regretted so cheerfully, and with a lighter heart than he could have thought possible a few hours ago. But at the first glance he stood arrested with a sudden chill that seemed to paralyse him. It was almost dark upon the loch; the water gleamed with that polished blackness through which the boat had cut as through something solid; but blacker now, shining like jet against the less responsive gloom of the land and hills. The framework of the doorway made a picture of this night scene, with the more definite darkness of the old castle in the centre, rising opaque against the softer distance. Seeing that Lord Erradeen made a sudden pause, Oona went towards him, and looked out too at the familiar scene. She had seen it often before, but it had never made the same impression upon her. "Oh, the light—the light again!" she said, with a cry of surprise. It came up in a pale glow as she was looking, faint, but throwing up in distinct revelation the mass of the old tower against the background. Walter, who seemed to have forgotten what he had come to do, was roused by her voice, and with nervous haste and almost violence shut the door. There was not much light in the little hall, and they could see each other's faces but imperfectly, but his had already lost the soothed and relieved expression which had replaced its agitated aspect. He scarcely seemed to see her as he turned round, took up his hat from the table, and went on confusedly before her, forgetting ordinary decorums, to the drawing-room, where Mrs. Forrester had already made herself comfortable in her usual chair, with the intention of for a few moments "just closing her eyes." Mysie had not brought the lights, and he stood before the surprised lady like a dark shadow, with his hat in his hand.

"I have come to take my leave," he said; "to thank you, and say good-bye."

"Dear me," said Mrs. Forrester, rousing herself, "you are in a great hurry, Lord Erradeen. Why should you be so anxious to go? You have nobody at Auchnasheen to be kept waiting. Toots! you must just wait now you are here for a cup of tea at least, and it will take Hamish a certain time to get out the boat."

"I must go," he said, with a voice that trembled: then suddenly threw down his hat on the floor and himself upon a low chair close to her, "unless," he said, "unless—you will complete your charity by taking me in for the night. Will you keep me for the night? Put me in any corner. I don't mind—only let me stay."

"Let you stay!" cried the lady of the isle. She sprang up as lightly as a girl at this appeal, with no further idea of "closing her eyes." "Will I keep you for the night? But that I will, and with all my heart! There is Ronald's room, where you washed your hands, just all ready, nothing to do but put on the sheets, and plenty of his things in it in case you should want anything. Let you stay!" she cried, with delighted excitement, "it is what I would have asked and pressed you to do. And then we can do something for your cold, for I am sure you have a cold; and Oona and you can settle all that business about the benevolent tyrant, which is more than my poor head is equal to. Oona, my dear, will you tell Mysie?—where is Mysie? I will just speak to her myself. We must get him better of his cold, or what will his mother think? He must have some more blankets, or an eiderdown, which will be lighter, and a good fire."

If her worst enemy had asked hospitality from Mrs. Forrester, she would have forgotten all her wrongs and opened her doors wide; how much more when it was a friend and neighbour! The demand itself was a kindness. She tripped away without a thought of her disturbed nap, and was soon heard in colloquy with Mysie, who shared all her sentiments in this respect. Oona, who stood silent by the fire, with a sense that she was somehow in the secret, though she did not know what it was, had a less easy part. The pang of sympathy she felt was almost intolerable, but she did not know how to express it. The quiet room seemed all at once to have become the scene of a struggle, violent though invisible, which she followed dumbly with an instinct beyond her power to understand. After an interval of silence which seemed endless, he spoke.

"It must be intended that we should have something to do with each other," he said, suddenly. "When you are there I feel stronger. If your mother had refused me, I should have been lost."

"It was impossible that she should have refused you, Lord Erradeen."

"I wish you would not call me by that ill-omened name. It is a horror to me; and then if all that is true——How is it possible that one man should lord it over an entire race for so long? Did you ever hear of a similar case? Oh! don't go away. If you knew what an ease it is to speak to you! No one else understands. It makes one feel as if one were restored to natural life to be able to speak of it, to ask advice. Nothing," he cried suddenly, getting up, picking up his hat as if about to leave the house, "nothing—shall induce me to go——"

"Oh, no, no!" she cried, "you must not go;" though she could not have told why.

He put down the hat again on the table with a strange laugh. "I was going then," he said, "but I will not. I will do exactly as you say." He came up to her where she stood full of trouble watching him. "I dare say you think I am going wrong in my head, but it is not that. I am being dragged—with ropes. Give me your hand to hold by. There! that is safety, that is peace. You hand is as soft—as snow," cried the young man. His own were burning, and the cool fresh touch of the girl's hand seemed to diffuse itself through all his being. Oona was as brave in her purity as the other Una, the spotless lady of romance, and would have shrunk from no act of succour. But it agitated her to have this strange appeal for help made to her. She did not withdraw her hand, but yet drew away a little, alarmed, not knowing what to do.

"You must not think," she said, faltering, "that any one—has more power over another than—he permits them to have."

She spoke like one of the oracles, not knowing what she said; and he listened with a slight shake of his head, not making any reply. After a moment he yielded to the reluctance which made itself felt in her, and let her hand go.

"Will you come with me outside?" he said; "not there, where that place is. I think the cold and the night do one good. Can we go out the other way?"

Oona accepted this alternative gladly. "We can go to the walk, where it is always dry," she said, with an assumption of cheerfulness. "It looks to the south, and that is where the flowers grow best." As she led the way through the hall, Walter took up Mrs. Forrester's furred cloak which hung there, and put it round her with a great deal of tenderness and care. The girl's heart beat as he took this office upon him, as one of her brothers might have done. It was the strangest conjunction. He was not thinking of her at all, she felt, save as affording some mysterious help in those mysterious miseries: and yet there was a sweetness in the thought he took, even at this extraordinary moment, for her comfort. There could have been no such dangerous combination of circumstances for Oona, whose heart was full of the early thrill of romance, and that inextinguishable pity and attraction towards the suffering which tells for so much in the life of women. A softness and melting of the heart indescribable came over her as she felt his light touch on her shoulders, and found herself enveloped as it were, in his shadow and the sentiment of his presence. He was not thinking of her, but only of his need of her, fantastic though that might be. But her heart went out towards him with that wonderful feminine impulse which is at once inferior and superior, full of dependence, yet full of help. To follow all his movements and thoughts as well as she could with wistful secondariness; yet to be ready to guide, to save, when need was—to dare anything for that office. There had never been aught in Oona's life to make her aware of this strange, sweet, agitating position—the one unchangeable form of conjunction for the two mortal companions who have to walk the ways of earth together. But his mind was pre-occupied with other thoughts than her, while hers were wholly bent upon him and his succour. It was dangerous for her, stealing her heart out of her breast in the interest, the sympathy, the close contact involved; but of none of these things was he aware in the pre-occupation of his thoughts.

They walked up and down for a time together, behind the house, along the broad walk, almost a terrace, of the kitchen garden, where there was a deep border filled in summer with every kind of old-fashioned flowers. It was bare now, with naked fruit-trees against the wall, but the moon was hid in clouds, and it was impossible to see anything, except from the end of the terrace the little landing-place below, and the first curves of the walk leading up to the house, and all round the glimmer of the loch. The stillness had been broken by the sound of a boat, but it was on the Auchnasheen side, and though Oona strained her eyes she had not been able to see it, and concluded that, if coming to the isle at all, it must have touched the opposite point, where there was a less easy, but possible, landing-place. As they reached the end of the terrace, however, she was startled to see a figure detach itself from the gloom and walk slowly towards the house.

"The boat must have run in under the bushes, though I cannot see it," she said; "there is some one coming up the walk."

Walter turned to look with momentary alarm, but presently calmed down. "It is most likely old Symington, who takes a paternal charge of me," he said.

Soon after they heard the steps, not heavy, but distinctly audible, crushing the gravel, and to Oona's great surprise, though Walter, a stranger to the place, took no notice of the fact, these footsteps, instead of going to the door, as would have been natural, came round the side of the house and approached the young pair in their walk. The person of the new-comer was quite unknown to Oona. He took off his hat with an air of well-bred courtesy—like a gentleman, not like a servant—and said—

"I am reluctant to interrupt such a meeting, but there is a boat below for Lord Erradeen."

Walter started violently at the sound of the voice, which was, notwithstanding, agreeable and soft, though with a tone of command in it. He came to a sudden stop, and turned round quickly as if he could not believe his ears.

"There is a boat below," the stranger repeated, "and it is extremely cold; the men are freezing at their oars. They have not the same delightful inspiration as their master—who forgets that he has business to settle this final night——"

Walter gave a strange cry, like the cry of a hunted creature. "In God's name," he exclaimed, "what have you to do here?"

"My good fellow," said the other, "you need not try your hand at exorcising; others have made that attempt before you. Is Circe's island shut to all footsteps save yours? But, even then, you could not shut out me. I must not say Armida's garden in this state of the temperature——" he said.

"Who is it?" asked Oona in great alarm under her breath.

"Let me answer you," the intruder said. "It is a sort of a guardian who has the first right to Lord Erradeen's consideration. Love, as even the copybooks will tell, ought to be subordinate to duty."

"Love!" cried Oona, starting from the young man's side. The indignant blood rushed to her face. She turned towards the house in sudden anger and shame and excitement. Circe! Armida! Was it she to whom he dared to apply these insulting names.

Walter caught her cloak with both hands.

"Do you not see," he said, "that he wants to take you from me, to drive you away, to have me at his mercy? Oona! you would not see a man drown and refuse to hold out your hand?"

"This is chivalrous," said the stranger, "to put a woman between you and that—which you are afraid to meet."

To describe the state of excited feeling and emotion in which Oona listened to this dialogue, would be impossible. She was surprised beyond measure, yet, in the strange excitement of the encounter, could not take time to wonder or seek an explanation. She had to act in the mean time, whatever the explanation might be. Her heart clanged in her ears. Tenderness, pity, indignation, shame, thrilled through her. She had been insulted, she had been appealed to by the most sacred voice on earth—the voice of suffering. She stood for a moment looking at the two shadows before her, for they were little more.

"And if he is afraid why should not he turn to a woman?" she said with an impulse she could scarcely understand. "If he is afraid, I am not afraid. This isle belongs to a woman. Come and tell her, if you will, what you want. Let my mother judge, who is the mistress of this place. Lord Erradeen has no right to break his word to her for any man: but if my mother decides that you have a better claim, he will go."

"I will abide by every word she says," Walter cried.

The stranger burst into a laugh.

"I am likely to put forth my claim before such a tribunal!" he said. "Come, you have fought stoutly for your lover. Make a virtue of necessity now, and let him go."

"He is not my lover," cried Oona; "but I will not let him go." She added after a moment, with a sudden change of tone, coming to herself, and feeling the extraordinary character of the

discussion. "This is a very strange conversation to occur here. I think we are all out of our senses. It is like the theatre. I don't know your name, sir, but if you are Lord Erradeen's guardian, or a friend of his, I invite you to come and see my mother. Most likely," she added, with a slight faltering, "she will know you as she knows all the family." Then, with an attempt at playfulness, "If it is to be a struggle between this gentleman and the ladies of the isle, Lord Erradeen, tell him he must give way."

The stranger took off his hat and made her a profound bow.

"I do so on the instant," he said.

The two young people stood close together, their shadows confounded in one, and there did not seem time to draw a breath before they were alone, with no sound or trace remaining to prove that the discussion in which a moment before their hearts had been beating so loudly had ever existed at all. Oona looked after the stranger with a gasp. She clung to Walter, holding his arm tight.

"Where has he gone?" she cried in a piercing whisper. She trembled so after her boldness that she would have fallen but for his sustaining arm. "Who is he? Where has he gone? That is not the way to the beach. Call after him, call after him, and tell him the way."

Walter did not make any reply. He drew her arm closer threw his, and turned with her towards the house. As for Oona, she seemed incapable of any thought but that this strange intruder might be left on the isle.

"He will get into the orchard and then among the rocks. He will lose himself," she cried; "he may fall into the water. Call to him, Lord Erradeen—or stop, we will send Hamish. Here is Hamish. Oh, Hamish! the gentleman has taken the wrong way——"

"It will just be a boat that has come for my lord," said Hamish. "I tellt them my lord was biding all night, but nothing would satisfee them, but I had to come up and get his lordship's last word."

"Oh, he is not going, Hamish! but there is a gentleman—"

Walter interrupted her with an abruptness that startled Oona.

"Let them see that every one is on board—and return at once," he said.

"Oh there will just be everybody on board that ever was, for none has come ashore," said Hamish. "What was you saying about a gentleman, Miss Oona? There will be no gentleman. It is joost Duncan and another man with him, and they cried upon me, Hamish! and I answered them. But there will be no gentleman at all," Hamish said.

CHAPTER II.

It was very dark upon Loch Houran that night. Whether nature was aware of a dark spirit, more subtle and more powerful than common man, roaming about in the darkness, temporarily baffled by agencies so simple that their potency almost amused while it confounded him—and shrank from the sight of him, who could tell? but it was dark, as a night in which there was a moon somewhere ought never to have been. The moon was on the wane, it was true, which is never like her earlier career, but all trace and influence of her were lost in the low-lying cloud, which descended from the sky like a hood, and wrapped everything in gloom. The water only seemed to throw a black glimmer into the invisible world where all things brooded in silence and cold, unseen, unmoving. The only thing that lived and shone in all this mysterious still universe was one warm window, full of light, that shone from the isle. It was a superstition of the simple mistress of the house that there should be no shutter or curtain there, so that any late "traveller by land or water" might be cheered by this token of life and possible help. Had that traveller, needing human succour, been led to claim shelter there, it would have been accorded fearlessly. "Exceeding peace had made Ben Adhem bold." The little innocent household of defenceless women had not a fear. Hamish only, who perhaps felt a responsibility as their sole possible defender, might have received with suspicion such an unexpected guest.

The mysterious person already referred to—whose comings and goings were not as those of other men, and whose momentary discomfiture by such simple means perplexed yet partially amused him, as has been said, passed by that window at a later hour and stood for a moment outside. The thoughts with which, out of the external cold and darkness, which affected him not at all, he regarded the warm interior where simple human souls, sheltering themselves against the elements, gathered about their fire, were strange enough. The cold, which did not touch him, would have made them shiver; the dark, which to his eyes was as the day, would have confused their imaginations and discouraged their minds; and yet together by their fire they were beyond his power. He looked in upon their simplicity and calm and safety with that sense of the superiority of the innocent which at the most supreme moment will come in to dash all the triumphs of guile, and all the arts of the schemer. What he saw was the simplest cheerful scene, the fire blazing, the lamp burning steadily, a young man and a girl seated together, not in any tender or impassioned conjunction, but soberly discussing, calculating, arguing, thought to thought and face to face; the mother, on the other side, somewhat faded, smiling, not over wise, with her book, to which she paid little attention, looking up from time to time, and saying something far from clever. He might have gone in among them, and she would have received him

with that same smile and offered him her best, thinking no evil. He had a thousand experiences of mankind, and knew how their minds could be worked upon and their imaginations inflamed, and their ambitions roused. Was he altogether baffled by this simplicity, or was there some lingering of human ruth in him, which kept him from carrying disturbance into so harmless a scene? or was it only to estimate those forces that he stood and watched them, with something to learn, even in his vast knowledge, from this unexpected escape of the fugitive, and the simple means by which he had been baffled for the moment, and his prey taken from him? For the moment!—that was all.

"Come, come now," Mrs. Forrester said. "You cannot argue away like that, and fight all night. You must make up your bits of differences, and settle what is to be done; for it is time we had the Books, and let the women and Hamish get to their beds. They are about all day, and up early in the morning, not like us that sit with our hands before us. Oona, you must just cry upon Mysie, and let them all come ben. And if you will hand me the big Bible that is upon yon table—since you are so kind, Lord Erradeen."

At this simple ceremonial—the kindly servant-people streaming in, the hush upon their little concerns, the unison of voices, from Oona's, soft with youth and gentle breeding, to the rough bass of Hamish, in words that spectator knew as well as any—the same eyes looked on, with feelings we cannot attempt to fathom. Contempt, envy, the wonder of the wise over the everlasting, inexplicable superiority of the innocent, were these the sentiments with which he gazed? But in the night and silence there was no interpreter of these thoughts. How he came or went was his own secret. The window was closed soon after, the lights extinguished, and the darkness received this little community of the living and breathing, to keep them warm and unseen and unconscious till they should be claimed again by the cheerful day.

The household, however, though it presented an aspect of such gentle calm, was not in reality so undisturbed as it appeared. In Oona's chamber, for one, there was a tumult of new emotions which to the girl were incomprehensible, strange, and terrible, and sweet. Lord Erradeen was but a new acquaintance, she said to herself, as she sat over her fire, with everything hushed and silent about her; nevertheless the tumult of feeling in her heart was all connected with him. Curiously enough, the strange encounter in the garden—of which she had received no explanation—had disappeared from her thoughts altogether. The rise and sudden dawn of a new life in her own being was more near and momentous than any mysterious circumstances, however unlike the common. By-and-by she might come to that—in the mean time a sentiment "*nova, sola, infinita*," occupied all her consciousness. She had known him during the last week only: three times in all, on three several days, had they met; but what a change these three days had made in the life that had been so free and so sweet, full of a hundred interests, without any that was exclusive and absorbing. In a moment, without knowing what was coming, she had been launched into this new world of existence. She was humbled to think of it, yet proud. She felt herself to have become a sort of shadow of him, watching his movements with an anxiety which was without any parallel in her experience, yet at the same time able to interpose for him, when he could not act for himself, to save him. It seemed to Oona suddenly, that everything else had slipped away from her, receding into the distance. The things that had occupied her before were now in the background. All the stage of life was filled with him, and the events of their brief intercourse had become the only occupation of her thoughts. She wondered and blushed as she wandered in that maze of recollections, at her own boldness in assuming the guidance of him; yet felt it to be inevitable—the only thing to be done. And the strange new thrill which ran through her veins when he had appealed to her, when he had implored her to stand by him, came back with an acute sweet mixture of pleasure and pain. She declared to herself, Yes!—with a swelling of her heart—she would stand by him, let it cost her what it might. There had been no love spoken or thought of between them. It was not love: what was it? Friendship, fraternity, the instinctive discovery of one by another, that divination which brings those together who can help each other. It was he, not she, who wanted help—what did it matter which it was? in giving or in receiving it was a new world. But whether it was a demon or an angel that had thus got entrance into that little home of peace and security—who could tell? Whatever it was, it was an inmate hitherto unknown, one that must work changes both in earth and Heaven.

Everything that could trouble or disturb had vanished from the dark world outside before Oona abandoned her musings—or rather before she felt the chill of the deep night round her, and twisted up her long hair, and drew aside the curtains from her window as was her custom that she might see the sky from her bed. There had been a change in the midnight hours. The clouds at last had opened, and in the chasm made by their withdrawal was the lamp of the waning moon "lying on her back" with a sort of mystic disturbance and ominous clearness, as if she were lighting the steps of some evil enterprise, guiding a traitor or a murderer to the refuge of some one betrayed. Oona shivered as she took refuge in the snow-white nest which had never hitherto brought her anything but profound youthful repose, and the airy flitting dreams of a soul at rest. But though this momentary chill was impressed upon her senses, neither fear nor discouragement were in her soul. She closed her eyes only to see more clearly the face of this new influence in her life, to feel her pulses tingle as she remembered all the events of the three days' Odyssey, the strange magical history that had sprung into being in a moment, yet was alive with such endless interest, and full of such a chain of incidents. What was to be the next chapter in it? Or was it to have another chapter? She felt already with a deep drawing of her breath, and warned herself that all would probably end here, and everything relapse into vacancy—a conclusion inconceivable, yet almost certain, she said to herself. But this consciousness only excited her the more. There was something in it of that whirl of desperation which gives a wild

quickening to enjoyment in the sensation of momentariness and possible ending—the snatching of a fearful joy.

This sudden end came, however, sooner than she thought; they had scarcely met at the breakfast table when Lord Erradeen begged Mrs. Forrester to allow him to send for his servant, and make his arrangements for his departure from the isle, instead of returning to Auchnasheen. "I have not felt safe or at ease, save here, since I came to the loch," he said, looking round him with a grateful sense of the cheerful quiet and security. His eyes met those of Oona, who was somewhat pale after her long vigil and broken rest. She had recognised at once with a pang the conclusion she had foreseen, the interruption of her new history which was implied in the remorseless unintentional abruptness of this announcement. He was going away; and neither felt any inducement to stay, nor any hesitation in announcing his resolution. She had known it would be so, and yet there was a curious pang of surprise in it which seemed to arrest her heart. Notwithstanding, as in duty bound, she met his look with a smile in her eyes.

"Hoots," said Mrs. Forrester, "you flatter the isle, Lord Erradeen. We know that is just nonsense; but for all that, we take it kind that you should like our little house. It will always be found here, just faithful and friendly, whenever you come back. And certainly ye shall send for your man or make what arrangements suits you. There's the library quite free and at your service for any writing you may have to do, and Hamish will take any message to Auchnasheen, or wherever you please. The only thing that grieves me is that you should be so set on going to-day."

"That must be—that must be!" cried Walter: and then he began to make excuses and apologies. There were circumstances which made it indispensable—there were many things that made him anxious to leave Auchnasheen. No, it was not damp—which was the instant suggestion of Mrs. Forrester. There were other things. He was going back to Sloebury to his mother (Mrs. Forrester said to England), and it was so recently that he had entered upon his property, that there was still a great deal to do. After he had made this uncompromising statement of the necessities that he had to be guided by, he looked across the table at Oona once more.

"And Miss Forrester is so kind as to take in hand for me the settlement of the cotters. It will be her doing. I hope they will not blame me for that alarm yesterday, which was no fault of mine; but the new arrangement will be your doing altogether."

"I shall not take the credit," said Oona. "I had not even the boldness to suggest it. It was your own thought, and they will bless you so, that wherever you are, at Sloebury or the end of the world, you must feel your heart warm——"

She said this with great self-command; but she was pale, and there was a curious giddiness stealing over her. She seemed to feel the solid ground slip away from under her feet.

"My heart," he said, looking at her with a grateful look, "will always be warm when I think of the Isle, and all that has been done for me here."

"Now, Lord Erradeen," said Mrs. Forrester, "you will just make Oona and me vain with all these bonnie speeches. We are always glad to be friendly and neighbourlike, but what have we been able to do?—just nothing. When you come back again and let your friends see a little more of you, we will all do what we can to make the loch agreeable. But I hope it will be warmer weather, and more pleasure in moving about. You will be back no doubt, if not sooner, in time for the grouse?"

He grew pale in spite of himself, and Oona, looking at him, felt the steady earth slip more and more away.

"I don't know," he said, hurriedly, "when I may come back—not before I—not sooner than I can ——I mean there are a great many things to look after; and my mother——"

His eyes seemed to seek hers again as if asking her sympathy, and appealing to her knowledge. "Not before I must—not sooner than I can help," that was what he meant to say. Oona gave him a faint smile of response. It was so wonderful that when she understood him so completely, he should understand her so little, and never suspect that there was anything cruel in those words. But she made the response he required, and strengthened him by that instinctive comprehension of him in which he put so strange a trust. There was an eagerness in all his preparations for going away which he almost forced upon her notice, so strong was his confidence in her sympathy. He lost no time about any of these arrangements, but sent Hamish with his boat to Auchnasheen for Symington, and wrote down his instructions for Shaw, and talked of what he was going to do when he got "home," with the most absolute insensibility to any feeling in the matter save his own. And it seemed to Oona that the moments flew, and the quick morning melted away, and before she could collect her thoughts the time came when her mother and she walked down to the beach with him, smiling, to see him off. There had never been a word said between them of that conversation in the garden on the previous night. Only when he was just about to leave, he cast a glance towards the walk where that encounter had taken place, and turned to her with a look such as cannot pass between any but those that have some secret link of mutual knowledge. Her mother was talking cheerfully of the view and the fine morning after the rain, walking before them, when he gave Oona that look of mutual understanding. "I owe you everything," he said, in a low tone of almost passionate fervour. Presently she found herself shaking hands with him as if he had been nothing more than the acquaintance of three days which he was, and wishing him a good journey. And so the Odyssey came to an end, and the history stopped in the course of making. She stood still for a little, watching the boat and the widening lines it drew along the surface of the water. "Sometimes to watch a boat moving off will

give you a giddiness," Mrs. Forrester said.

CHAPTER III.

There could be no greater contrast than that which existed between Walter Methven, Lord Erradeen, hurrying away with the sense of a man escaped with his life from the shores of Loch Houran, and Oona Forrester left behind upon the isle.

It was not only that he had all at once become the first object in her life, and she counted for little or nothing in his. That was not the question. She had been for sufficient space of time, and with sufficient stress of circumstances to make the impression one which would not die easily, of the first importance in his thoughts: and no doubt that impression would revive when he had leisure from the overwhelming pre-occupation which was in his mind. But it was that he was himself full of an anxiety and excitement strong enough to dwarf every other feeling, which made the blood course through his veins, and inspired every thought; while she was left in a state more like vacancy than anything else, emptied out of everything that had interested her. The vigorous bend of the rowers to the oars as they carried him away was not more unlike the regretful languor of the women as they stood on the beach, Mrs. Forrester waving her handkerchief, but Oona without even impulse enough in her to do that.

As for Walter, he was all energy and impulse. He arranged the portmanteaux which Symington had brought with his own hands, to leave room for the sweep of the oars, and quicken the crossing. His farewells were but half said. It seemed as if he could scarcely breathe till he got away. Every stroke of the oars lightened his heart, and when he was clear of that tragic water altogether, and sprang up upon the rude country waggonette which had been engaged at the inn to carry him to the station, his brow relaxed, and the muscles of his mouth gave way as they had not done since his first day on Loch Houran. He gave a look almost of hatred at the old castle, and then averted his face. When he reached the railway, the means of communication with the world he had known before, he was a different man. The horses had gone too slowly for him, so did the leisurely friendly trains on the Highland railway, with their broad large windows for the sake of the views. Travellers, as a rule, did not wish to go too fast while they skirted those gleaming lochs, and ran along under shadow of the mountains: they liked to have somebody to point out which was Loch Ool and which St. Monan's. It was too slow for Lord Erradeen, but still it was going away. He began to think of all the commonplace accessories of life with a sort of enthusiasm—the great railway stations, the Edinburgh Hotel, with its ordinary guests. He was so sick of everything connected with his Highland property and with its history, that he resolved he would make no pause in Edinburgh, and would not go near Mr. Milnathort. The questions they would no doubt put to him made him impatient even in thought. He would not subject himself to these; he would put away altogether out of his mind, if he could, everything connected with it, and all that he had been seeing and hearing, or, at least, had fancied he heard and saw.

But when Oona turned away from looking after the boat—which she was indeed the first to do, Mrs. Forrester waiting almost as long as it was within sight to wave her handkerchief if the departing guest should look back—she felt herself and her life emptied out all at once. When she began to think of it in the cold light of this sudden conclusion, a sense of humiliation came over her. She blushed with hot shame at this altogether unasked, unreasonable, unnecessary resignation of herself and her interests to a stranger. He was nothing but a stranger, she said to herself; there was no remarkable charm in him one way or another. She had not been at all affected by his first appearance. He was not handsome enough or clever enough, nor had he any special attraction to gain him so high a place. Somehow she had not thought of Walter in her first realisation of the new interest which had pushed away all the other occupations out of her existence: and she had not blushed in the high sense of expanded life and power to help. But now it moved her with a certain shame to think that the sudden departure of a man whom she scarcely knew, and to whom she was nothing, should thus have emptied out her existence and left a bewildering blank in her heart. She went slowly up the walk, and went to her room, and there sat down with a curious self-abandonment. It was all over, all ended and done. When he came into her life it was accidentally, without any purpose in it on either side; and now that he had gone out of it again, there was no anger, no sense of wrong, only a curious consciousness that everything had gone away—that the soil had slipped from her, and nothing was left. No, there was no reason at all to be angry—nobody was to blame. Then she laughed a little at herself at this curious, wanton sort of trouble intended by nobody—which neither he had meant to draw her into, nor she to bring upon herself.

There was one thing however between her and this vacancy. He had left her a commission which any kind-hearted girl would have thought a delightful one—to arrange with the factor how the cotters were to be most effectually helped and provided for. It had been their thought at first—the young man being little better instructed than the girl on such matters—that to make Duncan Fraser and the rest the proprietors of their little holdings would be the most effectual way of helping them, and would do the property of Lord Erradeen very little harm—a thing that Walter, unaccustomed to property, and still holding it lightly, contemplated with all the ease of the landless, never thinking of the thorn in the flesh of a piece of alienated land in the midst of an estate, until it suddenly flashed upon him that his estates being all entailed, this step would be impossible. How was it to be done then? They had decided that Shaw would know best, and that some way of remitting the rents at least during the lifetime of the present Lord Erradeen must be settled upon, and secured to them at once. Oona had this commission left in her hands. She could

have thought of none more delightful a few days ago, but now it seemed to make the future vacancy of life all the more evident by the fact that here was one thing, and only one, before her to do. When that was done, what would happen?—a return upon the pleasant occupations, the amusements, the hundred little incidents which had filled the past? After all, the past was only a week back. Can it ever return, and things be again as they were before?——Oona had never reasoned or speculated on these matters till this moment. She had never known by experiment that the past cannot return, or that which has been be once more; but she became aware of it in a moment now.

Then she got up and stood at her window and looked out on the unchanging landscape, and laughed aloud at herself. How ridiculous it was! By this time it made no difference to Lord Erradeen that she had ever existed. Why should it make any difference to her that he had come and gone? The new generation takes a view of such matters which is different from the old-fashioned sentimental view. After yielding to the new influence rashly, unawares, like a romantic girl of any benighted century, Oona began to examine it like an enlightened young intelligence of her own. Her spirit rose against it, and that vigorous quality which we call a sense of humour. There was something almost ludicrous in the thought that one intelligent creature should be thus subject to another, and that life itself should be altered by an accidental meeting. And if this was absurd to think of in any case, how much more in her own? Nobody had ever had a more pleasant, happy life. In her perfect womanliness and submission to all the laws of nature, she was yet as independent as the most free-born soul could desire. There was no path in all the district, whether it led to the loneliest cottage or the millionnaire's palace, that was not free to Oona Forrester. The loch and the hills were open to her as her mother's garden, to the perfectly dauntless, modest creature, who had never in her life heard a tone or caught a look of disrespect. She went her mother's errands, which were so often errands of charity, far and near, with companions when she cared for them, without companions when she did not. What did it matter? The old cotter people about had a pretty Gaelic name for her; and to all the young ones Miss Oona of the Isle was as who should say Princess Oona, a young lady whom every one was bound to forward upon her way. Her mother was not so clever as Oona, which was, perhaps, a drawback; but she could not have been more kind, more tender, more loving if she had possessed, as our Laureate says, "the soul of Shakespeare." All was well about and around this favourite of nature. How was it possible then that she could have come to any permanent harm in two or three days?

Notwithstanding this philosophical view, however, Oona did nothing all that day, and to tell the truth felt little except the sense of vacancy; but next day she announced to her mother that she was going to the Manse to consult with Mr. Cameron about the Truach-Glas cotters, and that probably she would see Mr. Shaw there, and be able to do the business Lord Erradeen had confided to her. Mrs. Forrester fully approved.

"A thing that is to make poor folk more comfortable should never be put off a moment," that kind woman said, "for, poor bodies, they have little enough comfort at the best," and she stood at the porch and waved her hand to her child, as the boat sped out of the shade of the isle into the cold sunshine which had triumphed for an hour or two over the clouds and rain. Oona found Mr. Shaw, as she had anticipated, in the village, and there was a very brisk and not altogether peaceable discussion in the minister's study, over this new idea. The factor, though he was so strongly set against all severe measures, and in reality so much on the side of the cotters, was yet taken aback, as was natural, by the new idea presented to him. He laughed at the notion of making them the owners of their little holdings.

"Why not give Tom Patterson his farm too? He finds it just as hard to pay the rent," he cried in minded ridicule and wrath. "There is no difference in the principle though there may be in the circumstances. And what if Lord Erradeen had a few hundred crofters instead of half-a-dozen? I'm speaking of the principle. Of course he cannot do it. It's all entailed, every inch of the land, and he cannot do it; but supposing he could, and that he were treating them all equally? It's just not to be done. It is just shifting the difficulty. It is putting other people at a disadvantage. A man cannot give away his land and his living. It is just a thing that is not to be done."

"He knows it is not to be done; he knows it is entailed, therefore——"

"Oh yes, Miss Oona; therefore—" cried the factor. "Little of it, very little, would have come his way if it had not been entailed. Whether or not it is good for the country, there can be no doubt it's the stronghold of a family. Very likely there would have been no Methvens (and small damage, begging his pardon that is a kind of a new stock), and certainly there would have been no property to keep up a title, but for the entail. It is a strange story, the story of them altogether." Shaw continued, "it has been a wonderfully managed property. I must say that for it; no praise to me, so I am free to speak. There was the late lord—the only one I knew. There was very little in him, and yet the way he managed was wonderful; they have just added land to land, and farm to farm. I do not understand it. And now I suppose we've arrived at the prodigal that always appears some time in a family to make the hoards go."

"No, no," said the minister, "you must not call the man a prodigal whose wish is to give to the poor."

"That is all very well," said Shaw; "the poor, where there are half-a-dozen of them, are easily enough managed. Give them their land if you like (if it was not criminal to cut a slice out of an estate), it does not matter much; but if there were a hundred? It is the principle I am thinking of. They cannot buy it themselves, and the State will not buy it for them, seeing they are only decent

Scots lads, not blazing Irishmen. I cannot see where the principle will lead to: I am not against the kindness, Miss Oona, far from that: and these half-a-dozen Frasers, what would it matter? but if there were a hundred? The land is just my profession, as the Church is Mr. Cameron's, and I must think of it, all the ways of it; and this is a thing that would not work so far as I can see."

"But Lord Erradeen acknowledges that," said Oona. "What he wants to do is only for his time. To set them free of the rent they cannot pay, and to let them feel that nobody can touch them, so long as he lives—"

"And the Lord grant him wealth of days," said the minister; "a long life and a happy one!"

"You will not look at it," cried the factor, "from a common-sense point of view. All that is very pretty, and pleasing to the young man's—what shall I call it?—his kindness and his vanity, for both are involved, no doubt. But it will just debauch the minds of the people. They will learn to think they have a right to it; and when the next heir comes into possession, there will be a burning question raised up, and a bitter sense of wrong if he asks for his own again. Oh yes, Miss Oona, so long as the present condition of affairs lasts it will be their own. A man with a rent of two or three pounds is just as liable as if it were two or three hundred. The principle is the same; and as I am saying, if there were a number of them, you just could not do it: for I suppose you are not a communist, Miss Oona, that would do away with property altogether?"

A sudden smile from among the clouds lit up Shaw's ruddy, remonstrative countenance, as he put this question, and Oona smiled too.

"I don't make any theories," she said; "I don't understand it. I feel as Lord Erradeen does, that whatever the law may be, I would rather be without a roof to shelter myself than turn one poor creature out of her home. Oh, I don't wonder when I remember the horror in his face! Think! could you sleep, could you rest—you, young and strong, and well off, when you had turned out the poor folk to the hill?—all for a little miserable money?" cried Oona, starting to her feet, "or for the principle, as you call it? I, for one," cried the girl, with flashing eyes, "would never have let him speak to me again."

"There you have it, Oona; there's a principle, if you like; there is something that will work," cried the old minister, with a tremulous burst of laughter. "Just you keep by that, my bonnie dear, and all your kind; and we'll hear of few evictions within the Highland line."

"That would be all very well," said the factor, "if every landlord was a young lad, like Lord Erradeen; but even then it might be a hard case, and Miss Oona would not find it as easy as she thinks; for supposing there were hundreds, as I'm always saying: and supposing there were some among them that could just pay well enough, but took advantage; and supposing a landlord that was poor too, and was losing everything? No, no, Miss Oona, in this world things are not so simple. My counsel is to let them be—just to let them be. I would bid them pay when they can, and that my lord would not be hard upon them. That is what I would do. I would tell them he was willing to wait, and may be to forgive them what was past, or something like that. After what happened the other day, they will be very sure he will not be hard upon them. And that is what I would advise him to do."

"You are not going to wash your hands of it, after all?" the minister said.

Shaw laughed. "Not just this time, Mr. Cameron. I always thought he was a fine lad. And now that he has good advisers, and amenable——" he added, with a glance at Oona, which fortunately she did not see.

And after this interview she went home, very silent, depressed as she had no right to be, feeling as if life was over, and all things come to an end.

CHAPTER IV.

It would be difficult to describe the sensations with which Lord Erradeen found himself set at liberty, and on his way back, as he thought at first, to the easy mind, the quiet life, the undisturbed and undisturbing circumstances of his previous existence. He scarcely seemed to breathe till he had crossed the Border, and was outside of Scotland, feeling during that time like a fugitive in full flight, incapable of thinking of anything except that he had eluded his pursuers and had escaped all possible risks and apprehensions. His trial had lasted nights and days, he could not tell how many. Now for the first time he had the calm, the leisure, the sense of safety, which were necessary for a review of all that he had gone through: he had seen the moon light up the pale line of the sea at Berwick, where Tweed falls into the waste of water, and the lights of Newcastle, turning into a shining highway the dark crescent of the Tyne, and then as the train pounded along through the darkness, with the throb and swing of life and speed, through the silence and night, his faculties seemed to come back to him, and his judgment to be restored. Through what a strange episode of existence had he passed since he saw the lights curve round the sides of that river, and the great bridge striding over above the roofs of the sleeping town! And now he had escaped—had he escaped? He had time at least and quiet to think it all out and see where he stood.

He had been for nearly three weeks altogether on Loch Houran, during which time he had gone through the severest mental struggle he had ever known. It seemed years to him now since the

moment when he had been suddenly confronted by the strange and mysterious personage who had assumed a tone towards him and claimed a submission which Walter had refused to yield. That this man's appearance had awakened in him a sensation of overwhelming excitement mingled with fear, that he had come in an unaccountable way, that he had been seen apparently by no one in the old castle but himself, that nobody had betrayed any consciousness of knowing who he was or how he was there, and yet that he had come and gone with a perfect acquaintance and familiarity with the place, the family, the estates, the story of the race; these were details which, with a tremulous sensation in his mind, as of a panic nearly over, he gathered together to examine and find out, if possible, what they meant. He had been unable during the time that followed, when he had taken refuge in Auchnasheen, to exercise any discriminating faculty, or use his own judgment upon these facts. At the moment of seeing and hearing occurrences which disturb the mind, reason is hampered in its action. Afterwards you may ask yourself, have you really heard and seen? but not when a definite appearance is before your eyes, or likely to re-appear at any moment, and a distinct voice in your ears. The actual then overmasters the soul; the meaning of it must be got at later. He had seen this man whose faculties and pretensions were alike so extraordinary, he had listened to the claim he made, he had been bidden to yield up his individual will and to obey under threatening of evil if he refused, and promises of pleasure and comfort if he consented. And Walter had said "No." He would have said No had an angel out of heaven appeared before him, making the same demand. He had been subjected to this strange trial at the very height of independence and conscious power, when he had newly begun to feel his own importance, and to enjoy its advantages. It had seemed to him absurd, incredible, that such a claim should be made, even while the personality of the strange claimant had filled him with a sensation of terror, which he summoned all his forces to struggle against, without any success. He had been like two men during that struggle. One a craven, eager to fly, willing to promise anything might he but escape; the other struggling passionately against the stranger and refusing—refusing, night and day. When he went to Auchnasheen the character of the conflict within him had become more remarkable still. The man who claimed his obedience was no longer visible, but he had been rent asunder between the power of his own resisting spirit and some strange influence which never slackened, which seemed to draw him towards one point with a force which his unwillingness to yield made into absolute agony. Still he had resisted, always resisted, though without strength to escape, until the moment had come when by sudden inspiration of natural justice and pity he had broken loose—by that, and by the second soul struggling in him and with him, by Oona's hand holding him and her heart sustaining him. This was the history of these two tremendous weeks, the most eventful in his life. And now he had escaped out of the neighbourhood in which he could feel no safety, out of the influence which had moved him so strangely, and was able to think and ask himself what it was.

The night was dark, and, as has been said, the moon was on the wane. She shed a pale mist of light over the dark country, where now and then there broke out the red glow of pit or furnace fires. The train swung onwards with a rock of movement, a ploughing and plunging, the dim light in the roof swaying, the two respectable fellow-passengers each in his corner amidst his wraps, slumbering uneasily. Walter had no inclination to sleep. He was indeed feverishly awake; all his faculties in wild activity; his mind intensely conscious and living. What did it all mean? The events which had affected him to a passionate height of feeling with which his previous life had been entirely unacquainted—was it possible that there was any other way of accounting for them? To look himself in the face as it were, and confess now at a distance from these influences that the man to whom he had spoken in the language of to-day was one of the fabulous men in whom the ignorant believe, his own early ancestor—the still existing, undying founder of the house, was, he said to himself, impossible. It could not be; anything else—any hypothesis was more credible than this. There was no place for the supernatural in the logic of life as he had learned it. Now that he had recovered control of himself, it was time for him to endeavour to make out a reason for the hallucination in which he had almost lost himself and his sober senses. And accordingly he began to do it; and this is what he said to himself. His imagination had been excited by all that had happened to him; the extraordinary change in his circumstances which seemed almost miraculous, and then the succession of incidents, the strange half-communications that had been made to him, the old, ruinous house in which he had been compelled to shut himself up, the wonderful solitude, full of superstitious suggestions, into which he had been plunged. All these details had prepared his mind for something—he knew not what. He felt a hot flush of shame and mortification come over him as he remembered how easily, notwithstanding all his better knowledge, he, a man of his century, acquainted with all the philosophies of the day, had been overcome by those influences. He had expected something out of nature, something terrible and wonderful. And when such a state of mind is reached, it is certain (he thought) that something will arise to take advantage of it.

Probably all these effects had been calculated upon by the individual, whoever he was, who haunted Kinloch Houran to excite and exploit these terrors. Who was he? Even now, so far out of his reach, so emancipated from his influence that he could question and examine it, Walter felt a certain giddiness come over his spirit at this thought, and was glad that one of his fellow-passengers stirred and woke, and made a shivering remark, How cold it was, before he again composed himself to sleep. It was very cold. There was an icy chill in the air which penetrated through the closed windows. But nothing else could come in—nothing else! and it could be but a sudden reflection from his past excitement that made Walter feel for a moment as if another figure sat opposite to him, gazing at him with calm sarcasm, and eyes that had a smile in them. When the giddiness passed off, and he looked again, there was (of course) no one opposite to him, only the dark blue cushions of the unoccupied place. Who was this man then who held a sort

of court in Kinloch Houran, and demanded obedience from its proprietor? He was no creature of the imagination. Excited nerves and shaken health might indeed have prepared the mind of the visitor for the effect intended to be produced upon him; but they could not have created the central figure—the powerful personality from whom such influence flowed. Who was he? The circumstances were all favourable for a successful imposture, or even a mystification. Suppose it to be some member of the family aggrieved by the promotion of a far-off branch, some dependent with so much knowledge of the secrets of the race as to be able to play upon the imagination of a novice, with mysterious threats and promises; perhaps, who could tell, a monomaniac, the leading idea of whose delusion was to take this character upon him? Walter's breast lightened a little as he made out one by one these links of explanation. It was characteristic of his time, and the liberality of mind with which modern thought abjures the idea of absolute imposture, that the sudden suggestion of a monomaniac gave him great relief and comfort. That might explain all—a man of superior powers crazed in this one point, who might have convinced himself that he was the person he claimed to be, and that it was the interest of the family he had at heart. Such a being, acquainted with all the mysterious passages and hiding-places that exist in such old houses, able to appear suddenly from a secret door or sliding panel, to choose moments when nature herself added to the sense of mystery, hours of twilight and darkness when the half-seen is more alarming than anything fully revealed—this would explain so much, that the young man for the moment drew a long breath of relief, and felt half-consciously that he could afford to ignore the rest.

And in the sense of this relief he fell asleep, and dreamed that he stood again at Mrs. Forrester's door in the Isle, and saw the light on the old tower of Kinloch Houran, and felt the attraction, the drawing and dragging as of some force he could not resist; and woke up with the blow he gave himself against the rail that supported the netting on the opposite side of the carriage, against which he struck his head in his rush towards the place to which he had felt himself called. He staggered back into his seat, giddy and faint, yet thankful to feel that it was only a dream; and then had to begin his self-arguments over again, and trace once more every link of the chain.

A monomaniac—yes, that might be the explanation; but whence then that power which drew him, which he had fought against with all the powers of his being at Auchnasheen, which he had never given in to, but which, even in the reflection of it given in his dream, was vivid enough to awaken him to a new branch of the question? Magnetism, mesmerism, he had heard of, and scorned as other names for charlatanism; but when you are searching anxiously for the means of accounting for mysterious phenomena you are glad to seize upon explanations that at another moment would be little satisfactory. Walter said to himself that the madman of Kinloch Houran—the monomaniac, must possess these strange powers. He might know many secrets, though his wits were gone astray. He might be sane enough to have a purpose, and to cultivate every possible means of affecting the mind he wished to work upon. Such curious combinations of madness and wisdom were not beyond human experience. Perhaps at the end of all his arguments, having fully convinced himself, the thread of the reasoning escaped him, for he suddenly shuddered and grew pale, and shrank into his corner, drawing his wraps close round him and raising the collar of his coat to his very eyes, as if to shut out some bewildering, overwhelming sight. But by this time the wintry day was breaking, and the stir of awakened life reached the other travellers, who woke and stretched themselves, shivering in the chill of the dawn, and began to prepare for their arrival. One of them spoke to Walter, expressing a fear that he was ill, he looked so pale, and offering his services to "see him home." The young man indeed felt as if he had come through a long illness when he stepped forth upon the platform at King's Cross, and felt that he had escaped from his fever and his trouble, and had new ways and new thoughts—or rather the repose of old thoughts and old ways—before him for some time to come.

He remained in London all day, and after his bath and his breakfast, felt the rising of a new life, and began to remember all the good things which he had partially forgotten, but which surely were more than enough to counterbalance the evil things, of which, when you set your mind to it, after all, so feasible an explanation could be found. London was at its darkest, and nothing invited him in the foggy and murky streets; nevertheless he lingered with that mixture of old habit and mental indolence which wastes so much time and disperses so many admirable resolutions. He went in the morning to see the house which belonged to him in Park Lane, and which was at present empty. It was one of those which look out from pleasant, large bow-windows upon the brightness of the Park and the cheerful thoroughfare. Even at such a moment it had a kind of brightness—as much light as could be got in London. It gave Walter a real pleasure to think of furnishing it for his mother, of seeing her take her place there and enter upon a larger life, a mode of existence for which he felt—with a glow of pride in her—she was more qualified than for the smaller village routine at Sloebury. His energy even went so far as to direct that the house should be put in order and prepared for occupation. And if he had gone home at once after this feat, not all the threatenings of his mysterious enemy would have prevented a pleasant re-beginning of his old life.

But he did not; he lingered about the streets, about the hotel to which he had gone in the morning, for no particular reason, and it was late when he started for Sloebury—late and dark and cold, and his sleepless night and all the excitements from which he had fled, began to tell upon him. When he reached the familiar station his cheerfulness and good-humour had fled. And all the pleasant anticipations of the home-coming and the comfort with which he had remembered that existence, free of all mystery, in which he had seldom done anything but what seemed good in his own eyes, abandoned him as he stepped into the drizzle of a dark and rainy December night, into the poor and badly-lighted streets that surround a railway everywhere, and

turn the worst side of every town to the eyes of strangers. He sent Symington and his baggage off before him, and himself set out to walk, with that incomprehensible pleasure in a little further delay which is so general. Stepping out into the mean streets had all the effect upon Walter's tired frame and capricious and impatient mind, of sudden disenchantment. His imagination perhaps had been affected by the larger atmosphere from which he had come, and he had forgotten the dinginess and poverty, which never before had struck him with the same force. The damp drizzle which was all there was for air, seemed to suffocate him; the pavement was wet and muddy, dirt and wretchedness pervaded everything. Then he began to realise, as he walked, the scene he was going to, which he could call up before him with such perfect distinctness of memory. Home! It used to be the centre, in books, of all pleasant thoughts—the tired wanderer coming to rest and shelter, the prodigal out of hunger and misery to forgiveness and the fatted calf, the "war-beaten soldier" from his cold sentry's march, the sailor from the wet shrouds and gloomy seas—to good fires and welcomes, kisses and a hot supper. But that primitive symbol of imagination, like so many others, has got perhaps somewhat soiled with ignoble use; and it never was, perhaps, from this point of view that young men of Walter Methven's type regarded the centre of family life, to which they returned when there was nothing better to do, with a sort of penitential sense of the duties that were considered binding there, and the preposterous things that would be expected of them.

Lord Erradeen, who had been longing for that safe and sensible refuge where no exaggeration or superstition prevailed, suddenly felt it rise before him like a picture of still life as he walked towards it. His mother seated knitting at one side of the fire, with a preoccupied look, listening for his step outside, the evening newspaper and a novel from Mudie's on the table. Miss Merivale opposite working crewel work, and putting a question now and then as to when he was expected: the two lamps burning steadily, the tick of the clock in the foreground, so to speak, the soul of the silent scene. The other accessories of the piece were all conventional ones: fire blazing brightly, now and then breaking into the monologue of the clock with a sudden rush and jet of flame, or dropping of ashes; curtains drawn, sofas and chairs within the glow of the warmth, ready for the new-comer's choice. There would be a sudden springing up, a disturbance of the perfect order of all these arrangements, on his entrance. He would be made to sit down in far too warm a corner; his personal appearance would be commented upon; that he was looking well, or ill, or tired, or as fresh as possible. And then the cross-examination would begin. Walter reminded himself that this cross-examination was maddening, and that even as a boy at school he had never been able to bear it. When he had said that he was well, and consented, yes, that he had come home sooner than he expected, but no, that nothing was wrong, what was there more to say? To be sure he had intended to say a great deal more, to pour forth all his troubles into his mother's sympathetic bosom; but that in any case could only have been when the two were alone. And would she understand him if he did so? Cousin Sophy—he could hear her in imagination—would give a sharp shriek of laughter at the idea of anything mysterious, at any suggestion of the supernatural (in which, of course, by this time Walter did not believe himself, but that was another matter). She would shriek even derisively at the idea that mesmerism could have affected any man in his senses. And his mother—what would she do? not shriek with laughter, that was not her way; but smile perhaps with a doubtful look to see whether it was possible that he could be in earnest in this incredible story of his. No, she would not believe him, she would think he was under the influence of some hallucination. She would look at him with a shock of something like contempt, an annoyed dismay that *her* son should be so credulous, or so weak. Walter's imagination leaped back to the other warm and softly-lighted room on the Isle, the innocent mother talking, who would have believed everything, the girl standing by who did understand, and that almost without a word. Ah, if that indeed were home! Thus with a sudden revulsion in his mind, shutting himself up, and double-locking the door of his heart, even before he had come to the door of the house, to which his mother, he knew, would rush to meet him, hearing and distinguishing his step—he went home.

Mrs. Methven, who had been on the watch all day, opened the door to him as he foresaw. She was trembling with anxiety and pleasure, yet self-restrained and anxious not to betray the excitement which probably he would think uncalled for; she took his wraps from him, and helped to take off his great-coat, giving an aid which was quite unnecessary, but which he, on his side commanding himself also, did his best to accept with an appearance of pleasure. "You have not dined," she said, "there is something just ready. We waited half an hour, but I thought you would prefer to come by this train. Come in and get thawed, and let me look at you, while they bring up your dinner." She took him by the arm as she spoke, and led him into the drawing-room where everything was exactly as he had imagined. And she drew him, as he had imagined, too close to the fire, and drawing the softest chair, said "Sit down, dear, and get warm."

"I am not a bit cold. I have walked, you know, from the station. How do you do, Cousin Sophy? Your room is too warm, mother, I always tell you so. However it looks very cheerful after the wet and mud outside," he said, with an attempt to be gracious.

"The rain makes everything dismal out of doors. Has it been raining all the way? You have had a dreadful journey, my poor boy."

"Of course it is warmer here than in Scotland," said Miss Merivale.

And then there was a pause, and his mother looked at him more closely by the light of the lamp. She was just going to say "You are not looking very well"—when Walter broke in.

"I hear a tray coming, and I am very hungry. I shall go into the dining-room, mother, and join you

by-and-by."

"I will go too and wait upon you, Walter. I mean to wait upon you myself to-night. I hope your lordship has not grown too fine for that," she said with an attempt at playful ease. It was a relief to leave Miss Merivale, and have her son all to herself. She put his chair to the table for him, and brought the claret which had been warming, and handed him his plate with a smile of content. "It is pleasant to serve one's boy," she said, "and we don't want any third person. I have so much to hear, and to ask—"

An impatient prayer that she would not begin the moment he sat down to worry a fellow with questions was on Walter's lips; but he forbore, doing his very best to command himself. To sit in his old place, to feel his old impulse, to find the claret too warm, and the potatoes cold, was almost too much for him; but still like a hero he forbore. And she took advantage of his magnanimity. She never relaxed her watch upon him. That is the penalty one pays for having one's mother to serve one: a servant is silent at least. She asked him if he would not have a little more, just this little piece which was very nicely done? Some of the vegetables which were better cooked than usual? A little salad? Some stewed fruit with that Devonshire cream which he used to like? A little of his favourite cheese? She was not in general a fussy woman, but she was so anxious, after the *rapprochement* that had taken place on the eve of his going away, to please him, to preserve that tenderer strain of feeling—if it could be done this way! And yet all the time she was restraining herself not to say too much, not to worry him. A woman has to exercise such wiles often enough for her husband's benefit; but it is hard to go through the process again for her son.

He bore it all with a devouring impatience, yet self-restraint too—not entreating her in words to let him alone for heaven's sake! as he would so fain have done. Perhaps there was something to be said on his side also; his mind was laden with care and anxiety, and wanted repose above all; and this wistful over-anxiety and desire to propitiate by details was irritating beyond description. He did not know how to put up with it. Love itself is sometimes very hard to put up with—embarrassing, officious, not capable of perceiving that to let its object alone is the best. Mrs. Methven did not know how to propitiate him—whether to show her interest or to put on a form of indifference. All her urgency about his dinner, was it not to spare him the questions which she knew he did not love? But that succeeded badly, and her curiosity, or rather her anxiety, was great.

"How did you like Kinloch Houran?" she ventured to say at last. What a question! It seemed to Walter that a glance at his face would have shown her how inappropriate it was.

"Like Kinloch Houran!" he said. "If you want a categorical answer, mother—and I know you are never satisfied with anything else—not at all!"

"I am sorry for that, Walter, since it seems a place you must have a great deal to do with. Auchnasheen, then, was that better? You must teach me to pronounce the name."

"Auchnasheen, if possible, was worse," he said. "I shall never be able to endure either the one or the other, or forget the associations—don't make me think of them, please. When I got home I thought I should be able to escape all that."

"My dear, I beg your pardon: I did not know. Was the weather then so bad? They say it always rains—and the place very dull, of course, so far in the wilds? But you said in your letter that the lake was lovely, and that there were some pleasant people——"

He put up his hand, begging her to go no further. "It was lovely enough if you like, but I hate the place; isn't that enough? I shall never go back with my free will."

Mrs. Methven looked at him in astonishment. "I thought—" she said, "you remember how fantastic you thought it, and mediæval—that you had to make a periodical visit to the old home of the race?"

His very lips trembled with irritation. He had written about all that in the first days of his absence, and even after his arrival at Loch Houran, making fun of the old world stipulation. She might have divined, he thought, that it was a very different matter now. "I am sorry to keep you so long here, out of your own comfortable corner," he said. "You never like sitting in the dining-room. It is brutal of me to keep you here."

"No, Walter, it is my pleasure," she cried; then, poor soul, with that most uncalled-for, unprofitable desire for information, "And there are so many things I want to know——"

He commanded himself with a great effort. "Mother," he said, "I have not enjoyed my visit to Scotland. There are a great many things that perhaps I may be able to talk of hereafter if you will give me time, but that I don't want even to think of now. And I'm tired with my journey; and everything is not *couleur de rose*, as you seem to think. Let me alone, if you can, for to-night."

"Let you alone—if I can!" She was so startled, so bitterly disappointed, that for a moment or two she could not speak. And this aggravated Walter still more.

"Mother," he cried, getting up from his unsatisfactory meal, "I hope you are not going to make a scene the first night."

Thus, without any intention, with indeed the strongest desire to adopt a better way, this was how

young Lord Erradeen resumed his intercourse with his mother. And yet Oona's mother, with all her little gentle affectations, with her kind effusiveness which there was no withstanding, had given him the sincerest sense of home and a refuge from trouble. Was it Oona's presence that explained all, or was there something more subtle underneath? There followed on this occasion no scene; but when Mrs. Methven returned to the drawing-room alone, leaving Walter, as she said, in peace to smoke his cigar after his dinner, Miss Merivale's keen eyes perceived at once that the traveller's meal had not been a happy ceremonial.

"I dare say he is tired," she said.

"Yes, he is tired—almost too tired to eat. Smoke is the grand panacea," said Mrs. Methven, with a smile.

"The worst of smoke is that it is so unsociable," said Miss Merivale, cheerfully, picking up her book. "I think I'll go to bed and leave you free for your talk with Walter when the cigar's done. Oh yes, you will get on better by yourselves. You will get more out of him if you are alone. But I dare say you won't get very much out of him. It will come by scraps—a little at a time; and he will be quite astonished that you don't know—by instinct, I suppose. Men are all like that."

It was very kind of Cousin Sophy. Mrs. Methven gave her a kiss of gratitude as she took her candle and went away. But the expedient after all did little good. Walter lingered over his cigar, growing less and less inclined for any confidences, while his mother lingered in the drawing-room, hoping he would come to her; and Cousin Sophy, by far the most comfortable of the three, established herself cosily in her easy-chair by her bed-room fire, with a yellow novel. Miss Merivale had aspirations beyond Mudie. She thought the French writers far more subtle and searching in their analysis of character than her compatriots ever were, and she liked their boldness, and the distinctness with which they cut away all pretences and showed humanity as it was. She had no opinion of humanity—but yet she was in her way very good-natured, and would even go out of her way to show kindness to one of her fellow-creatures, as she had done to-night. Though her own room looked comfortable, and was so indeed up to a certain point, Miss Merivale, if nobody else, was aware that there was a draught which there was no eluding,—a draught which, whatever you might do, caught you infallibly in the back of the neck. She had taken down the curtains and put them up again. She had changed the position of her seat. She had bought a folding screen. She had even changed her chair and procured a high-backed old-fashioned thing, something like that cushioned sentry-box in which porters delight; but in no way could she escape this draught, except in bed, and it was much too early to go to bed. Therefore she had made a distinct sacrifice of personal comfort in coming so soon up-stairs. She sat there and mused, asking herself what boys were born for, or at least by what strange mistake Providence ever committed them to the charge of women; and why it was that they could not be happy or natural with the people they belonged to. "I feel almost sure now," she said to herself, "that I shall have a stiff neck to-morrow, to no purpose, and that those two down-stairs are sitting in separate rooms, and will not say a word to each other."

It was a curious, very curious reading of an English home, could any spectator have looked through the secure covering of that respectable roof, or through the curtains that veiled the windows, and seen the two rooms in which these two persons sat each alone. How was it? Why was it? The mother had no thought but for her son. The son was not unkind or heartless, but full of good qualities. And yet at a moment when he had much to tell, and she was eager to hear, they sat in two separate rooms, as if they were fellow-lodgers and no more. Cousin Sophy, who was a sensible woman, with much kind feeling towards both, though she was not perhaps the kind of person from whom any high degree of unselfish devotion was to be looked for, sat and shook her head, and "wondered at it," as the ladies at Camelot did over Elaine. But it was a greater wonder than Elaine.

Was it, perhaps, the beginning of the fulfilment of that threat that everything would go ill with him, which had been made at Kinloch Houran? But if so it was no new ill, but only the further following out of an evil that had been growing for years.

CHAPTER V.

Something of the same perversity which had turned all his good resolutions to nothing on the night of his arrival, affected Walter when he went out next morning into Sloebury. The place had narrowed and grown small in every way. There was no horizon, only lines of brick houses; no space, only the breadth of a street; no air to breathe for a man who had come from the wide solitude of the hills, and the keen freshness of the Highland breezes. Everything here was paltry, and monotonous, and small; the people who met him—and he met everybody, and there was not a man who could claim the slightest acquaintance with him, or a woman who had seen him once in her neighbour's drawing-room who did not now claim acquaintance with Lord Erradeen—seemed to have dwindled along with the scene. They had never been distinguished by intelligence or originality, but he had not been aware how paltry they were before. Had he seen Jeremy's new turn-out? all the men inquired of him. He had already heard of it from Miss Merivale, who had given him a sketch of the history of the town, and what had happened during his absence, at breakfast. It was a high phaeton, "which I suppose must be the fashion," Miss Merivale said. "You should really see it," cried all the young men, with details about the harness and the high-stepping mare which were endless. What did Lord Erradeen care for young Jeremy's phaeton or

the high-stepping mare? but it was the only topic at Sloebury—that, and a report which Miss Merivale had also furnished him with about Julia Herbert. "Your old flame: no doubt it was to console herself in your absence," said Cousin Sophy. This was disagreeable too. Walter did not care to hear that the girl who had distinguished himself and been distinguished by him should make herself remarkable in a flirtation with another man. He did not want her indeed, but he objected to the transfer of her affections. And everything around looked so barren, stale, flat, and unprofitable. Perhaps it was the quickening of life which his recent experiences, painful though they had been, had brought him, which made him feel how dead-alive everything was. At Loch Houran his mind had gone back to the safe and peaceable commonplace of his native town with something like an enthusiasm of preference for its calm common sense, and superiority to the fever and excitements of that life upon the edge of the supernatural. Now it seemed to him that superstition itself, not to speak of the heats and chills of human passion, were higher things than this cynic-steadiness, this limit of matter-of-fact. What would Sloebury think of those things that had been so real to him, that had rent his very being asunder? He could imagine the inextinguishable laughter with which his story would be greeted, and blushed at the possibility of betraying himself. A seer of ghosts and visions, a victim of mesmerism! He would become in a moment the scorn, as he was at present, the envy, of the town. Not a soul of them would understand. His experiences must be buried in his own bosom, and no one here must ever know that he had got beyond that surface of life to which all their knowledge was confined. When he met Underwood indeed this determination wavered a little: but then Underwood looked at him with an eagerness of inspection which was still more offensive. What did the fellow mean? Did he think it likely that he, a stranger, a person whom the better people disapproved, should be chosen as the confidant of Lord Erradeen?

"You have come back very soon," the captain said; as indeed did everybody whom he met.

"No—not sooner than I intended," said Walter, coldly. "It was business merely that took me there at all."

Underwood examined his face with a curiosity that had knowledge in it. "I know that country so well," he said. "I should like to know what you think of it. Of course you were at Auchnasheen? I have been weeks there, with the late lord—and at the old castle too," he added, with a keen look.

"You were interested in the architecture, I suppose."

Underwood said nothing for a moment. Then suddenly—"I wish you'd come and talk to me about it!" he cried. "Any time that you will come I'll shut out everybody else. I'll keep myself free—"

"My dear fellow," Walter said in a supercilious tone, "why should I make Sloebury pay the penalty, and banish your friends from you for my selfish advantage?" To remember the time when this man had taken notice of him and been his superior, gave him a sense of impatient indignation. "Besides, I don't know that there is anything to say."

"Oh, as you please," said Underwood; but when they passed each other, he turned back and laid a hand on Walter's sleeve. "I keep early hours now," he said. "After ten I am always free."

Lord Erradeen walked away, half-angry, half-amused, by the man's presumption, who, after all, was a nobody; but yet, he made a secret note in his mind, almost outside of his consciousness. After ten—It might, in the dreadful blank of those hours after ten at Sloebury (or even before ten for that matter), be a resource.

He had not gone very much further when he fell into another lion's mouth. But how wrong, how cruel, to apply such a phrase to the red and smiling mouth, fresh as the cherries in the song, of Miss Julia Herbert, on her way from the rectory where she paid her old aunt a daily visit, to the cottage in which she was her mother's stay and solace! She had been flirting a great deal in Walter's absence, no one could deny. A young Wynn, a relation on the other side of the house, had been staying there, on leave from his regiment, and on such an occasion what else was there to do? But young Wynn was gone, and his circumstances were not such as to have stood in competition for one moment with Lord Erradeen. As soon as she saw him, Julia began to smile and wave her hand. If there was a little sense of guilt in her, so much the more reason for even an excess of friendliness now. And perhaps there was in Walter a certain desire to let the little world about, which had insisted upon her little infidelities, perceive that she was as much under his influence as ever, as soon as he chose to appear. This was not the way in which the world regarded the matter, if Walter had known. Instead of looking at him as the conquering hero, who had but to show himself, the spectators said pityingly that Julia Herbert had got hold of poor Lord Erradeen again.

"Oh, Walter!" she cried; then changed her tone with a very pretty blush, and said, "I ought to have said Lord Erradeen; but it was the surprise. And so you have come home?"

"I have come *back*," he said, with a little emphasis.

"I see it all. Forgive me that I should be so silly—*back*, of course; that means a few days, that means you have come for your boxes, or to see your mother, or to know her wishes respecting the new furniture of the banqueting hall. Shall it be mediæval or renaissance? If you ask my advice——"

"I do; of course, I do. It is for that chiefly I am here."

"That is what I thought. Renaissance, then. There, you have my opinion—with plenty of cupids

and good, fat garlands——"

She laughed, and Walter laughed too, though he was not very much amused. But, of course, he could not speak to a lady as he had spoken to Underwood.

"Come now, tell me about it," the young lady said. "You cannot refuse such a little bit of novelty to one who never sees anything new except a novel: and there is so little novelty in them! About what? Oh, about Scotland, and the scenery, and the old castle: and who you met, and what you did. Mayn't I show a little curiosity—in one whom," she added with that exaggeration of sentiment which leaves room for a laugh, "I have known all my life?"

"That, I hope, is not all the claim I have on your interest," said Walter in the same tone.

"Oh, no, not half. There have been moments!—And then the romance of you, Lord Erradeen! It is delightful to touch upon the borders of romance. And your rank! I feel a great many inches higher, and ever so much elevated in my own estimation, by being privileged to walk by your lordship's side. When are you going to take your seat and help to rule your country? They say the House of Commons is to be preferred for that. But there is nothing so delightful as a peer."

"How lucky for me that you should think so. I may walk with you, then, to the——"

"Corner," said Julia, "not too far; oh, certainly, not too far: or we shall have all the old ladies, male and female, making comments."

"I don't care for the old ladies—or their comments," said Walter: the fun was languid, perhaps, but yet it afforded a little occupation when one had nothing else to do.

"You? Oh, of course not, as you will escape presently, and know all my wiles by heart already, it cannot make much difference to you. It is I who have to be considered, if you please, my lord. They will say there is *that* Julia Herbert at her old tricks, trying to take in poor Lord Erradeen—a poor, innocent young man in the snares of that designing baggage! They will probably add that the police should put a stop to it," Miss Herbert said.

"The deluded old ladies! Without knowing that it is exactly the other way——"

"Now that is the prettiest speech you ever made," said Julia. "I never heard you say anything so nice before. You must have been in very good society since you went away. Tell me, who was it?" she asked with her most insinuating look.

They were old practitioners both. They understood each other: they had flirted since they had been in long clothes, and no harm had ever come of it. This is, no doubt, what Miss Herbert would have said had any feminine critic interposed; but there was something more serious, as the feminine critic would have divined, at once, in Julia's eye. She meant more, not less, than she said; and she was anxious to know, having her eyes upon all contingencies like a wise general, what rivals might have come in the way.

"I have met scarcely any one," said Walter. "You cannot conceive what a lonely place it is. Oh, of course there are people about. I was promised a great many visitors had I stayed. On the other hand, even in winter, it is wonderfully beautiful. Coming back to this perfectly flat country, one discovers for the first time how beautiful it is."

"Yes," said Julia, indifferently; the beauty of the country did not excite her. "I have seen a photograph of your old castle. You can only get to it by water, Captain Underwood says. Oh, he has been a great authority on the subject since you went away. One of your castles is on Loch Houran; but the others——"

"If you like to call them castles," said Walter, gently flattered by these queries, "there are two of them on Loch Houran. One I call a ruin, and the other a shooting-box——"

"Oh, you lucky, lucky person; and a house in town, and another grand place in Scotland! Aren't you frightened to trust yourself among poor people who have nothing! Don't you feel alarmed lest we should rush at you and tear you to pieces, and divide your spoils? I am very romantic. I should have the old castle," she said with a side glance of provocation and invitation.

Her watchful eyes perceived a change in his countenance as she spoke. There were limits, it was evident, to the topics her flying hand might touch. She went on cleverly without a pause—

"You wonder what I should do with it? Restore it, Lord Erradeen. Build the walls up again, and make everything as it used to be. I should enjoy that—and then the furnishing, how delightful! Don't you know that the aim and object of every rational being now is to make a little Victorian house look like a big Queen Anne one? or if not that, an Eastern harem with quantities of draperies, and mats and cushions. How much more delightful to have the real thing to work upon!"

"But my house is not a Queen Anne house, or an Oriental——"

"You don't like to say the word, you good, delicate-minded young man! Of course not; but a castle like the *Mysteries of Udolpho*. At all events you must ask mamma and me to pay you a visit, and I shall take my lute like Emily in that beautiful story, and a small but well-chosen collection of books; and then whatever happens—suppose even that you shut my lover up in one of your dungeons——"

"Which I should certainly do; nay, hang him on the gallows-hill."

"No, no," she said, "not hang him; let him have the death of a gentleman. Here we are at the corner. Oh, you are going my way? Well, perhaps that makes a difference. You meant to pay your respects to mamma? I don't think that I can in that case, Lord Erradeen, interfere with the liberty of the subject; for you have certainly a right, if you wish it, to call on mamma."

"Certainly I have a right. I am prepared to obey you in every other respect; but Mrs. Herbert has always been very kind to me, and it is one of my objects——"

"How much improved you are!" cried Julia. "How nice you are! How grateful and condescending! Tell me whom you have been consorting with while you have been away. The Scotch have good manners, I have always heard. Who is your nearest neighbour in your old castle, Lord Erradeen?"

Walter cast about in his mind for a moment before he replied. He had no mind to profane the sanctity of the Isle by betraying its gentle inmates to any stranger's curiosity. He said—"I think my nearest neighbour is a Mr. Williamson—not a distinguished name or person—who has a gorgeous great house and everything that money can buy. That means a great deal. It has all been made by sugar, or some equally laudable production."

"And Mr. Williamson—no, it is not distinguished as names go—has a daughter, Lord Erradeen?"

"I believe so, Miss Herbert."

"How solemn we are! It used to be Julia—and Walter. But never mind, when one gets into the peerage one changes all that. 'One fair daughter, and no more, whom he loved passing well!'"

"There is but one, I think; sons in an indefinite number, however, which lessens, I suppose, in a commercial point of view, the value of the lady."

"Lord Erradeen, you fill me with amazement and horror. If that is how you have been taught by your Scotch neighbours——"

"Miss Herbert, I am following the lead you have given me—trying humbly to carry out your wishes."

And then they looked at each other, and laughed. The wit was not of a high order, but perhaps that is scarcely necessary to make a duel of this kind between a young man and a young woman amusing. It was more than amusing to Julia. She was excited, her bosom panted, her eyes shone—all the more that Walter's calm was unbroken. It was provoking beyond measure to see him so tranquil, so ready to respond and follow her lead, so entirely unlikely to go any further. He was quite willing to amuse himself, she said to herself, but of feeling in the matter he had none, though there had been moments.

And it did not once occur to her that her antagonist was clever enough to have eluded her investigations, or that the smile upon his face was one of secret pleasure in the secret sanctuary whose existence he had revealed to no one—the little isle in the midst of Loch Houran and the ladies there. He went back to them while all this lively babble went on, seeing them stand and wave their hands to him, as he was carried away over the wintry water. He had come away with relief and eagerness to be gone; but how fair it all looked as he turned back out of this scenery so different from his loch, and from the side of a girl who wanted to "catch" him, Walter knew. Odious words! which it is a shame to think, much less speak, and yet which are spoken constantly, and, alas! in some cases, are true.

Notwithstanding this lively consciousness of the young lady's meaning (which in itself is always flattering and propitiates as much as it alarms), Walter accompanied Julia very willingly to the cottage. He had not thought of going there so soon. It was a kind of evidence of interest and special attraction which he had not meant to give, but that did not occur to him at the moment. The mother and daughter exerted themselves to the utmost to make his visit agreeable. They insisted that he should stay to luncheon, they sang to him and made him sing, and talked and made him talk, and burned delicate incense before him, with jibes and flouts and pretences at mockery. They had the air of laughing at him, yet flattered him all the time. He was such a prize, so well worth taking a little trouble about. The incense tickled his nostrils, though he laughed too, and believed that he saw through them all the time. There was no deception, indeed, on either side; but the man was beguiled and the woman excited. He went away with certain fumes in his brain, and she came down from the little domestic stage upon which she had been performing with a sense of exhaustion, yet success. Miss Williamson, a country beauty, or perhaps not even a beauty, with red hair and a Scotch accent, and nothing but money to recommend her! Money was much to ordinary mortals, but surely not enough to sweep away all other considerations from the mind of a young favourite of fortune. No! Julia believed in a certain generosity of mind though she was not herself sufficiently well off to indulge in it, and she could not think that money, important as it was, would carry the day.

In the mean time, it was apparent to all the world that Lord Erradeen had spent the greater part of his first day at Sloebury, at the Cottage; he had stayed to luncheon, he had promised to come back to practise those duets. A young man who has just come into his kingdom, and is therefore in circumstances to marry, and likely in all human probability to be turning his thoughts that way, cannot do such things as this with impunity. If he had not meant something why should he thus have *affiché'd* his interest in her daughter, Mrs. Herbert asked herself in polyglot jargon. There was no reason why he should have done so, had he not meant it. Thus Walter walked into

the snare though it was so evident, though he saw it very well, and though the sportswoman herself trailed it on the ground before him and laughed and avowed her deep design. In such cases fun and frankness are more potent than deceit.

Walter continued in Sloebury for two or three weeks. He found the stagnation of every interest intolerable. He had nothing to do, and though this was a condition which he had endured with much composure for years before, it pressed upon him now with a force beyond bearing. And yet he did not go away. He betook himself to the Cottage to practise those duets almost every day; and presently he fell into the practice of visiting Captain Underwood almost every night; but not to confide in him as that personage had hoped. Underwood soon learned that a reference to Loch Houran made his companion silent at once, and that whatever had happened there the young lord meant to keep it to himself. But though Walter did not open his heart, he took advantage of the means of amusement opened to him. He suffered Captain Underwood to discourse to him about the turf; about horses, of which the young man knew nothing; about the way in which both pleasure and profit might be secured, instead of the ruin to which it is generally supposed that pursuit must lead. Underwood would have been very willing to "put" his young friend "up" to many things, and indeed did so in learned disquisitions which perhaps made less impression than he supposed upon a brain which was preoccupied by many thoughts. And they played a great deal, that deadly sort of play between two, which is for sheer excitement's sake, and is one of the most dangerous ways of gambling. Walter did not lose so much as might have been expected, partly because his interest was apt to flag, and partly that his companion had designs more serious than those of the moment, and was in no hurry to pluck his pigeon—if pigeon it was, of which he was not yet sure.

Thus the young man held himself up to the disapproval of the town, which, indeed, was ready to forgive a great deal to a peer, but "did not like," as all authorities said, "the way he was going on." He was behaving shamefully to Julia Herbert, unless he meant to marry her, which she and her mother evidently believed to the derision of all spectators; and to mix himself up so completely with Underwood, and abandon the society of his own contemporaries, were things which it was very difficult to forgive. He did not hunt as he had intended, which would have been an amusement suited to his position, partly because there was a good deal of frost, and partly because it was not an exercise familiar to Walter, who had never had the means of keeping horses. And the football club belonged to the previous ages, with which he now felt so little connection. Therefore, it happened after a time, notwithstanding the charm of his rank, that Sloebury felt itself in the painful position of disapproving of Lord Erradeen. Strange to say, he was very little different from Walter Methven, who was a young fellow who had wasted his time and chances—a kind of good-for-nothing. It was something of an insult to the community in which he lived, that he should be "caught" by the most undisguised flirt, and should have fallen under the influence of the person most like a common adventurer of any in Sloebury. He owed it at least to those who had contemplated his elevation with such a rush of friendly feeling that he should be more difficult to inveigle. Had he still been plain Walter Methven, he could not have been more easily led away.

The house in which Walter was the first interest, and which had risen to such high hopes in his elevation, was held in the strangest state of suspense by this relapse into his old ways. The only element of agreeable novelty in it was the presence of Symington, who had taken possession of the house at once, with the most perfect composure and satisfaction to himself. He was the most irreproachable and orderly retainer ever brought into a house by a young man returning home. He gave no trouble, the maids said; he was not proud, but quite willing to take his meals in the kitchen, and did not stand upon his dignity. Presently, however, it appeared that he had got everything in his hands. He took the control of the dinner table, made suggestions to the cook, and even to Mrs. Methven herself when she ordered dinner, and became by imperceptible degrees the chief authority in the house. In this capacity he looked with puzzled and disapproving eyes at his young lord. His first inquiries as to where the horses were kept, and where he was to find his master's hunting things, being answered impatiently, with an intimation that Walter possessed neither the one nor the other, Symington took a high tone.

"You will, no doubt, take steps, my lord, to supply yourself. I hear it's a fine hunting country: and for a young gentleman like you with nothing to do——"

"Don't you think I can manage my own affairs best?" the young man said.

"It's very likely ye think so, my lord," with great gravity, Symington said. He was laying the table for luncheon, and spoke sometimes with his back to Walter as he went and came.

"I suppose you are of a different opinion?" Walter said, with a laugh.

"Not always—not always, my lord. I've seen things in you that were very creditable—and sense too—and sense too!" said Symington, waving his hand. "I'm just thinking if I were a young gentleman in your lordship's place, I would get more enjoyment out of my life. But we never know," he added piously, "what we might be capable of, if we were exposed to another's temptations and put in another's place."

"Let me hear," said Walter, with some amusement, "what you would do if you were in my place."

"It's what I have often asked mysel'," said Symington, turning round, and polishing with the napkin in his hand an old-fashioned silver salt cellar. "Supposing ye were rich and great that are at present nobody in particular, what would ye do? It's an awful difficult question. It's far more

easy to find fault. We can all do that. Your lordship might say to me, 'That silver is no what it ought to be.' And I would probably answer, 'It's been in a woman's hands up till now,' which he had never taken into consideration. And I may misjudge your lordship in the same way."

"Do you mean to say that I too have been in a woman's hands? But that is uncivil, Symington, to my mother."

"I would on no hand be unceevil to my lady; and it was not that I was meaning. To my thinking, my lord, you just dinna get enough out of your life. There is a heap of satisfaction to be got out of the life of a lord, when he has plenty of money, and five-and-twenty years of age like you. It is true your lordship is courting, which accounts for many things."

"What do you mean by courting? Come, we have had enough of this," Lord Erradeen said.

"I did not expect, my lord, that you would bide it long, though you were very good-natured to begin with. Courting is just a very well kent amusement, and no ill in it. But I will not intrude my remarks on your lordship. There is one thing though, just one thing," Symington said, re-arranging the table with formal care. "You'll no be going north again, my lord, as well as I can reckon, for nigh upon another year?"

"What have you to do with my going north?" Walter cried impatiently.

"Your lordship forgets that I will have to go with ye, which gives me a hantle to do with it," said Symington imperturbably; "but that will no be at least till it's time for the grouse? It will always be my duty:—and my pleasure, and my pleasure!" he added with a wave of his hand, "to follow your lordship to the place ye ken of, and do my best for you: but in the mean time I'm thinking this place suits me real well, and I will just bide here."

"Bide here, you old Solomon!" Walter cried, between laughter and wrath; "how do you know that you are to bide anywhere, or that I mean you to stay with me at all?"

Symington waved his hand dismissing this question with the contempt it merited. "I am just a person much attached to the family," he said, "and ye would not find it comfortable, my lord, up yonder, without me. But in the mean time ye will get a younger lad with my advice. And I'll just bide where I am with my lady, your mother, who is a lady of great judgment. I am getting an auld man; and your lordship is a young one; and if you are over-quiet at present, which is my opinion, it is no to be expected or desired that the like of that can last. Ye will aye find me here, my lord, when you want me. It will suit me far better at my years than running to and fro upon the earth at the tail of a young lad. But as long as I can draw one foot after another, I will go with your lordship *up yonder*, and never fail ye," Symington said.

CHAPTER VI.

The manner of life of which Symington disapproved went on till Christmas was over, and the new year had begun. It was not a new kind of life, but only the old, heightened in some of its features; less tragical in its folly because the young man was now no longer dependent upon his own exertions, yet more tragical in so far that life had now great opportunities for him, and means of nobler living, had he chosen. He received business letters now and then from Mr. Milnathort and from Shaw at Loch Houran which he read with impatience or not at all. Business disgusted him. He had no desire to take the trouble of making up his mind on this or that question. He let his letters collect in a pile and left them there, while he went and practised his duets, or lighted his cigar with the pink paper of the telegram which called his attention to letters unanswered, and went out to play ecarte with Underwood. He did not care for the ecarte. He did not care for the duets. Poor Julia's devices to secure him became day by day more transparent to him, and Underwood's attempts to gain an influence. He saw through them both, yet went on day by day. The Herberts, mother and daughter, spoke of him with a secure proprietorship, and Julia, though never without that doubt which adventurers know, had almost a certainty of the coronet upon her handkerchief which she worked upon a cigar-case for him by way of making quite sure what a viscount's coronet was. It is a pretty ornament. She was rather ashamed of her old-fashioned name, but that above it made everything right. Underwood for his part shook off the doubt which had been in his mind as to whether Lord Erradeen was a pigeon to be plucked. He thought of a campaign in town carried on triumphantly by means of his noble victim. It was worth waiting for after all.

And thus Christmas passed. Christmas, that season of mirth! There was the usual number of parties, at all of which Lord Erradeen was a favoured guest, and allowed himself to be exhibited as Miss Herbert's thrall. In these assemblies she used to talk to him about Miss Williamson. "Oh yes, a lady in Scotland, whose wealth is untold; hasn't Lord Erradeen told you? It is to be a match, I understand," Julia would say with a radiant countenance. "Sugar—or cotton, I don't remember which. When one has estates in the West Highlands, that is part of the programme. One always marries—sugar. That is a much prettier way of putting it than to say one marries money." This tantalised Sloebury a little, and painfully mystified Mrs. Methven, who had never heard Miss Williamson's name; but it did not change the evident fact that Lord Erradeen must either be engaged, or on the point of being engaged—or else that he was using Julia Herbert very ill. When the new year began, and it was suddenly announced that he was going away, there was a flutter and thrill of excitement over all the town. The rector, who met Walter on his way to the railway, and who was aware of all the expectations connected with him, stared aghast at the

intimation. "Going away!" he said, then put forth a tremulous smile. "Ah, I see! going on some visits, to pot a few pheasants before the season is over."

"I don't think that would tempt me," Walter said. "I am going to town, and my mother will follow shortly. It is a removal, I fear——"

"You are going from Sloebury! But then—but then——" The old clergyman gasped for breath.

"My friends think I have wasted a great deal too much time in Sloebury," Lord Erradeen said, and he waved his hand to the rector, who went home with his lower lip dropped, and his cheeks fallen in, in a consternation beyond words. His excitement was as great, though of a different kind, as on that day when he ran in from church with his surplice still on, and the most extraordinary disregard of decorum to carry the news of Walter's elevation in rank to his wife. "That fellow is going off without a word," cried Mr. Wynn. "He has been amusing himself, that's all; but you never will listen to me. The girl has been going too far, a great deal too far, her mother ought not to have allowed it. And now I shall hear nothing else wherever I go," the rector said. He was almost ready to cry, being old and a nervous man by nature. "I thought it was settled this time, and that we should have no further trouble with her," which was a contradiction of himself after the words he had begun with. Mrs. Wynn soothed him as best she could, though indeed she had been the one who had all along doubted Lord Erradeen's "intentions," and bade the rash Julia beware.

"Perhaps," she said, "they have come to an understanding, my dear. For it was quite true what he told you: he has wasted too much time in Sloebury. A young man in his position should not hang about in a place like this."

"A young man in his position—should not raise expectations that are never to come to anything," the rector said; which was a truth so undeniable that even his peace-making wife could find nothing to reply.

The change of sentiment which led Walter away from Sloebury was accomplished almost in a moment. In a capricious and wayward mind, a touch is sometimes enough to change the entire direction of a life. He had been kept indoors by a cold, and for want of something else to do had read his letters, and even answered one or two of them. There were several from Shaw relating the course of events at Loch Houran; but these might not perhaps have moved him, had he not found inclosed in one of them a note, now somewhat out of date, from Oona. It was very short and very simple. "I found I was not authorised to do anything with the poor Frasers except to tell them you would not be hard upon them: and I took it upon me to assure old Jenny that whatever happened you would never take the coo, and Granny that she should die in peace in her own house even—which she would like, I think, for the credit of the glen—if she should live to be a hundred. I think you will not disown my agency by doing anything contrary to this. My mother sends her best regards." There was nothing more: but the words acted upon Walter's dissatisfied mind like the sudden prick of a lance. It seemed to him that he saw her again standing, with a somewhat wistful look in her eyes, watching him as his boat shot along the gleaming water—her mother with her waving handkerchief, her nodding head, her easy smile, standing by. Oona had said nothing, made no movement, had only stood and looked at him. How little she said now! and yet she was the only living creature (he said to himself in the exaggeration of a distracted mind) who had ever given him real help. She had ever given him her hand without hesitation or coquetry or thought of herself, to deliver him from his enemy—a hand that had purity, strength in its touch, that was as soft—as snow, he had said: cool, and pure, and strong. The thought of it gave him a pang which was indescribable. He rose up from where he sat among a litter of paper and books, the accumulations of an idle man, and went hurriedly to the drawing-room, where his mother sat alone by her fire—so much the more alone because he was in the next room, a world apart from her. He came in with a nervous excitement about him.

"Mother," he said, "I am going to town to-morrow."

She put down her book and looked at him. "Well, Walter?" she said.

"You think that is not of much importance; but it is, as it happens. I am going away from Sloebury. I shall never do any good here. I can't think why I have stayed—why *we* have stayed indeed; for it cannot have much attraction for you."

She put down the book altogether now. She was afraid to say too much or too little in this sudden, new resolution, and change of front.

"I can understand your feeling, Walter. You have stayed over Christmas out of consideration for ——" She would have said "me" if she could, but that was impossible. "For the traditions of the season," she added, with a faint smile.

"That is a very charitable and kind way of putting it, mother. I have stayed because I am a fool—because I can't take the trouble to do anything but what suggests itself at the moment. Perhaps you think I don't know? Oh, I know very well, if that did any good. I am going to get the house ready, and you will join me when it is fit for you to live in."

"I, Walter?" she said, with a startled tone. Her face flushed and then grew pale. She looked at him with a curious mixture of pleasure and pain. It seemed like opening up a question which had been long settled. Death is better than the reviving flutters of life when these are but to lead to a little more suffering and a dying over again. She added, somewhat tremulously, "I think perhaps

it would be better not to consider the question of removal as affecting me."

"Mother," he said, almost wildly, his eyes blazing upon her, "your reproaches are more than I can bear."

"I mean no reproach," she said, quietly. "It is simple enough. Your life should not be fettered by cares which are unnecessary. I am very well here."

"We can't go all over it again," he said. "We discussed that before. But you will say I have been as selfish, as careless as ever I was: and it is true—worse. Ah, I wonder if this was part of the penalty? Worse, in the old way. That would be a sort of a devilish punishment, just like him—if one were so silly as to believe that he had the power."

"Of whom are you speaking, Walter?" asked his mother, startled. "Punishment—who can punish you? You have done nothing to put yourself in any one's power."

He gazed at her for a moment as she looked at him with anxious eyes, investigating his face to discover, if she could, what he meant. Then he burst into an excited laugh.

"I am getting melodramatic," he said, "by dint of being wretched, I suppose."

"Walter, what is this? If there is indeed anything hanging over you, for God's sake tell me."

She got up hurriedly and went to him in sudden trouble and alarm, but the sensation of the moment did not carry him any further. He put away her hand almost impatiently. "Oh, there is nothing to tell," he said, with irritation. "You take everything *au pied de la lettre*. But I am going to town to-morrow, all the same."

And this he did, after a night in which he slept little and thought much. It may be thought that Oona Forrester's letter was a small instrument to effect so much, but it is not thus that influences can be reckoned. His mother had done a great deal more for him than Oona, but nothing she could have done or said could have moved him like the recollection of that small, soft hand by which he had held as if it were the anchor of salvation. It kept him from a sort of despair as he remembered it, through this turbulent night, as he lay awake in the darkness, asking himself could this be what his adversary meant? Not misfortune or downfall, which was what he had thought of, feeling himself able to defy such threats: but this self-abandonment to his natural defects, this more and more unsatisfactoriness of which he was conscious to the bottom of his heart. It did not occur to him that in the dread that came over him, and panic-stricken sense of the irresistible, he was giving the attributes of something far more than man to his maniac, or monomaniac, of Kinloch Houran. It was not the moment now to question what that being was, or how he had it in his power to affect the life and soul of another. The anguish of feeling that he was being affected, that the better part was being paralysed in him and the worse made stronger, was what occupied him now. When he got a little sleep in the midst of his tossings and troublings of mind and body, it was by the soothing recollection of Oona's refreshing, strengthening touch, the hand that had been put into his own and had given him the strength of two souls.

And so it was that next morning, when he ought to have been practising those duets at Julia Herbert's side, he was hurrying up to London as fast as steam and an express train could carry him. It was not perhaps the best place to go to for spiritual reformation, but at least it was a beginning of something new. And in the force of this impulse he went on for some time, proceeding at once to Park Lane, to push forward the preparations of the house, securing for himself a servant in the place of Symington, and establishing himself, for the interval that must elapse before the house was ready for him, in chambers. In this way he found occupation for a week or two. He made an effort to answer his letters. He suffered himself to go through certain forms of business with the London lawyers who were the correspondents of Mr. Milnathort; and so for a short time found himself in the position of having something to do, and, still more strange, of doing it with a lightness of mind and enlivenment of life which was extraordinary, and without a reflection in respect to the duets and the ecarte. They were over, these *délaissements*, and that was all about it.

It was not such plain sailing however after the beginning. Established in chambers which were pleasant enough, with plenty of money, with youth and health, and what was still more, as he thought, with rank and a title which had the effect of making everybody civil and more than civil to him, Lord Erradeen suddenly awoke to the fact that he was less than nobody in the midst of that busy world of London in which there are so many people who love a lord. Yes; but before you can love a lord, invite him, caress him, make his time pass agreeably, you must know him. And Walter knew nobody. The most curious, the most rueful-comic, insignificant-important of all preliminaries! The doors were open, and the entertainment ready, and the guest willing; but there was no master of the ceremonies to bring him within the portals. It had not occurred to him until he was there, nor had he thought, even had his pride permitted him to ask for them, of the need of introductions, and some helping hand to bring him within the reach of society. Society, indeed, had as yet scarcely come back to town, but yet there was a sprinkling at the club windows, men were to be seen in Pall Mall and Piccadilly, and even a few carriages with ladies in them frequented the Park. But what did that matter to him who knew nobody? He had no club. He was a stranger from the country. No house was open to him; he went about the streets without meeting a face he knew. To be sure, this must not be taken as an absolute fact, for there were people he knew, even relations, one very respectable clan of them, living at Norwood, in the highest credit and comfort, who would have received him with open arms. And he knew Mr. Wynn, the rector's nephew, a moderately successful barrister, who called upon and asked him to

dinner with extreme cordiality, as did one or two other people connected with Sloebury. But in respect to the society to which he felt himself to belong, Walter was like the Peri at the gate of Paradise. He knew nobody. Had ever any young peer with means to keep up his rank, been in such a position before? It gave him a certain pleasure to think upon one other, born to far higher fortunes than himself, who had entered London like this in inconceivable solitude. Byron! a magnificent example that went far to reconcile him to his fate. Walter thought a great deal of the noble poet in these days, and studied him deeply, and took pleasure in the comparison, and consolation in the feeling that he could enter thoroughly into all those high, scornful-wistful, heroic utterances about mankind. The Byronic mood has gone out of fashion; but if you can imagine a youth richly endowed by fortune, feeling that his new honours should open every door to him, and also a little that he was fit to hold his own place with the best, yet perceiving no door move on its hinges, and forced to acknowledge with a pang of surprise and disappointment, and that sense of neglected merit which is one of the most exquisite pangs of youth, that nobody cared to make his acquaintance, or even to inquire who was Lord Erradeen! It is all very well to smile at these sentiments where there has been no temptation to entertain them. But the young peer, who knew nobody, entered completely into Byron's feelings. He pondered upon the extraordinary spectacle of that other young peer strolling haughtily, with his look like a fallen angel, up between the lordly ranks to take his hereditary seat: all the representatives of the old world staring coldly at him, and not one to be his sponsor and introduce him there. The same thing Walter felt would have to happen in his own case, if he had courage enough to follow the example of Byron; and he felt how hollow were all his honours, how mean the indifferent spectators round him, how little appreciated himself, with all the keenness of youthful passion and would-be cynicism. Unfortunately, he was not a Byron, and had no way of revenging himself upon that world.

This curious and irritating discovery, after all his good resolutions, had, it need scarcely be said, the reverse of an elevating influence upon him. He sought the amusement from which his equals shut him out in other regions. Strolling about town in an aimless way, he picked up certain old acquaintances whose renewed friendship was of little advantage. There will always be black sheep everywhere, and it is no unprecedented case for a boy from a public school, or youth from the university, to come across, six or seven years after he has left these haunts of learning, stray wanderers, who in that little time have fallen to the very depth of social degradation. When such a thing happens to a young man, the result may be a noble pity and profound impression of life's unspeakable dangers, and the misery of vice; or it may be after the first shock a sense that his own peccadilloes are not worth thinking of, seeing how infinitely lower down others have fallen. Walter stood between these two. He was sincerely sorry, and anxious to succour the fallen; but at the same time he could not but feel that in his position, who never could come to that, the precautions which poor men had to take were scarcely necessary. And what could he do? A young man must have something to amuse himself and occupy his time.

It was while he was sliding into the inconceivable muddle of an indolent mind and a vacant life that Underwood came to town. The captain's motives and intentions in respect to him were of a very mixed character, and require further elucidation: but the effect of his appearance in the mean time was a rapid acceleration of the downward progress. Underwood was "up to" many things which Lord Erradeen was not "up to" as yet, and the young man did not any longer, except by intervals, despise the society of the elder one, who brought, it could not be denied, a great many fresh excitements and occupations into his life. Under Captain Underwood's instructions he became acquainted with the turf, which, as everybody knows, is enough to give a young man quite enough to do, and a good many things to think of. And now indeed the time had come when the captain began to feel his self-banishment to Sloebury, and his patience, and all his exertions, so far as Walter was concerned, fully repaid. There was no repetition of that Byronic scene in the House of Lords. Instead of proudly taking his seat alone, and showing the assembled world how little he cared for its notice, Walter discovered that he was indifferent to the world altogether, and asked himself, What is the good of it? with the philosophy of a cynic. What was the good of it, indeed? What was it but a solemn farce when you came to look into it? The House of Commons might be something, but the House of Lords was nothing; and why should a man trouble himself to become a member of it? Then as to the clubs. What was the use of struggling to get admission to White's, or Boodle's, or any other of those exalted institutions which Walter only knew by name —when at Underwood's club, where he was received with acclamation, you had the best dinner and the best wine in London, and no petty exclusiveness? Walter was not by any means the only titled person in that society. There were quantities indeed of what the captain called "bosses" on its books. Why then should Lord Erradeen take the trouble to sue and wait for admittance elsewhere with these doors so open to him? In the midst of this new influx of life, it is scarcely necessary to say that the house in Park Lane came to a standstill. It stood through all the season profitless, of use to nobody; and Walter's life went on, alas, not to be described by negations, a life without beauty or pleasure; though pleasure was all its aim.

At Sloebury the commotion made by his departure had been great. At the Cottage there had been a moment of blank consternation and silence, even from ill words. Then Mrs. Herbert's energies awoke, and her vivacity of speech. Fire blazed from this lady's eyes, and bitterness flowed from her tongue. She fell upon Julia (who, indeed, might have been supposed the greatest sufferer) with violent reproaches, bidding her (as was natural) remember that *she* had always been against it: a reproach in which there was really some truth. Julia, too, had a moment of prostration in which she could hold no head at all against the sudden disappointment and overthrow, and still more overwhelming realisation of what everybody would say. She retired to her room for a day, and drew down the blinds and had a headache in all the forms. During that period, no doubt, the

girl went through sundry anguishes, both of shame and failure, such as the innocent who make no scheming are free from; while her mother carried fire and flame to the Rectory, and even betrayed to various friends her burning sense of wrong, and that Julia had been shamefully used. But when Julia emerged out of the shelter of that headache she put down all such demonstrations. She showed to Sloebury, all on the watch to see "how she took it," a front as dauntless and eyes as bright as ever. In a campaign the true soldier is prepared for anything that can happen, and knows how to take the evil with the good. Had she weakly allowed herself to love Walter the result might have been less satisfactory; but she had been far too wise to run such a risk. Afterwards, when rumours of the sort of life he was leading reached Sloebury, she confided to her mother, in the depths of their domestic privacy, that it was just as well he was going a little wrong.

"Oh, a little wrong!" cried Mrs. Herbert vindictively. "If all we hear is true it is much more than a little. He is just going to the bad as fast as his legs can carry him—with *that* Captain Underwood to help him on; and he richly deserves it, considering how he has behaved to you."

"Oh, wait a little, mamma," Julia said. "I know him better than any one. He will come round again, and then he will be ready to hang himself. And the prodigal will come home, and then——Or, perhaps Tom Herbert will ask me up to town for the end of the season, after all the best is over, as he is sometimes kind enough to do. And I shall carry a little roast veal, just a sort of specimen of the fatted calf, with me to town." Thus the young lady kept up her heart and bided her time.

Mrs. Methven bore the remarks of Sloebury and answered all its questions with a heavier heart. She could not take any consolation in Walter's wrong-doing, neither could she have the relief of allowing that he was to blame. She accounted for the rearrangement of everything, which she had to consent to after taking many measures for removal, by saying that she had changed her mind. "We found the house could not be ready before the end of the season," she said heroically, "and what should I do in London in the height of the summer with nobody there?" She bore a fine front to the world but in reality the poor lady's heart had sunk within her. Oddly enough, Julia, the wronged, who at heart was full of good nature, was almost her only comforter. Julia treated Lord Erradeen's absence as the most natural thing in the world.

"I know what took him away in such a hurry," she said. "It was Miss Williamson. Oh, don't you know about Miss Williamson? his next neighbour at that Lock—something or other, a girl made of money—no, sugar. The next thing we shall hear is that you have a daughter-in-law with red hair. What a good thing that red hair is so fashionable! She is so rich, he was quite ashamed to mention it; that is why he never told you; but Walter," she cried, with a laugh, "had no secrets from me."

Mrs. Methven, in dire lack of anything to cling to, caught at Miss Williamson as at a rock of salvation. If he had fallen in love, did not that account for everything? She could only pray God that it might be true.

Symington had been bringing in the tea while Miss Herbert discoursed. When he came back to remove the tea things after she was gone, he "took it upon him," as he said, "to put in his word." "If you will excuse me, my lady," he said (a title which in a sort of poetical justice and amendment of fate Symington considered due to my lord's mother), "my lord could not do better than give his attention to Miss Williamson, who is just the greatest fortune in all the country-side. But, even if it's not that, there is nothing to be out of heart about. If he's taking a bite out of the apples of Gomorrah, he'll very soon find the cinders cranshing in his mouth. But whatever he is after, when it comes to be the time to go *up yonder* there will be an end to all that."

"My good Symington," said Mrs. Methven, "do you think it is necessary to excuse my son to me? It would be strange if I did not understand him better than any one." But notwithstanding this noble stand for Walter, she got a little consolation both from the thought of Miss Williamson, and of that mysterious going *up yonder*, which must be a crisis in his life.

Thus winter ran into summer, and the busy months of the season went over the head of young Lord Erradeen. It was a very different season from that which he had anticipated. It contained no Byronic episode at all. The House of Lords never saw its new member, neither did any of those gay haunts of the fashionable world of which he had once dreamed. He went to no balls, or crowded dazzling receptions, or heavy dinners. He did not even present himself at a *levée*. He had indeed fallen out of his rank altogether, that rank which had startled him so, with a kind of awe in the unexpected possession. His only club was that one of indifferent reputation to which Underwood had introduced him, and his society, the indifferent company which collected there. He began to be tolerably acquainted with race-courses, great and small, and improved his play both at billiards and whist, so that his guide, philosopher, and friend declared himself ready on all occasions to take odds on Erradeen. He spent a great deal of his time in these occupations, and lost a great deal of his money. They were almost the only things that gave him a semblance of an occupation in life. He was due at the club at certain hours to pursue this trade, which, like any other trade, was a support to his mind, and helped to make the time pass. At five-and-twenty one has so much time on hand, that to spend it is a pleasure, like spending money, flinging it to the right hand and the left, getting rid of it: though there is so much to be got out of it that has grown impossible to the old fogeys, no old fogey is ever so glad to throw it away.

And thus the days went on. They were full of noise and commotion, and yet, as a matter of fact, they were dullish as they dropped one after another. And sometimes as he came back to his rooms in the blue of the morning, and found as the early sun got up, that sleep was impossible, or

on such a moment as a Sunday morning, when there was little or nothing "to do," Walter's thoughts were not of an agreeable kind. Sometimes he would wake from a doze with the beautiful light streaming in at his windows, and the brown London sparrows beginning to twitter, and would jump up in such a restlessness and fierce impatience with himself and everything about him as he could neither repress nor endure. At such moments his life seemed to him intolerable, an insult to reason, a shame to the nature that was made for better things. What was the good of going on with it day after day? The laughter and the noise, who was it that called them the crackling of thorns—a hasty momentary blaze that neither warmed nor lighted? And sometimes, even in the midst of his gaiety, there would suddenly come into his mind a question—Was this what was to happen to him if he resisted the will of the dweller on Loch Houran? Psha! he would say to himself, what was happening to him? Nothing but his own will and pleasure, the life that most young fellows of his age who were well enough off to indulge in it possessed—the life he would have liked before he became Lord Erradeen: which was true; and yet it did not always suffice him for an answer. At such times curious gleams of instinct, sudden perceptions as by some light fitfully entering, which made an instantaneous revelation too rapid almost for any profit, and then disappeared again—would glance across Walter's soul.

On a fine evening in June he was walking with Underwood to the club to dine. The streets were cool with the approach of night, the sky all flushed with rose red and every possible modification of heavenly blue, the trees in the squares fluttering out their leaves in the coolness of the evening, and shaking off the dust of day, a sense of possible dew going to fall even in London streets, a softening of sounds in the air. He was going to nothing better than cards, or perhaps, for a caprice, to the theatre, where he had seen the same insane burlesque a dozen times before, no very lively prospect: and was cogitating in his mind whether he should not run off to the Continent, as several men were talking of doing, and so escape from Underwood and the club, and all the rest of the hackneyed round: which he would have done a dozen times over but for the trouble of it, and his sense of the bore it would be to find something to amuse him under such novel circumstances. As they went along, Underwood talking of those experiences which were very fine to the boys in Sloebury, but quite flat to Walter now—there suddenly appeared to him, standing on the steps of a private hotel, in a light overcoat like a man going to dinner, a middle-aged, rustic-looking individual, with a ruddy, good-humoured countenance, and that air of prosperity and well-being which belongs to the man of money. "I think I have seen that man somewhere before," said Walter. Underwood looked up, and the eyes of all three met for a moment in mutual recognition. "Hallo, Captain Underwood!" the stranger said. Underwood was startled by the salutation; but he stopped, willingly or unwillingly, stopping Walter also, whose arm was in his. "Mr. Williamson! You are an unexpected sight in London," he said.

"No, no, not at all," said the good-humoured man, "I am very often in London. I am just going in to my dinner. I wonder if I might make bold, being a countryman and straight from Loch Houran, to say, though we have never met before, that I am sure this is Lord Erradeen?"

Walter replied with a curious sense of amusement and almost pleasure. Mr. Williamson, the father of the fabulous heiress who had been invented between Julia Herbert and himself!

"I am very glad to make your acquaintance, Lord Erradeen; you know our lands march, as they say in Scotland. Are you engaged out to your dinner, gentlemen, may I ask, or are ye free to take pot luck? My daughter Katie is with me, and we were thinking—or at least she was thinking—for I am little learned in such matters—of looking in at the theatre to see a small piece of Mr. Tennyson's that they call the *Falcon*, and which they tell me, or rather she tells me, is just most beautiful. Come now, be sociable; it was no fault of mine, my lord, that I did not pay my respects to ye when ye were up at Loch Houran. And Katie is very wishful to make your acquaintance. Captain Underwood knows of old that I am fond of a good dinner. You will come? Now that's very friendly. Katie, I've brought you an old acquaintance and a new one," he said, ushering them into a large room cloudy with the fading light.

The sudden change of destination, the novelty, the amusing associations with this name, suddenly restored Walter to a freshness of interest of which the *blasé* youth on his way to the noisy monotony of the club half an hour before could not have thought himself capable. A young lady rose up from a sofa at the end of the room and came forward, bending her soft brows a little to see who it was.

"Is it any one I know? for I cannot see them," in simplest tones, with the accent of Loch Houran, Miss Williamson said.

CHAPTER VII.

The room was large with that air of bare and respectable shabbiness which is the right thing in a long-established private hotel—with large pieces of mahogany furniture, and an old-fashioned carpet worn, not bare exactly, but dim, the pattern half-obliterated here and there, which is far more correct and *comme il faut* than the glaring newness and luxury of modern caravanseries. As Mr. Williamson, like a true Englishman (a Scotsman in this particular merely exaggerates the peculiarity), loved the costly all the better for making no show of being costly, it was naturally at one of these grimly expensive places that he was in the habit of staying in London. A large window, occupying almost one entire side of the room, filled it with dim evening light, and a view of roofs and chimneys, against which Katie's little figure showed as she came forward asking, "Is

it any one I know?" It was not a commanding, or even very graceful figure, though round and plump, with the softened curves of youth. When the new-comers advanced to meet her, and she saw behind her father's middle-aged form, the slimmer outlines of a young man, Katie made another step forward with an increase of interest. She had expected some contemporaries of papa's, such as he was in the habit of bringing home with him to dinner, and not a personage on her own level. Mr. Williamson, in his good-humoured cordiality, stepped forward something like a showman, with a new object which he feels will make a sensation.

"You will never guess who this is," he said, "so I will not keep ye in suspense, Katie. This is our new neighbour at Loch Houran, Lord Erradeen. Think of me meeting him just by chance on the pavey, as ye may say, of a London street, and us next door to each other, to use a vulgar expression, at home!"

"Which is the vulgar expression?" said Katie. She was very fond of her father, but yet liked people to see that she knew better. She held out her hand frankly to Walter, and though she was only a round-about, bread-and-butter little girl with nothing but money, she was far more at her ease than he was. "I am very glad to make your acquaintance, Lord Erradeen," she said. "We were just wondering whether we should meet you anywhere. We have only been a week in town."

"I don't think we should have been likely to meet," said Walter with that tone of resentment which had become natural to him, "if I had not been so fortunate as to encounter Mr. Williamson as he says, on the *pavé*."

Katie was not pleased by this speech. She thought that Walter was rude, and implied that the society which he frequented was too fine for the Williamsons, and she also thought that he meant a laugh at her father's phraseology, neither of which offences were at all in the young man's intention.

"Oh," Katie cried, resentful too, "papa and I go to a great many places—unless you mean Marlborough House and that sort of thing. Oh, Captain Underwood!" she added next moment in a tone of surprise. The appearance of Captain Underwood evidently suggested to her ideas not at all in accordance with that of Marlborough House.

"Yes," he said, "Miss Williamson: you scarcely expected to see me. It is not often that a man is equally intimate with two distinct branches of a family, is it? But I always was a fortunate fellow, and here I am back in your circle again."

Walter's mind was considerably preoccupied by his own circumstances, and by the novelty of this new meeting; but yet he was quick-witted enough to remark with some amusement the recurrence of the old situation with which he was quite acquainted—the instinctive repugnance of the feminine side everywhere to this companion of his, and the tolerance and even friendliness of the men. Katie did all but turn her back upon Underwood before his little speech was ended. She said, "Will you ring for dinner, papa?" without making the slightest reply to it: and indeed, after another glance from one to the other, retired to the sofa from which she had risen, with a little air of having exhausted this new incident, and indifference to anything that could follow, which piqued Walter. Had she been a noble person either in fact or in appearance, of an imposing figure and proportions even, it might have seemed less insupportable; but that a little dumpy girl should thus lose all interest in him, classifying him in a moment with his companion, was beyond Lord Erradeen's patience. He felt bitterly ashamed of Underwood, and eager even, in his anger at this presumptuous young woman's hasty judgment, to explain how it was that he was in Underwood's company. But as he stood biting his lip in the half-lighted room, he could not but remember how very difficult it would be to explain it. Why was he in Underwood's company? Because he could get admittance to none better. Marlborough House! He felt himself grow red all over, with a burning shame, and anger against fate. And when he found himself seated by Katie's side at the lighted table, and subject to the questions with which it was natural to begin conversation, his embarrassment was still greater. She asked him had he been here and there. That great ball at the French Embassy that everybody was talking about—of course he had been one of the guests? And at the Duke's—Katie did not consider it necessary to particularise what duke, confident that no Christian, connected ever so distantly with Loch Houran, could have any doubt on the subject. Was the decoration of the new dining-room so magnificent as people said? Walter's blank countenance, his brief replies, the suppressed reluctance with which he said anything at all, had the strangest effect upon Katie. After a while she glanced at Captain Underwood, who was talking with much volubility to her father, and with a very small, almost imperceptible shrug of her little shoulders, turned away and addressed herself to her dinner. This from a little girl who was nobody, who was not even very pretty, who betrayed her plebeian origin in every line of her plump form and fresh little commonplace face, was more than Walter could bear.

"You must think me dreadfully ignorant of the events of society," he said, "but the fact is I have not been going out at all. It is not very long, you are aware, since I came into the property, and—there have been a great many things to do."

"I have always heard," said Katie, daintily consuming a delicate *entrée*, with her eyes upon her plate as if that was her sole interest, "that the Erradeen estates were all in such order that there was never anything for the heir to do."

"You speak," said Walter, "as if they changed hands every year."

"Oh, not that exactly; but I remember two; and I might have remembered others, for we have

only been at Loch Houran since papa got so rich."

"What a pleasant way of remembering dates!"

"Do you think so, Lord Erradeen? Now I should think that to have been rich always, and your father before you, and never to have known any difference, would be so much more pleasant."

"There may perhaps be something to be said on both sides," said Walter; "but I am no judge—for the news of my elevation, such as it is, came to me very suddenly, too suddenly to be agreeable, without any warning."

Katie reconsidered her decision in the matter of Lord Erradeen; perhaps though he knew nobody, he might not be quite unworthy cultivation, and besides, she had finished her *entrée*. She said, "Didn't you know?" turning to him again her once-averted eyes.

"I had not the faintest idea; it came upon me like a thunderbolt," he said. "You perceive that you must treat me with a little indulgence in respect to dukes, &c.—even if I had any taste for society, which I haven't," he added, with a touch of bitterness in his tone.

"Oh," said Katie, looking at him much more kindly; then she bent towards him with quite unexpected familiarity, and said, lowering her voice, but in the most distinct whisper, "And where then did you pick up that odious man?"

Walter could not but laugh as he looked across the table at the unconscious object of this attack.

"I observe that ladies never like him," he said; "at home it is the same."

"Oh, I should think so," cried Katie, "everybody thought it was such a pity that Lord Erradeen took him up—and then to see him with you! Oona Forrester would be very sorry," Katie added after a pause.

"Miss Forrester!" Walter felt himself colour high with pleasure at the sound of this name, then feeling this a sort of self-betrayal, coloured yet more. "You know her?"

Katie turned round upon him with a mixture of amusement and disdain. "Know her! is there any one on the loch, or near it, that doesn't know her?" she said.

"I beg your pardon," cried Walter. "I forgot for the moment." Then he too retired within himself for so long a time that it was Katie's turn to be affronted. He devoted himself to his dinner too, but he did not eat. At last "Why should she be sorry?" he asked curtly as if there had been no pause.

"How can I tell you now while he sits there?" said Katie, lowering her voice; "some other time perhaps—most likely you will call in the day-time, in the morning, now that we have made your acquaintance."

"If you will permit me," Walter said.

"Oh yes, we will permit you. Papa has always wanted to know you, and so have I since—If you are allowed to come: but perhaps you will not be allowed to come, Lord Erradeen."

"Will not be *allowed*? What does that mean? and since when, may I ask, have you been so kind as to want to know me? I wish I had been aware."

"Since——well, of course, since you were Lord Erradeen," said the girl, "we did not know of you before: and people like us who have nothing but money are always very fond of knowing a lord—everybody says so at least. And it is true, in a way. Papa likes it very much indeed. He likes to say my friend, the Earl of ——, or my friend, the Duke of ----. He knows a great many lords, though perhaps you would not think it. He is very popular with fine people. They say he is not at all vulgar considering, and never takes anything upon him. Oh, yes, I know it all very well. I am a new person in the other way—I believe it is far more what you call snobbish—but I can't bear the fine people. Of course they are very nice to me; but I always remember that they think I am not vulgar considering, and that I never pretend to be better than I am."

There was something in this address spoken with a little heat, which touched Walter's sense of humour, a faculty which in his better moods made his own position, with all its incongruities, ruefully amusing to him. "I wonder," he said, "if I pretend to be better than I am? But then I should require in the first place to know what I am more distinctly than I do. Now you, on that important point, have, I presume, no doubt or difficulty?——"

"Not the least," she said, interrupting him. "The daughter of a rich Glasgow man who is nobody—that is what I am—everybody knows; but you, my lord, you are a noble person of one of the oldest families, with the best blood in your veins, with——" She had been eyeing him somewhat antagonistically, but here she broke off, and fell a laughing. "I don't believe you care a bit about it," she said. "Are you going with us to the theatre to see the *Falcon*, Lord Erradeen?"

"What is the *Falcon*?" he said.

"You have not seen it nor heard of it? It is Mr. Tennyson's," said Katie with a little awe. "How is it possible you have not heard? Don't you know that lovely story? It is a poor gentleman who has nothing but a falcon, and the lady he loves comes to see him. She is a widow (that takes away the interest a little, but it is beautiful all the same) with a sick child. When he sees her coming he has

to prepare an entertainment for her, and there is nothing but his falcon, so he sacrifices it, though it breaks his heart. And oh, to see the terrible stage bird that is brought in, as if that could be his grand hawk! You feel so angry, you are forced to laugh till you cry again. That kind of story should never be brought to the literal, do you think it should?"

"And what happens?" said Walter, young enough to be interested, though not sufficiently well-read to know.

"Oh, you might guess. She had come to ask him for his falcon to save her child. What could it be else? It is just the contrariety of things."

"You cannot know very much, Miss Williamson, of the contrariety of things."

"Oh, do you think so? Why shouldn't I? I think I am precisely the person to do so. It seems to me in my experience," she added, fixing a look upon him which seemed to Walter's conscience to mean a great deal more than it was possible Katie could mean, "that almost everything goes wrong."

"That is a most melancholy view to take."

"But so is everything melancholy," said the girl. Her little simple physiognomy, her rosy cheeks and blue eyes, the somewhat blunted profile (for Katie had no features, as she was aware) and altogether commonplace air of the little person who produced these wonderful sentiments amused Walter beyond measure. He laughed perhaps more than was strictly decorous, and drew the attention of Mr. Williamson, who, absorbed in his talk with Underwood, had almost forgotten his more important guest.

"What is the joke?" he said. "I am glad to see you are keeping his lordship amused, Katie, for the captain and me we have got upon other subjects concerning the poor gentleman, your predecessor, Lord Erradeen. Poor fellow! that was a very sad business: not that I would say there was much to be regretted before the present bearer of the title," the rich man added with a laugh; "but at your age you could well have waited a little, and the late lord was a very nice fellow till he fell into that melancholy way."

"I told you everything was melancholy," said Katie in an undertone.

"And I," said the young man in the same suppressed voice, "shall I too fall into a melancholy way?" He laughed as he said so, but it was not a laugh of pleasure. Could he do nothing without having this family mystery—family absurdity—thrust into his face?

"If you want your cigar, papa—" said Katie getting up, "and you can't live without that, any of you gentlemen—I had better go. Let laws and learning, wit and wisdom die, so long as you have your cigars. But the carriage is ordered at a quarter to ten, and Lord Erradeen is coming, he says. In any case *you* must come, papa, you know. I can't go without you," she said, with a little imperative air. It was enough to make any one laugh to see the grand air of superiority which this little person took upon her, and her father greeted her exit with a loud laugh of enjoyment and admiration.

"She is mistress and more, as we say in Scotland," he said, "and there must be no trifling where my Katie is concerned. We will have to keep to the minute. So you are coming with us, Lord Erradeen? What will you do, Underwood? I'm doubting if what they call the poetical dramaw will be much in your way."

To which Underwood replied with some embarrassment that it certainly was not at all in his way. He liked Nelly Somebody in a burlesque, and he was always fond of a good ballet, but as for Shakespeare and that sort of thing, he owned it was above him. Good Mr. Williamson disapproved of ballets, utterly, and administered a rebuke on the spot.

"I hope you are not leading Lord Erradeen into the like of that. It is very bad for a young man to lose respect for women, and how you can keep any after those exhibitions is beyond me. Well, I will not say I take a great interest, like Katie, in poetry and all that. I like a good laugh. So long as it is funny I am like a bairn, I delight in a play: but I am not so sure that I can give my mind to it when it's serious. Lord! we've enough of seriousness in real life. And as for your bare-faced love-making before thousands of people, I just can't endure it. You will think me a prejudiced old fogey, Lord Erradeen. It makes me blush," said the elderly critic, going off into a laugh; but blush he did, through all the honest red upon his natural cheeks, notwithstanding his laugh, and his claret, and his cigar. Was he a world behind his younger companion who glanced at him with a sensation of mingled shame, contempt, and respect, or was he a world above him? Walter was so confused in the new atmosphere he had suddenly begun to breathe, that he could not tell. But it was altogether new at all events, and novelty is something in the monotony of life.

"I'll see you at the club after," said Underwood, as they loitered waiting for Miss Williamson at the hotel door. But Walter made no reply.

Now Lord Erradeen, though he had been perverse all his life, and had chosen the evil and rejected the good in many incomprehensible ways, was not—or this history would never have been written—without that finer fibre in him which responds to everything that is true and noble. How strange this jumble is in that confusion of good and evil which we call the mind of man! How often may we see the record of a generous action bring tears to the eyes of one whose acts are all selfish, and whose heart is callous to sufferings of which he is the cause: and hear him with noble

fervour applaud the self-sacrifice of the man, who in that language by which it is the pleasure of the nineteenth century to make heroism just half-ridiculous, and to save itself from the highflown, "never funked and never lied; I guess he didn't know how:" and how he will be touched to the heart by the purity of a romantic love, he who for himself feeds on the garbage—and all this without any conscious insincerity, the best part of him more true and real all the time than the worst! Walter, to whom his own domestic surroundings had been so irksome, felt a certain wholesome novelty of pleasure when he set out between the father and daughter to see what Mr. Williamson called the "poetical dramaw," a thing hitherto much out of the young man's way. He had been of late in all kinds of unsavoury places, and had done his best to debase his imagination with the burlesques; but yet he had not been able to obliterate his own capacity for better things. And when he stood looking over the head of Katie Williamson, and saw the lady of the poet's tale come into the poor house of her chivalrous lover, the shock with which the better nature in him came uppermost, gave him a pang in the pleasure and the wonder of it. This was not the sort of heroine to whom he had accustomed himself: but the old Italian romancer, the noble English poet, and the fine passion and high perception of the actors, who could understand and interpret both, were not in vain for our prodigal. When that lady paused in the humble doorway clothed in high reverence and poetry, not to speak of the modest splendour of her mature beauty and noble Venetian dress, he felt himself blush, like good Mr. Williamson, to remember all the less lovely images he had seen. He could not applaud; it would have been a profanation. He was still pure enough in the midst of uncleanness, and high enough though familiar with baseness, to be transported for the moment out of himself.

The other two formed a somewhat comical counterbalance to Walter's emotion; not that they were by any means unfeeling spectators. Mr. Williamson's interest in the story was unfeigned. As Mrs. Kendal poured forth that heartrending plea of a mother for her child, the good man accompanied her words by strange muffled sounds which were quite beyond his control; and which called forth looks of alarm from Katie, who was his natural guardian, and who herself maintained a dignified propriety as having witnessed this moving scene before. But the running commentary *sotto voce*, which he kept up throughout, might have furnished an amusing secondary comedy to any impartial bystander. "Bless us all!" said Mr. Williamson, "two useless servants doing nothing, and not a morsel in the house! How do ye make that out!" "Lordsake! has he killed the hawk? but that's just manslaughter: and a tough morsel I would say, for the lady, when all's done." "What is it she's wanting—just the falcon he's killed for her. Tchick! Tchick! Now I call that an awful pity, Katie. Poor lady! and poor fellow! and he has to refuse her! Well, he should not have been so hasty. After all she did not eat a morsel of it; and what ailed that silly old woman there to toss up a bit omelette or something, to save the bird—and they're so clever at omelettes abroad," the good man said, with true regret. "Oh, papa, how material you are! Don't you know it's always like that in life?" cried Katie. "I know nothing of the kind," said her father, indignantly. "What is the use of being a poet, as you call it, if ye cannot find some other way and not break their hearts? Poor lad! Now that's a thing I can't understand—a woman like that come pleading to you, and you have to refuse her!" Katie looked round upon her father with her little air of oracle. "Don't you see, papa, that's the story! It's to wring our hearts he wrote it." Mr. Williamson paid no attention to this. He went on softly with his "Tchick! tchick!" and when all was over dried his eyes furtively and got up with haste, almost impatience, drawing a long breath. "It's just all nonsense," he said. "I'll not be brought here again to be made unhappy. So she's to get *him* instead of the bird—but, bless me! what good will that do her? *that* will never save her bairn."

"It will satisfy the public, more or less," said a voice behind.

Walter had been aware that some one else had come into the box, who stood smiling, listening to the conversation, and now bent forward to applaud as if aware that his applause meant something. Katie turned half round, with a little nod and smile.

"Did you hear papa?" she said. "Oh, tell Mr. Tennyson! he is quite unhappy about it. Are you unhappy too, Lord Erradeen? for you don't applaud, or say a word."

"Applaud!" Walter said. "I feel that it would be taking a liberty. Applaud what? That beautiful lady who is so much above me, or the great poet who is above all? I should like to go away and draw breath, and let myself down——"

"Toots!" said Mr. Williamson, "it is just all nonsense. He should not have been so hasty. And now I would just like to know," he added, with an air of defiance, "what happened to that bairn: to want a falcon and get a stepfather! that was an ill way to cure him. Hoots! it's all nonsense. Put on your cloak, Katie, and let us get away."

"But I like you, Lord Erradeen, for what you say," cried Katie. "It was too beautiful to applaud. Oh, tell Mrs. Kendal! She looked like a picture. I should like to make her a curtsey, not clap my hands as you do."

"You will bid me tell Boccaccio next?" said the new-comer. "These are fine sentiments; but the actors would find it somewhat chilly if they had no applause. They would think nobody cared."

"Lord Innishouran," said Katie, "papa has forgotten his manners. He ought to have introduced to you Lord Erradeen."

Walter was as much startled as if he had been the veriest cockney whose bosom has ever been fluttered by introduction to a lord. He looked at the first man of his rank (barring those damaged

ones at Underwoods club) whom he had met, with the strangest sensation. Lord Innishouran was the son of the Duke—the great potentate of those northern regions. He was a man who might make Walter's career very easy to him, or, alas! rather might have made it, had he known him on his first coming to London. The sense of all that might be involved in knowing him, made the young man giddy as he stood opposite to his new acquaintance. Lord Innishouran was not of Walter's age. The duke was the patriarch of the Highlands, and lived like a man who never meant to die. This gentleman, who at forty-five was still only his father's heir, had taken to the arts by way of making an independent position for himself. He was a *dilettante* in the best sense of the word, delighting in everything that was beautiful. Walter's enthusiasm had been the best possible introduction for him; and what a change there seemed in the young man's world and all his prospects as he walked home after taking leave of the Williamsons with Innishouran's, not Underwood's, arm within his own!

"I cannot understand how it is that we have not met before. It would have been my part to seek you out if I had known you were in town," his new friend said. "I hope now you will let me introduce you to my wife. The duke has left town—he never stays a moment longer than he can help. And everything is coming to an end. Still I am most happy to have made your acquaintance. You knew the Williamsons, I suppose, before? They are excellent people—not the least vulgarity about them, because there's no pretension. And Katie is a clever girl, not without ambition. She is quite an heiress, I suppose you know——"

"I don't know—any one, or anything," Walter said.

"Come, that is going too far," said the other, with a laugh. "I presume you don't care for society. That is a young man's notion; but society is not so bad a thing. It never answers to withdraw from it altogether. Yes, Katie is an heiress. She is to have all the Loch Houran property, I believe, besides a good deal of money."

"I thought," said Walter, "there were several sons."

"One—one only; and he has the business, with the addition also of a good deal of money. Money is a wonderful quality—it stands instead of a great many other things to our friends there. I am fond of intellect myself, but it must be allowed that the most cultivated mind would not do for any man what his money does at once for that good neighbour of ours—who is a most excellent fellow all the same."

"I have met him for the first time to-day," said Walter, "in the most accidental way."

"Ah! I thought you had known them; but it is true what I say. I look upon money with a certain awe. It is inscrutable. The most perfect of artists—you and I when we most look up to them, do also just a little look down upon them! No, perhaps that is too strong. At all events, they are there on sufferance. They are not of us, and they know it. Whether they care for us too much, or whether they don't care at all, there is still that uneasy consciousness. But with this good-natured millionnaire, nothing of the sort. He has no such feeling."

"Perhaps because his feelings are not so keen. Miss Williamson has just been telling me what you say—that her family are considered not vulgar because they never pretend to be better than they are."

"Ah!" cried Lord Innishouran, startled, "did Katie divine that? She is cleverer than I thought—and a very fine fortune, and an ambitious little person. I hope her money will go to consolidate some property at home, and not fall into a stranger's hands. I am all for the Highlands, you see, Erradeen."

"And I know so little about them," said Walter.

But nevertheless he knew very well what was meant, and there was a curious sensation in his mind which he could not describe to himself, as if some perturbation, whether outside or in he could not tell which, was calmed. He had a great deal of talk with his new friend as they threaded the noisy little circles of the streets, among the shouting link-boys and crowds of carriages, then reached the calm and darkness of the thoroughfares beyond. Lord Innishouran talked well, and his talk was of a kind so different from that of Underwood's noisy coterie, that the charm of the unusual, added to so many other novel sensations, made a great impression upon Walter's mind, always sensitive and open to a new influence. He felt a hot flush of shame come over him when walking thus through the purity of the night, and in the society of a man who talked about great names and things, he remembered the noise of the club, the heated air full of smoke and inanities, the jargon of the race-course and the stables. These things filled him with disgust, for the moment at least, just as the duets had given him a sense of disgust and impatience at Sloebury. His new friend only left him at the door of his rooms, which happened to lie in Lord Innishouran's way, and bade him good night, promising to call on him in the morning. Walter had not been in his rooms so early for many a day. He hesitated whether or not to go out again, for he had not any pleasure in his own society; but pride came to the rescue, and he blushed at the thought of darting out like a truant schoolboy, as soon as the better influence was withdrawn. Pride prevented him from thus running away from himself. He took a book out of the shelves, which he had not done for so long. But soon the book dropped aside, and he began to review the strange circumstances of the evening. In a moment, as it seemed, his horizon had changed. Hitherto, except in so far as money was concerned, he had derived no advantage from his new rank. Now everything seemed opening before him. He could not be unmoved in this moment of transition. Perhaps the life which was called fast had never contained any real temptation to

Walter. It had come in and invaded the indolence of his mind and filled the vacant house of his soul, swept and garnished but unoccupied, according to the powerful simile of Scripture; but there was no tug at his senses now urging him to go back to it. And then he thought, with a certain elation, of Lord Innishouran, and pleasurably of the Williamsons. Katie, was that her name? He could not but laugh to himself at the sudden realisation of the visionary Miss Williamson after all that had been said. What would Julia Herbert say? But Julia Herbert had become dim to Lord Erradeen as if she had been a dozen years away.

CHAPTER VIII.

Next morning Lord Innishouran fulfilled his promise of calling, and made his appearance almost before Walter, following the disorderly usages of the society into which he had fallen, was ready to receive him. The middle-aged eldest son was a man of exact virtue, rising early, keeping punctual hours, and in every way conducting himself as became one whose position made him an example to the rest of the world. And he was one who had a deep sense of the duties of his position. It seemed to him that this young man was in a bad way. "He is at a crisis, evidently at a crisis," he had said to his wife, "and a good influence may be everything for him." "He should marry Katie Williamson," said Lady Innishouran. "The Erradeens may be odd, as you say, but they always manage to do well for themselves." "Not always, not always, my dear; the property seems to grow, but the men come to little," Innishouran said, shaking his head; and he left his house with the full intention of becoming a "good influence" to Walter. He proposed at once to put him up at the most irreproachable and distinguished of clubs, and asked him to dinner on the spot. "I am afraid there is nobody of consequence left whom I can ask to meet you," he said; "but in any case Lady Innishouran is anxious to make your acquaintance."

The Innishourans belonged to the ranks of those very great people for whom the season ends much earlier than for others. The duke had gone home early in June, and his son held that in the end of that month there was nobody of consequence left, except, he said to himself, cabinet ministers, who were perhaps something too much for a young Highland lord.

"And you must take your seat," he said, "that is a matter of duty. If we had met earlier the duke would of course have been one of your supporters. I am sure my father will regret it very much. But, however, it can't be helped, and I, you know, don't occupy the necessary position; but there will be no difficulty in that respect."

This was very different from Walter's fine misanthropic Byronic idea of solitary grandeur, and defiance of the staring ranks of superannuated peers. "I am no politician," he said awkwardly. "I had scarcely thought it was worth the while." "It is always worth while to assume the privileges of your position," Lord Innishouran said. Walter was taken possession of altogether by this good influence. And forthwith his path lay in a course of golden days. It was characteristic of Walter that it gave him no trouble to break his old ties, perhaps because of the fact that he had not, so to speak, made them by any exercise of his will, but simply drifted into them by the exertions of those who meant to benefit by his weakness. He did not, perhaps, put this into words, but yet felt it with a sort of interior conviction which was deeper than all those superficial shades of sentiment which bind some men to the companions of the day, even when they care little for them. Perhaps it was selfishness, perhaps strength—it is difficult sometimes to discriminate.

Thus Captain Underwood, after his interrupted, but latterly almost unbroken, sway over the young man's time and habits, found himself suddenly left in the lurch, and quite powerless over his pupil. The captain tried in the first place the easy tone of use and wont.

"Come, Erradeen," he said, "we shall be late. You forget the engagement you made with So-and-so, and So-and-so—"

"I think it was you who made the engagement," Walter said. "I am not going to keep it anyhow. I am going with Innishouran to——"

"With Lord Innishouran!" the other cried, overawed. "So then," he said, with such a sneer as is often effectual with the young and generous, "now that you have got in with the big-wigs you mean to throw your old friends over."

"I don't know much about old friends," Walter said. "I don't call the fellows at your club old friends."

And then Captain Underwood made one of those mistakes which persons of inferior breeding are so apt to make. "You were glad enough to have them when you had nobody else to take any notice of you," he said. This was after two or three attempts to recover his old standing, and when he began to feel a certain exasperation. Walter, though he was irritable by nature, had so much the best of the argument at this moment that he kept his temper.

"I don't think," he said, "that I ever was very glad. I allowed myself to be drawn into it *faute de mieux*."

"And now I suppose you think you can throw *me* off too, like an old glove, in your infernal Scotch, cold-blooded way!" cried the captain.

"Am I Scotch?" said Lord Erradeen.

It was not much wonder, perhaps, if Underwood lost his temper. But another time he took matters more wisely. He would not give up in a fit of temper the hold he thought he had obtained upon the young man. He was very unwilling, as may be supposed, to resign his *protégé* and victim, and made spasmodic attempts to regain his "influence." At all times this "influence" had been held precariously, and had it been a virtuous one like that of Lord Innishouran, Walter's mentor and guide might have called forth the sympathy of the spectator; for he had many things to bear from the young man's quick temper, and the constantly recurring dissatisfaction with himself and all things around which made him so difficult to deal with. Underwood, however, after his first disappointment, did not despair. The changeable young fellow, upon whom no one could calculate, whose mind was so uncertain, who would shoot off at a tangent in the most unexpected way, might as suddenly, as he had abandoned, turn to him again.

Miss Williamson received her new acquaintance very graciously when he went to see her next day. She met him with all the ease of an old acquaintance.

"Papa has been so busy," she said, "putting John into the business, that we have only got here at the very end of the season. Yes, it is a nuisance; but think how many people there are much better than I, that never come at all. Oona Forrester for instance. You think perhaps she is too good even to wish to come? Not at all; there never was a girl so good as that. Besides, I don't think it would be good. A girl ought to see the world as much as a boy. When you don't know the world, it makes you uninteresting—afterwards; you don't know how to talk to people. Not Oona, you know. I don't think there is any want of interest about her; but most people. Well, did you like Lord Innishouran? He is very kind, and fond of exerting a good influence. I felt that he was the very person for you."

"You think then that I stand in need of a good influence?" Walter said.

"Yes, after Captain Underwood," said Katie calmly. "I think it was very lucky that you met papa, and that Lord Innishouran was at the theatre and came into our box. Perhaps you will look back to it and think—if you had not happened to come here, what people call accidentally, as you passed——"

"I might go a step further," said Walter, "and say if I had not happened to be with Captain Underwood, who knew your father, I should never have known what good fortune was standing upon these steps, and never have made the acquaintance of Miss Williamson."

"You are making fun of me," said Katie. "I do not mind in the very least. But still it is just as well, perhaps, that you made the acquaintance of Miss Williamson. What were you going to do with yourself? Nothing so good I am sure as seeing the *Falcon*, and making friends with Lord Innishouran, who can be of a great deal of use to you. *We* cannot do much for you, of course. All sorts of people ask us, but still you know we are not of your class. We are only not vulgar, because—I told you last night."

Walter laughed with guilty amusement, remembering how Lord Innishouran had justified Katie's estimate of the world's opinion.

"I do not understand," he said, "how any one can think of you and vulgarity in the same day."

"Well," said Katie, calmly, "that is my own opinion. But still between me and Oona Forrester there is a great difference. I don't deceive myself about that. And why is it? I am—oh, some hundred times more rich. I can do almost whatever I like; that is to say, I can turn papa, as people say, round my little finger (that is rather vulgar, by the way). I come up here, I go abroad, I meet all kinds of interesting people: and yet I am not like Oona when all is said. Now how is that? It does not seem quite fair."

She looked at him with an honest pair of blue eyes out of a prepossessing, sensible little face, as she asked this question with all the gravity of a philosophical investigator. Notwithstanding a little figure which threatened in after life to be dumpy, and a profile of which the lines were by no means distinctly drawn, Katie Williamson at twenty had enough of the *beauté du diable* to make her rather an attractive little person. But as Walter looked at her, he too seemed to see a vision of the other with whom she compared herself. He always thought of Oona as she had stood watching his boat pushed off; his mind at the time had been too hurried and eager to remark her look; but that deeper faculty which garners up a face, a look, an act, which we do not seem to notice at the moment, and makes them afterwards more real and present to us than things that are under our eyes, had taken a picture of Oona as she stood in that profoundest deep of emotion, the most poignant moment of her life, with something of the wondering pang in her eyes which was in her heart. How many times since then had he seen her, though he had not seen her at the time! Looking at her in his mind's eye, he forgot altogether the question Katie was putting to him, and the necessity of protesting politely that she did herself wrong. Indeed he was not roused to this till Katie herself, after pausing for reply, said with a little sharpness, "You don't make me any answer, Lord Erradeen: you ought to tell me I have no reason to be so humble-minded, but that I am as good as Oona. That is what any polite person would say."

Thus challenged, Walter started with a certain sheepishness, and hastened to inform her, stammering, that comparisons were odious, but that there was nobody who might not be flattered, who ought not to be pleased, who, in short, would not be happy to think themselves on the same level——

Katie broke through his embarrassed explanations with a laugh. "You quite agree with me," she

said, "and that is what I like you for. I am not a girl who wants compliments. I am an inquirer. And things are so funny in this world: everything about ourselves is so droll—"

"What is that you are saying about being droll, Katie?" said Mr. Williamson, coming in. "You do say very daft-like things, my dear, if that is what you mean. And how are you this morning, my Lord Erradeen? none the worse of that *Falcon*? Bless me, that falcon—that just set your teeth on edge the very sight of it. I am glad it was not served up to me. But you will stay to your lunch? We are just going to lunch, Katie and I; and we are both very fond of company. Now just stay. I will take it very kind if you have nothing better to do; and afterwards we'll stroll together to the Caledonian Club, which you ought to be a member of, Lord Erradeen, for auld Scotland's sake. I will put you up if that is agreeable to you. Come, Katie, show Lord Erradeen the way. I have been knocking about all the morning, and I am bound to say I'm very ready for my lunch."

And in this way affairs went on. Unaccustomed as he was to consider what any change of direction might lead to, it suited Walter very well to have a place where he was always welcome within his reach, and to be urged to stay to lunch, to go to the opera and the theatre, to be the audience for Katie's philosophies, which amused him. The atmosphere was new, and if not, perhaps, exciting, was fresh and full of variety. He had never in his life encountered anything like the easy wealthiness and homeliness, the power to do whatever they pleased, yet extreme simplicity in doing it, which characterised both father and daughter. And there was so much movement and energy about them that he was kept amused. Katie's perfectly just impression of the opinion of the world had no embittering effect upon that little philosopher, whose consciousness of well-being, and of the many ways in which she was better off than her neighbours, gave her a composure and good humour which were delightful. By-and-by, though Walter himself was not aware of this, he began to receive invitations to entertainments at which the Williamsons were to be present, with that understanding on the part of society which is so instinctive, and which, though sometimes without foundation, rarely fails to realise its purpose. He was not indeed at all dependent upon them for his society. Lord Innishouran had opened the way, which once open, is so very easy for a young peer, whose antecedents, even if doubtful, have never compelled general disapproval. He who had known nobody, became in a month's time capable of understanding all the allusions, and entering into that curious society-talk which the most brilliant intellects out of it are confused by, and the most shallow within gain a certain appearance of intelligence from. After a little awkwardness at the beginning, easily explained by the benevolent theory that he had only just come to town, and knew nobody, he had speedily picked up the threads of the new existence, and got himself into its routine. To a new mind there is so much that is attractive in it—a specious air of knowing, of living, of greater experience, and more universal interests is diffused over it. And how indeed should it be possible not to know more in the midst of that constant multiplicity of events, and in sight and hearing of those that pull the strings and move the puppets everywhere? There is something in brushing shoulders with a minister of state that widens the apprehension; and even the lightest little *attaché* gives a feeling that it is cosmopolitan to the circle in which he laughs and denies any knowledge of European secrets. Probably the denial is quite true, but nobody believes it, and the young lady with whom he has flirted knows a little more of the world in consequence—that is, of the world as it is understood in those regions which claim that name for themselves. This tone Walter acquired so easily that it surprised himself. He did it better than many to the manner born, for to be sure there was to him a novelty in it, which made it feel real, and kept him amused and pleased with himself. He took his seat in the House of Lords, not in the Byronic way, and thought a great deal more of the House of Lords ever after. It seemed to him an important factor in European affairs, and the most august assembly in the world. No—that term perhaps is sacred to the House of Commons, or rather was sacred to the House of Commons, at the time when there were no other popular chambers of legislators to contest the dignity. But a hereditary legislator may still be allowed to think with awe of that bulwark of the constitution in which he has a share.

Lord Erradeen became one of the immediate circle of the Innishourans, where all "the best people" were to be met. He became acquainted with great dignitaries both of Church and State. He talked to ambassadors—flirted—but no, he did not flirt very much. It was understood that he was to be asked with the Williamsons by all the people who knew them; and even among those who were a little above Miss Katie's range, it was known that there was an heiress of fabulous wealth, whose possessions would sensibly enlarge those of Lord Erradeen, and with whom it was an understood thing—so that flirtation with him was gently discouraged by the authorities. And he himself did not perhaps find that amusement necessary; for everything was new to him—his own importance, which had never up to this time been properly acknowledged, and still more the importance of others with whom it was a wonder to the young man to feel himself associating. The Underwood crew had always secretly angered him, as undeniably inferior to the society from which he felt himself to be shut out. He had been disgusted by their flattery, yet offended by their familiarity, even when in appearance *bon camarade*. And the sense of internal satisfaction now in having attained unmistakably to "the best people" was very delightful to him, and the air of good society a continual pleasure. Probably that satisfaction, too, might fail by and by, and the perennial sameness of humanity make itself apparent. But this did not occur within the first season, which indeed had begun to wane of its early glories as a season, the duke being gone, and other princes, high and mighty, before Walter appeared in it at all. There was, however, a great deal to be done still in the remnant of June and the early part of July: the heat, the culmination of all things, the sense that these joys will presently be over, and another season, which, in its way, is like another lifetime, departed into the past—producing a kind of whirl and intoxicating impulse. People met three or four times a day in the quickening of all the social wheels before they stopped altogether—in the Park in the morning, at luncheon parties,

afternoon receptions, dinners—two or three times in the evening—town growing more and more like the "village," which it is sometimes jocularly called.

Through all this Walter spent a great deal of his time with Katie Williamson. Society flattered the probable match. He had to give her his arm to dinner, to dance with her, to talk to her, to get her shawl and call her carriage; her father, in his large good-humoured way, accepting with much placidity a sort of superior footman in Lord Erradeen. "You are younger than I am," he would say occasionally, with a laugh. He, too, began to take it for granted. It could not be said that it was Lord Erradeen's fault. He indeed gave in to it with a readiness which was unnecessary, by those continual visits at the hotel, luncheons, dinners, attendances at theatre and opera, which certainly originated in his own will and pleasure. But all that was so simple and natural. He had a sincere liking for Katie. She was a refuge to him from the other society which he had thrown over. Why should he refrain from visiting his country neighbours? There seemed nothing in the world against it, but everything in its favour. They asked him, to be sure, or he would not have gone. Mr. Williamson said—"We'll see you some time to-morrow," when they parted; and even Katie began to add—"We are going to the So-and-so's; are you to be there?" Nothing could be more natural, more easy. And yet a girl who had been properly on her guard, and a young man particular not to have it said that he had "behaved ill" to a lady, would have taken more care. Had Katie had a mother, perhaps it would not have been; but even in that case, why not? Walter was perfectly eligible. Supposing even that there had been a sowing of wild oats, that had not been done with any defiance of the world, and it was now over; and the Erradeens were already a great family, standing in no need of Katie's fortune to bolster them up. The mother, had she been living, would have had little reason to interfere. It was all perfectly natural, suitable in every way, such a marriage indeed as might have justified the proverb, and been "made in heaven."

It would be scarcely correct to say, as is sometimes said, that the last to know of this foregone conclusion, were the parties chiefly concerned. It might indeed be true in respect to Walter, but not to the other principal actor, who indeed was perfectly justified in her impression that he was a conscious agent throughout, and intended everything he was supposed to intend. Katie, for her part, was not unaware of the progress of events upon which all the world had made up its mind. She expected nothing less than to be called upon to decide, and that without any great delay—perhaps before she left town, perhaps shortly after her return home—whether or not she would be Lady Erradeen. She did not think of the coronet upon her handkerchief, as Julia Herbert had done, but of many things which were of more importance. She frankly avowed to herself that she liked Lord Erradeen; as to being in love with him, that was perhaps a different matter. She was much experienced in the world (or thought herself so) though she was so young; having had no mother, and feeling herself the natural guide of her other less enlightened parent. And she was very fond of her father. She could "turn him round her little finger." Wherever she wished to go he went; whatever she wished to do, he was ready to carry out her wishes. She was not at all sure that with a husband she would have half so much of her own way. And Katie liked her own way. She could not fancy herself blindly, foolishly in love as people were in books; but she liked Lord Erradeen. So far as that went it was all simple enough; but on the other hand, there were mysteries about the family, and Katie scorned and hated mysteries. Suppose he should ask her to believe in the Warlock lord? Katie knew what would follow; she would laugh in his face, however serious he might be. To her it would be impossible to believe in any such supernatural and antiquated nonsense. She felt that she would scorn even the man who was her husband did he give faith to such fables. She would not listen to any evidence on the subject. Sometimes words had dropped from him which sounded like a belief in the possibility of such influences. To think that she, Katie, should have to defer to superstition, to be respectful, perhaps, of absurdity such as this! *That* she would never do. But otherwise she allowed in her sensible, much-reasoning, composed little mind, that there was very little to object to in Lord Erradeen.

Walter himself was not half so ready to realise the position. He liked Katie, and had not been much accustomed to deny himself what he liked even in his days of poverty. He did not see now why he should not take the good with which the gods provided him in the shape of a girl's society, any more than in any other way. He was a little startled when he perceived by some casual look or word that he was understood by the world in general to be Katie's lover. It amused him at first: but he had so just an opinion of Katie that he was very sure she had no disposition to "catch" him, such as he had not doubted Julia Herbert to have. He might be vain, but not beyond reason. Indeed it was not any stimulus to vanity to be an object of pursuit to Julia Herbert. It was apparent enough what it would be to her to marry Lord Erradeen, whereas it was equally apparent that to marry anybody would be no object, unless she loved him, to Katie. And Katie, Walter was sure, betrayed no tokens of love. But there were many things involved that did not meet the common eye. Since he had floated into this new form of "influence," since he had known the girl whom it would be so excellent for the Erradeen property that he should marry, a halcyon period had begun for Walter. The angry sea of his own being, so often before lashed into angry waves and convulsions, had calmed down. Things had gone well with him: he had come into the society of his peers; he had assumed the privileges of the rank which up to this time had been nothing but a burden and contrariety. The change was ineffable, not to be described; nothing disturbed him from outside, but, far more wonderful, nothing irritated him within. He felt tranquil, he felt *good*: he had no inclination to be angry; he was not swayed with movements of irritation and disgust. The superiority of his society was perhaps not sufficient to account for this, for he began to see the little ridicules of society after a month's experience of it. No, it was himself that was changed; his disturbances were calmed; he and his fate were no longer on contrary sides.

It seemed to the young man that the change all about and around him was something miraculous. He seemed to stand on a calm eminence and look back upon the angry waters which he had escaped with a shiver at the dangers past, and a sense of relief which was indescribable. If he could get Katie to marry him that calm perhaps might become permanent. There would be no guilt in doing this, there would be no wrong to any one. And then he thought of Oona on the beach, looking after his boat. What was she thinking then, he wondered? Did she ever think of him now? Did she remember him at all? Had she not rather dismissed that little episode from her mind like a dream? He sighed as he thought of her, and wondered, with wistful half-inquiries; but, after all, there was no ground for inquiries, and no doubt she had forgotten him long ago. Other questions altogether came into his mind with the thought of Katie Williamson. If he married her would not all the elements of evil which he had felt to be so strong, which had risen into such force, and against which he had been unable to contend—would they not all be lulled for ever? It would be no yielding to the power that had somehow, he no longer reasoned how, got him in its clutches: but it would be a compromise. He had not been bidden to seek this wealthy bride, but in his heart he felt that this way peace lay. It would be a compromise. It would be promoting the interests of the family. Her wealth would add greatly to the importance of the house of Erradeen. And if he made up his mind to a step which had so many advantages, would it not in some sort be the signing of a treaty, the establishment of peace? He thought with a shudder, out of this quiet in which his spirit lay, of those conflicts from which he had escaped. He was like a man on firm land contemplating the horrors of the stormy sea from which he had escaped, but amid which he might be plunged again. It was possible that the disposition in which that sea itself should be braved, rather than accept its alternative, might return to him again. But at the present moment, in full enjoyment of so many more pleasures, and with the struggles of the former period in his mind, he shuddered at the prospect. Katie, it seemed to him, would be a compromise with fate.

The other person most deeply concerned—to wit, Mr. Williamson—was in a state of rapture, and chuckled all day long over the prospect. He would have had Lord Erradeen with them wherever they went. Not a doubt on the subject, not a possibility that all was not plain sailing, crossed his mind. There was no courtship indeed between them, such as was usual in his own more animated class and age. It was not the fashion, he said to himself, with a laugh; but what did the young fellow come for so constantly if it were not Katie? "It's not for my agreeable conversation," he said to himself, with another guffaw. When a young man was for ever haunting the place where a girl was, there could not be two opinions about his motives. And it would be very suitable. He said this to himself with an elation which made his countenance glow. To think of losing Katie had been terrible to him, but this would not be losing Katie. Auchnasheen was next door to Birkenbraes, and they should have Birkenbraes if they liked—they should have anything they liked. John was splendidly provided for by the business and all the immense capital invested in it; but Katie was his darling, and from her he could not be separated. A pretty title for her, and a very good fellow for a husband, and no separation! He thought, with a sort of delighted horror as of some danger past, that she was just the girl that might have fallen in love with a lad going out to India or to the ends of the earth, and gone with him, whatever any one could say; and to think by the good guiding of Providence she had lighted on one so ideally suitable as Lord Erradeen! The good man went about the world rubbing his hands with satisfaction. It was all he could do, in his great contentment, not to precipitate matters. He had to put force upon himself when he was alone with Walter not to bid him take courage, and settle the matter without delay.

CHAPTER IX.

Things went on in this way till nearly the end of July, when the parks were brown like heather, and a great many people already had gone out of town. Those who remained kept up their gaieties with a sort of desperation of energy, intent upon getting as much as possible out of the limited time. And what with the drawing closer of the bonds of society, and the additional fervour of the pace at which everything went on, Walter spent almost his entire time in Katie's society, meeting her everywhere, and being, by universal consent, constituted her partner and escort wherever they did meet. She had half begun to wonder herself that nothing further came of it, and that he did not speak the words which would settle every question, so far at least as he was concerned. Miss Williamson, for her own part, reserved her personal freedom. She would not say even to herself that she had finally made up her mind. She would see what he had to say for himself, and then——But Katie was very prudent, and would not be premature. Walter, too, rather wondered at himself that he did nothing conclusive. He perceived for the first time in his life that the position was not one which could be glided over, which he could terminate simply by going away. He had come to that, that Katie must cut the knot, not he: or else, which was most likely, bind it closer. She was a girl of whom nobody could think lightly—not a good girl only, but a little personage of distinct importance. No doubt she would make such a wife as a man might be very well satisfied with, and even proud of in his way. She was even pretty—enough: she was clever, and very well able to hold her own. At the head of a table, at the head of a great house, Katie, though with in every way a pronounced yet not unrefined Scotch accent (as indeed in the wife of a Scotch lord was very appropriate), would be quite equal to the position. And peace would come with her: no young man could do more for his family than bring such an accession of fortune into it. It would probably save him from further vexation about small matters of the estate, and those persecutions about leases and investments to which he was now subject. This had been the one drawback of his life since he had known Katie. He had been asked to decide on one side and another: he had concluded against Peter Thomson the sheep farmer, in sheer

vexation with Shaw's importunity. He had thought more than once that he saw old Milnathort shake his head, and was subject to the factor's outspoken blame. But if he brought Katie into the family, what would it matter about these small things? One or two unsatisfactory tenants would be little in comparison with that large addition of fortune. And he liked Katie. In herself she was very agreeable to him—a companion whom he by no means wished to lose. There was something in her independence, her almost boyishness, her philosophies and questionings, which made her unlike any other girl with whom he had ever been brought into contact. The thing was not that they were in love with each other, but that they could get on quite well together. Notwithstanding, Walter, being quite content with the circumstances as they were, took no new step, but let the course of events run on day by day.

They had gone together to one of the last celebrations of the waning season—the evening reception at the Royal Academy. Everybody who was in town was there; and Walter, who had now an abundance of acquaintances, went from one group to another, paying his respects to the ladies, but always keeping somewhere within reach of the Williamsons, with whom he had come. Katie expected him to be within reach. It had come to be a habit with her to look round for Lord Erradeen, to beg him to get her what she wanted, to take her to this or that. Her father, though always most dutiful in attendance, yet naturally found persons of his own age to talk with; and he was apt to say foolish things about the pictures, and say them at the top of his voice, which made Katie cautious not to direct his attention to them more than was necessary; but Walter, who on the whole considered her something of an authority on art, and was not unwilling to accept her guidance to some extent, was here a very agreeable companion. She had just intimated to him her desire to look at something of which the artist had been speaking to her—for Katie considered it her duty even in presence of society to show a certain regard for the pictures, as the supposed object of the meeting—and taking his arm, was going on to the corner indicated, when somebody all at once made a little movement towards them with a quick exclamation of pleasure, and saying, "Walter!" suddenly laid a finger upon Lord Erradeen's unoccupied arm.

This sudden incident produced a curious dramatic effect amid the many groups of this elegant company. Some of the bystanders even were attracted, and one enterprising young painter took in his mind's eye an instantaneous sketch of the three figures enacting a scene in the genteel comedy of life. Walter in the midst, startled, looking a little guilty, yet not losing his composure, replied readily enough, "Julia!" holding out his hand to the somewhat eager stranger, who leaned forward towards him with sparkling eyes, and the most arch and smiling expression of pleasure and interest. Katie, on the other hand, held back a little, and looked very gravely at the meeting, with a manifest absence in her countenance of that pleasure which the others expressed, whether they felt it or not. She did not withdraw from Walter's arm, or separate herself in any way, but gazed at the new-comer who addressed him so familiarly with a look of grave inspection. Katie meant to look dignified, and as a girl should look who was the lawful possessor of the attention to which an illegitimate claimant had thus appeared; but her figure was not adapted for expressing dignity. She was shorter than Julia, and less imposing, and her *beauté du diable* could not bear comparison with Miss Herbert's really fine features and charming figure. Julia was as much, or indeed more, a country girl than the other; but she was much handsomer, and had all the instincts of society. Her face was radiant with smiles as she gave her hand to Walter, and half-permitted, half-compelled him to hold it a moment longer than was necessary in his.

"I thought we could not be long of meeting," she said, "and that you were sure to be here. I am with my cousins the Tom Herberts. I suppose you know them? They have asked me up for the fag-end of the season. I always told you my season was the very end—and the result is, I am quite fresh when you jaded revellers have had too much of it, and are eager to hurry away."

And indeed she looked fresh, glowing, and eager, and full of life and pleasure; her vivid looks seemed to take the colour out of Katie, who still stood with her hand upon Walter's arm. For his part he did not know what to do.

"You would not think, to look round these rooms, that it was the fag-end of the season," he said.

"Ah! that's your usual benevolence to make me think less of my disadvantages," said Julia. "You know I don't encourage illusions on that subject. You must come and see me. You must be made acquainted with my cousins, if you don't know them."

"In the mean time, Lord Erradeen, will you take me to my father, please," said Katie, on his arm.

"Oh," cried Julia, "don't let me detain you now. We have just come. You'll find me presently, Walter, when you are at liberty. No, go, go, we shall have plenty of time afterwards for our talks. I insist upon your going now."

And she dismissed him with a beaming smile, with a little pat on his arm as if it had been she who was his lawful proprietor, not Katie. Miss Williamson said nothing for the moment, but she resisted Walter's attempt to direct her towards the picture she had meant to visit. "I think I will go to papa," she said. "I must not detain you, Lord Erradeen, from your—friend."

"That doesn't matter," said Walter; "I shall see her again. Let us do what we intended to do. What is the etiquette on such an occasion, Miss Williamson? Would it be correct for me, a mere man, to introduce two ladies to each other? You know I am a novice in society. I look for instruction to you."

"I can't tell, I am sure," said Katie. "I don't think the case has occurred to me before. You seem to know the lady very well, Lord Erradeen?"

"I have known her almost all my life," Walter replied, not quite at his ease. "We have played together, I suppose. She comes from Sloebury where my mother is living. They have all sorts of fine connections, but they are poor, as you would divine from what she said."

"I did not listen to what she said. Conversation not addressed to one's self," said Katie with some severity, "one has nothing to do with. I could see of course that you were on the most friendly terms."

"Oh, on quite friendly terms," said Walter; he could not for his life have prevented a little laugh from escaping him, a laugh of consciousness and amusement and embarrassment. And Katie, who was full of suspicion, pricked up her little ears.

"I should have said on terms that were more than friendly," she said in a voice that was not without a certain sharp tone.

Walter laughed again with that imbecility to which all men are subject when pressed upon such a question.

"Can anything be better than friendly?" he said. "Poor Julia! she has a very kind heart. Was not this the picture you wanted to see?"

"Oh," cried Katie, "I have forgotten all about the picture! This little incident has put it out of my head. Human interest is superior to art. Perhaps if you had not left Sloebury, if your circumstances had not changed, your friendship might have changed into—something warmer, as people say."

"Who can tell?" cried Walter in his vanity; "but in that case we should have been two poverties together, and that you know would never do."

"I am no judge," cried Katie; "but at all events you are not a poverty now, and there is no reason —Oh, there is papa; he is talking to *that* ambassador—but never mind. Patience for another minute, Lord Erradeen, till we can make our way to him, and then you shall go."

"But I don't want to go," Walter said.

"Oh, that is impossible; when Miss—Julia—I am sure I beg your pardon, for I don't know her other name—was so kind as to tell you where to find her. You must want to get rid of me. Papa, give me your arm; I want to show you something."

"Eh! what do you want to show me, Katie? I'm no judge, you know. You will find it very much better, I'm confident, to show it to young Erradeen."

"Thank you, Lord Erradeen," said Katie, making him a curtsey. She took her father's almost reluctant arm, and turned him suddenly away at once from his ambassador, and from Walter, who stood astonished to find himself thus thrown off. "Look here, papa, it is in this direction," the young lady said.

Mr. Williamson's voice was rather louder than good manners allowed. "What! is it a tiff?" he said, with a laugh. "That's according to all the rules, Katie. I'm astonished you have not had one before."

Walter heard this speech as well as Katie, and it threw the last gleam of reality on the position in which he stood. That he was looked upon by her father as her lover, and no doubt by herself too, or what would the encounter with Julia have mattered to her, was plain enough. He had known it vaguely before, but only from his own side of the question, and had debated it as a matter of expediency to himself. But when he saw it from the other side, recognising with a shock that they too had something to say in the matter, and coming right up against that barrier of a *must*, which was so obnoxious to his character, everything took a very different aspect. And Julia, too, had assumed an air of property—had made a certain claim of right in respect to him. What! was he to be made a slave, and deprived of free action in respect to the most important act of his life, because he had freely accepted invitations that were pressed upon him? The thing was ridiculous, he said to himself, with some heat. It might be well for him to offer himself to Katie, but to have a virtual demand made upon him, and acknowledge a necessity, that was not to be borne. Still less was he likely to acknowledge any right on the part of Julia Herbert. In her case he was altogether without responsibility, he said to himself; and even in the other, was it a natural consequence of Mr. Williamson's perpetual invitations and hospitality that he should put himself at the disposal of Mr. Williamson's daughter? He seemed to hear that worthy's laugh pealing after him as he took his way hastily in the opposite direction to that in which he had met Julia, with a determination to yield to neither. "A tiff!" and, "according to all the rules?" A lovers' quarrel, that was what the man meant; and who was he that he should venture to assume that Lord Erradeen was his daughter's lover?

Walter hurried through the rooms in the opposite direction, till he got near the great staircase, with its carpeted avenue, between the hedges of flowers, and the group of smiling, bowing, picturesque Academicians in every variety of beard, still receiving the late, and speeding the parting guests. But fate was too much here for the angry young man. Before he had reached the point of exit, he felt once more that tap on his arm. "Walter! I believe he is running away," said a voice, close to him; and there was Julia, radiant, with her natural protectors beside her, making notes of all that passed.

This time he could not escape. He was introduced to Lady Herbert and Sir Thomas before he could move a step from amid that brilliant crowd. Then Julia, like Katie, declared that she had something she wished to show him, and led him—half-reluctant, half, in the revulsion of feeling, pleased, to have some one else to turn to—triumphantly away.

Sir Thomas, who was tired, protested audibly against being detained; but his wife, more wise, caught him by the arm, and imposed patience.

"Can't you see!" she cried in his ear, "what a chance it is for Julia—Lord Erradeen, a most eligible young man. And think the anxiety she is, and that one never can be sure what she may do." "She is a horrid little coquette; and you may be sure the man means nothing serious, unless he is a fool!" growled Sir Thomas. But his wife replied calmly, "Most men are fools; and she is not a bad-hearted creature, though she must have some one dangling after her. Don't let us interfere with her chance, poor thing. I shall ask him to dinner," Lady Herbert said. And Sir Thomas, though he was rather a tyrant at home, and hated late hours, was kept kicking his heels in the vestibule, snarling at everybody who attempted to approach, for nearly an hour by the clock. So far, even in the most worldly bosoms, do conscientious benevolence and family affection go.

"Come, quick!" said Julia, "out of hearing of Maria. She wants to hear everything; and I have so many things to ask you. Is it all settled? That was She, of course. How we used to laugh about Miss Williamson! But I knew all the time it would come true. Of course that was *she*," Julia said, leaning closely upon his arm and looking up into his face.

"I don't know what you mean by *she*. It is Miss Williamson, certainly," he said.

"I was sure of it! She is not so pretty as I should have expected from your good taste. But why should she be pretty? She has so many other charms. Indeed, now that I think of it, it would have been mean of her to be pretty—and is it all settled?" Julia said.

She looked at him with eyes half laughing, half reproachful, full of provocation. She was as a matter of fact slightly alarmed, but not half so much as she said.

"I am not aware what there is to settle. We are country neighbours, and I meet them frequently—they go everywhere."

"Ah! so are we country neighbours, *amis d'enfance*: but I don't go everywhere, Lord Erradeen. Yes, I called you Walter; that was for a purpose, to pique her curiosity, to make her ask who was that forward horrid girl. Did she? I hope she was piqued."

"I heard nothing about any forward, horrid girl. She is not that sort of person. But I prefer to hear about yourself rather than to discuss Miss Williamson. When did you come? and where are you? What a pity," Walter said hypocritically, "that you come so late."

"Ah, isn't it? but what then? We are too poor to think of the season. This is what one's fine friends always do. They ask us for the last week, when everything is stifled in dust—when all you revellers are dead tired and want nothing so much as to go away—then is the moment for poor relations. But mind that you come to Bruton Street," Julia said. "It gives me consequence. They are not very much in society, and a title always tells."

"You do not leave any ground for my vanity. I am not to suppose that I am asked for any other reason."

Julia pressed his arm a little with her fingers. She sighed and gave him a look full of meaning.

"The Tom Herberts will think a great deal of you," she said; "they will instantly ask you to dinner. As for me—what am I that I should express any feeling? We are country neighbours, as you were saying. But enough of me. Let us return to our—lamb," cried Julia. "Tell me, have you seen a great deal of her? How little I thought when we used to laugh about Miss Williamson that it would come true."

"It has come true, as it began, in your imagination," said Walter, provoked, and thinking the reiteration vulgar. He was aware that a great many people who knew him were remarking the air with which this new young lady hung upon his arm. They were not equal in this respect. She had few acquaintances, and did not care, nay, would have been pleased that she should be remarked; whereas he began to throb with impatience and eager desire to get away from the comment he foresaw, and from the situation altogether. Julia was very pretty, more pretty and sparkling in the pleasure of having met and secured him thus at the very outset of her too-short and too-late campaign in town, than he had ever known her, and there was nothing that was objectionable in her dress. The Tom Herberts were people against whom nothing could be said. And yet Lord Erradeen, himself not much more than a novice, felt that to everybody whom they met, Julia would be truly a country neighbour, a girl whom no one knew, and whose object, to secure a recreant lover, would be jumped at by many fine observant eyes. There was no return of tenderness in his sentiments towards her. Indeed there had been no tenderness in his sentiments at any time he said to himself with some indignation, which made it all the more hard that he should thus be exhibited as her captive before the eyes of assembled London now. But notwithstanding his impatience he could not extricate himself from Julia's toils. When after various little pretences of going to see certain pictures, which she never looked at, she suffered him to take her back to her friends, Lady Herbert showed herself most gracious to the young man. She begged that as Julia and he were, as she heard, very old friends, he would come to Bruton Street whenever it suited him. Would he dine there to-morrow, next day? It would give Sir

Thomas and herself the greatest pleasure. Dear Julia, unfortunately, had come to town so late: there was scarcely anything going on to make it worth her while: and it would be so great a pleasure to her to see something of her old friend. Julia gave him little looks of satirical comment aside while her cousin made these little speeches, and whispers still more emphatic as he accompanied her down-stairs in the train of the Herberts, who were too happy to get away after waiting an hour for the young lady. "Don't you think it is beautiful to see how concerned she is for my pleasure; and so sorry that I have come so late! The truth is that she is delighted to make your acquaintance. But come, do come, all the same," she said, her cheek almost touching Walter's shoulder as she looked up in his face.

Need it be doubted that, with the usual malign disposition of affairs at such a crisis, the Williamsons' carriage drew up behind that of the Herberts, and that Walter had to encounter the astonished gaze of good Mr. Williamson, and the amused but not very friendly look of Katie, as he appeared in this very intimate conjunction? Julia's face so full of delighted and affectionate dependence raised towards him, and his own head stooped towards her to hear what she was saying. He scarcely could turn aside now to give them one deprecating glance, praying for a suspension of judgment. When he had put Julia into her cousin's carriage, and responded as best he could to the "Now remember to-morrow!" which she called to him from the window, he was just in time to see Mr. Williamson's honest countenance, with a most puzzled aspect, directed to him from the window of the next carriage as the footman closed the door. The good man waved his hand by way of good-night, but his look was perplexed and uncomfortable. Walter stood behind on the steps of Burlington House amid all the shouts of the servants and clang of the hoofs and carriages, himself too much bewildered to know what he was doing. After a while he returned to get his coat, and walked home with the sense of having woke out of a most unpleasant dream, which somehow was true.

As for Katie, she drove home without a remark, while her father talked and wondered, and feared lest they had been "ill bred" to Lord Erradeen. "He came with us, and he would naturally calculate on coming home with us," the good man said. But Katie took no notice. She was "a wilful monkey" as he had often said, and sometimes it would happen to her like this, to take her own way. When they reached the hotel, Captain Underwood, of all people in the world, was standing in the hall with the sleepy waiter who had waited up for them. "I thought perhaps Erradeen might be with you," the captain said apologetically. Katie, who on ordinary occasions could not endure him, made some gracious reply, and asked him to come in with the most unusual condescension though it was so late. "Lord Erradeen is not with us," she said. "He found some friends, people just newly come to town, so far as I could judge, a Miss Julia—I did not catch her name—somebody from Sloebury."

"Oh!" said Underwood, excited by his good fortune, "Julia Herbert. Poor Erradeen! just when he wanted to be with you! Well that's hard; but perhaps he deserved it."

"What did he deserve? I supposed," said Katie, "from the way they talked, that they were old friends."

Underwood did not in his heart wish to injure Walter—rather the other way; he wanted him to marry Katie, whose wealth was dazzling even to think of. But Walter had not behaved well to him, and he could not resist the temptation of revenging himself, especially as he was aware, like all the rest, that a lovers' quarrel is a necessary incident in a courtship. He smiled accordingly and said, "I know: they are such old friends that the lady perhaps has some reason to think that Erradeen had used her rather badly. He is that kind of a fellow you know: he must always have some one to amuse himself with. He used to be dangling after her to no end, singing duets, and that sort of thing. Sloebury is the dullest place in creation—there was nothing else to do."

Katie made very little demonstration. She pressed her lips tightly together for a moment and then she said, "You see, papa, it was not ill-bred, but the most polite thing you could have done to leave Lord Erradeen. Good-night, Captain Underwood." And she swept out of the room with her candle, her silken train rustling after her, as though it was too full of indignation with the world. Her father stood somewhat blankly gazing after her. He turned to the other with a plaintive look when she was gone.

"Man," said Mr. Williamson, "I would not have said that. Don't you see there is a tiff, a kind of a coolness, and it is just making matters worse? Will you take anything? No? Well, it is late, as you say, and I will bid you good-night."

It was thus that the effect produced by Julia's appearance was made decisive. Walter for his part, walking slowly along in the depth of the night towards his rooms, was in the most curiously complicated state of feeling. He was angry and indignant both at Miss Herbert's encounter, and the assumption on the part of the Williamsons that it was to them that his attention belonged; and he was disturbed and uneasy at the interruption of that very smooth stream which was not indeed true love, but yet was gliding on to a similar consummation. These were his sentiments on the surface; but underneath other feelings found play. The sense that one neutralised the other, and that he was in the position of having suddenly recovered his freedom, filled his mind with secret elation. After he had expended a good deal of irritated feeling upon the girl whom he felt to be pursuing him, and her whom he pursued, there suddenly came before his eyes a vision, soft, and fresh, and cool, which came like the sweet Highland air in his face, as he went along the hot London street—Oona standing on the beach, looking out from her isle upon the departing guest. What right had he to think of Oona? What was there in that dilemma to suggest to him a being so much above it, a creature so frank yet proud, who never could have entered into any such

competition? But he was made up of contradictions, and this was how it befell. The streets were still hot and breathless after the beating of the sun all day upon the unshaded pavements and close lines of houses. It was sweet to feel in imagination the ripple of the mountain air, the coolness of the woods and water. But it was only in imagination. Oona with her wistful sweet eyes was as far off from him, as far off as heaven itself. And in the mean time he had a sufficiently difficult imbroglio of affairs on hand.

Next morning Lord Erradeen had made up his mind. He had passed a disturbed and uneasy night. There was no longer any possibility of delay. Oona, after all, was but a vision. Two or three days—what was that to fix the colour of a life? He would always remember, always be grateful to her. She had come to his succour in the most terrible moment. But when he rose from his uneasy sleep, there was in him a hurrying impulsion which he seemed unable to resist. Something that was not his own will urged and hastened him. Since he had known Katie all had gone well. He would put it, he thought, beyond his own power to change, he would go to her that very morning and make his peace and decide his life. That she might refuse him did not occur to Walter. He had a kind of desire to hurry to the hotel before breakfast, which would have been indecorous and ridiculous, to get it over. Indeed, so strong was the impulse in him to do this, that he had actually got his hat and found himself in the street, breakfastless, before it occurred to him how absurd it was. He returned after this and went through the usual morning routine, though always with a certain breathless sense of something that hurried him on. As soon as he thought it becoming, he set out with a half-solemn feeling of self-renunciation, almost of sacrifice. If 'twere done when 'tis done, then 'twere well it were done quickly. This was not a very lover-like frame of mind. He felt that he was giving up everything that was visionary, the poetry of vague ideals, and even more, the inspiration of that face, the touch of that hand which had been as soft as snow. Katie's hand was a very firm and true one. It would give him an honest help in the world; and with her by his side the other kind of aid, he said to himself, would be unnecessary. No conflict with the powers of darkness would be forced upon him. His heated imagination adopted these words in haste, and did not pause to reflect how exaggerated and ridiculous they would sound to any reasonable ear.

He found Mr. Williamson alone in the room where Katie was usually ready to receive him in her fresh morning toilette and smile of welcome. The good man wore a puzzled look, and was looking over his bill with his cheque-book beside him on the table. He looked up when Lord Erradeen came in, with a countenance full of summings up.

"Yes," he said, "I am just settling everything, which is never very pleasant. You need to be made of money when you come to London. Katie is away this morning by skreigh of day. Oh, yes, it was a very sudden resolution. She just took it into her little head. And here am I left to pay everything, and follow as soon as I can. It is breaking up our pleasant party. But what am I to do? I tell her she rules me with a rod of iron. I hope we'll see a great deal of you in autumn, when you come to Auchnasheen."

Walter went back to his rooms with a fire of resentment in his veins, but yet a sense of exhilaration quite boyish and ridiculous. Whatever might happen, he was free. And now what was to be his next step? To play with fire and Julia, or to take himself out of harm's way? He almost ran against Underwood as he debated this question, hurrying towards his own door.

CHAPTER X.

It was late in October, when summer was gone even from the smooth English lanes about Sloebury, and autumn, with that brave flourish of flags and trumpets by which she conceals decay, was in full sway over the Scotch hills and moors when Lord Erradeen was next heard of by those interested in him. He had gone abroad at the end of the season, without even returning to Sloebury to see his mother, and very little had been known of him during this disappearance. Mrs. Methven, it is to be supposed, knew something of his movements, but the replies she gave to questions addressed to her were short and vague. She generally answered that he was in Switzerland; but that is rather a wide word, as everybody said, and if she was acquainted more particularly with his whereabouts she chose to keep the information to herself. And in Scotland there was nothing at all known about him. All kinds of business waited till he should be there, or should answer to the appeals made him. Letters elicited no reply, and indeed it was by no means certain that he got the letters that were sent to him. Mrs. Methven writing to Mr. Milnathort, avowed, though with reserve, that she was by no means sure of her son's address, as he was travelling about; and at his club they had no information. So that all the details of the management of the estates, about which their proprietor required to be consulted, had accumulated, and lay hopelessly in the Edinburgh office, sometimes arranging themselves by mere progress of time, though this the angry lawyer, provoked beyond measure, would not allow. The Williamsons had returned to Loch Houran, to their magnificent modern castle of Birkenbraes, in August, for the grouse: it being the habit of the hospitable millionnaire to fill his vast house for those rites of autumnal observance; but neither did they know anything of the wandering peer. "We saw a great deal of young Erradeen in London," Mr. Williamson said; "but at the end he just slipped through our fingers like a knotless thread." "That seems to be his most prominent characteristic," said Lord Innishouran, who for a time flattered himself that he had "acquired an influence" over this unsatisfactory young man; and the other potentates of the county shook their heads, and remarked that the Erradeens were always strange, and that this new man must be just like the rest.

There was another too who began to be of the same opinion. Notwithstanding the indignant manner in which Katie had darted away after discovering the previous relations of Walter with Julia Herbert, and hearing Underwood's malicious statement that "he must always have some one to amuse himself with," there was yet in her mind a conviction that something more must be heard of Lord Erradeen. He would write, she thought, when he found that she had not waited for any explanation from him. It was not possible that after the close intercourse that had existed he would disappear and make no sign. And when months passed by and nothing was heard of him, Katie was more surprised than she would confess. He had "slipped away like a knotless thread." Nothing could be more true than this description. From the moment when she turned away from him in the great room at Burlington House, she had heard or seen nothing more of Walter. Her heart was quite whole, and there was not any personal wistfulness in her questionings; but she was piqued, and curious, and perhaps more interested in Lord Erradeen than she had ever been before.

In these circumstances it was very natural, almost inevitable, that she should take Oona into her confidence. For Oona was known, on his first appearance, to have "seen a great deal" of Lord Erradeen. This she herself explained with some eagerness to mean that she had met him three times—one of these times being the memorable moment of the eviction which he had put a stop to, an incident which had naturally made a great commotion in the country-side. But Mrs. Forrester had never felt the slightest reluctance to talk of their intercourse with the young lord. She had declared that she took a great interest in him, and that she was his first friend on Loch Houran: and anticipated with cheerful confidence the certainty of his coming back, "more like one of my own boys than anything else," she said. The fact that the Forresters were the first to know, and indeed the only people who had known him, did indeed at the time of his first appearance identify them with Lord Erradeen in a marked way. The minister and the factor, though not match-makers, had allowed, as has been said, to steal into their minds, that possibility which is more or less in the air when youth and maiden meet. And there were others who had said—some, that Oona Forrester would make a capital wife for Lord Erradeen, a young man who was a stranger in the country; some, that it would be a good thing for Oona to secure, before any one else knew him, the best match on the loch; and some even, that though Mrs. Forrester looked such a simple person, she had her wits all about her, and never neglected the interests of her family. In the course of time, as Lord Erradeen disappeared and was not heard of any more, this gossip drooped and died away. But it left a general impression on the mind of the district that there was a tie of friendship between Lord Erradeen and the ladies of the Isle. They had something to do with him—not love, since he had never come again; but some link of personal knowledge, interest, which nobody else had: any information about him would naturally be carried there first; and Katie, having elucidations to ask as well as confidences to make, lost no time in carrying her budget to the Isle.

The true position of affairs there was unsuspected by any one. The blank which Oona anticipated had closed down upon her with a force even stronger than that which she had feared. The void, altogether unknown to any one but herself, had made her sick with shame and distress. It was inconceivable to her that the breaking off of an intercourse so slight (as she said to herself), the absence of an individual of whom she knew so little, not enough even for the most idiotical love at first sight, should have thus emptied out the interests of life, and made such a vacancy about her. It was a thing not to be submitted to, not to be acknowledged even, which she would have died sooner than let any one know, which she despised herself for being capable of. But notwithstanding all this self-indignation, repression, and shame, it was there. Life seemed emptied out of all its interest to the struggling, indignant, unhappy girl. Why should such a thing be? A chance encounter, no fault of hers, or his, or any one's. A few meetings, to her consciousness quite accidental, which she had neither wished for nor done anything to bring about. And then some strange difficulty, danger, she could not tell what, in which he had appealed to her for her help. She would have refused that help to no one. It was as natural for her to give aid and service as to breathe. But why, why should a thing so simple have brought upon her all this that followed? She was not aware even that she loved the man; no! she said to herself with a countenance ablaze with shame, how could she love him? she knew nothing of him; and yet when he had gone away the light had been drawn out of her horizon, the heart out of her life. It was intolerable, it was cruel; and yet so it was. Nobody knew with what a miserable monotony the old routine of existence went on for some time after. She was so indignant, so angry, so full of resistance, that it disturbed her temper a little: and perhaps the irritation did her good. She went on (of course, having no choice in the matter) with all her old occupations just as usual, feeling herself in a sort of iron framework within which she moved without any volition of her own. The winter months passed like one long blank unfeatured day. But when the spring came, Oona's elastic nature had at last got the upper hand. There began again to be a little sweetness to her in her existence. All this long struggle, and the slowly acquired victory, had been absolutely unsuspected by those about her. Mysie, perhaps, spectator as servants are of the life from which they are a little more apart than the members of a family, divined a disturbance in the being of her young mistress who was at the same time her child; but even she had no light as to what it was; and thus unobserved, unknown, though with many a desperate episode and conflict more than bloody, the little war began to be over. It left the girl with a throbbing experience of pain such as it is extraordinary to think could be acquired in the midst of so much peace, and at the same time with a sort of sickening apprehension now and then of the possibility of a renewal of the conflict. But no, she said to herself, that was not possible. Another time she would at least be forewarned. She would put on her armour and look to all her defences. Such a cheap and easy conquest should never be made of her again.

She had thus regained the command of herself without in the least forgetting what had been, when Katie came with her story to claim her advice and sympathy. Katie came from her father's castle with what was in reality a more splendid equipage than that which conveyed her with swift prancing horses along the side of the loch. She came attended by a crew of gentlemen, the best in these parts. Young Tom Campbell, of the Ellermore family, was her bow oar. He was furthest off, as being hopelessly ineligible, and not having, even in his own opinion, the least right to come to speech of the heiress, for whom he had a hot boyish passion. Scott of Inverhouran, a Campbell too by the mother's side, and not far off the head of his clan, was stroke; and between these two sat the son of a Glasgow trader, who could have bought them both up, and an English baronet who had come to Birkenbraes nominally for the grouse, really for Katie. Tom of Ellermore was the only one of the crew who might not, as people say, have married anybody, from the Duke's daughter downwards. Katie was accompanied by a mild, grey-haired lady who had once been her governess, and a pretty little girl of fifteen, not indisposed to accept a passing tribute from the least engaged of the gentlemen. Katie deposited her companions and her crew with Mrs. Forrester, and calling Oona aside, rushed up-stairs to that young lady's bed-chamber, where it was evident nobody could pursue them.

"Oh, Oona, never mind *them*," she cried. "Your mother will give them their tea and scones; but I want you—I want your advice—or at least I want you to tell me what you think. They will do very well with Mrs. Forrester." Then she drew her friend into the little elbow-chair in the window, Oona's favourite seat, and threw herself down on the footstool at her feet. "I want you to tell me —" she said, with a certain solemnity, "what you think of Lord Erradeen."

"Of Lord Erradeen?" said Oona, faintly. She was taken so completely by surprise that the shock almost betrayed her. Katie fixed upon her a pair of open, penetrating brown eyes. They were both fair, but Oona was of a golden tint, and Katie of a less distinguished light brownness. Katie, with her little profile somewhat blurred and indistinct in the outlines, had an air of common sense and reason, while Oona's was the higher type of poetry and romance.

"Yes; you know him better than any one about here. But first, I will tell you the circumstances. We saw a great deal of him in London. He went everywhere with us, and met us everywhere——"

"Then, Katie," cried Oona, with a little burst of natural impatience; "you must know him a great deal better than I."

Said Kate calmly—"I am a quite different person from you, and I saw him only in society. Just hear me out, and you will know what I mean. People thought he was coming after me. I thought so myself more or less: but he never said a word. And the last night we met another girl, who took hold of him as some girls do—you know? Oh, not taking his arm with her hand, as you or I should do, or looking at him with her eyes; but just with a fling, with the whole of her, as those girls do. I was disgusted, and I sent him away. I don't think yet that he wished it, or cared. But of course he was obliged to go. And then Captain—I mean one that knew him—told me—oh, yes, that he was like that; he must always have some one to amuse himself with. I would not see him after: I just came away. Now what does it mean? Is he a thing of that sort, that is not worth thinking about; or is he—?—oh, no, I am not asking for your advice: I ask you what you think."

Oona was not able to quench the agitation that rose up in her heart. It was like a sea suddenly roused by an unforeseen storm.

"I wish," she said, "you would not ask me such questions. I think nothing at all. I—never saw him —in that light."

"What do you think?" said Katie, without changing her tone. She did not look in her friend's face to make any discovery, but trifled with the bangles upon her arm, and left Oona free. As a matter of fact, she was quite unsuspicious of her companion's agitation; for the question, though very important, was not agitating to herself. She was desirous of having an unbiassed opinion, but even if that were unfavourable, it would not, she was aware, be at all likely to break her heart.

Oona on her side was used to having her advice asked. In the interval she schooled herself to a consideration of the question.

"I will tell you, Katie, how I have seen him," she said, "here with my mother, and among the poor cotters in the Truach Glas. How could I tell from that how he would behave to a girl? He was very pretty, with my mother. I liked him for it. He listened to her and did what she told him, and never put on an air, or looked wearied, as gentlemen will sometimes do. Then he was very kind to the cotters, as I have told you. To see them turned out made him wild with indignation. You may judge by that the kind of man he was. It was not like doing them a favour; it was mending a miserable wrong."

"I have heard all this before," said Katie, with a slight impatience, "but what has that to do with it? You are telling me facts, when I want your opinion. The one has nothing to do with the other. I can put this and that together myself. But what I want is an opinion. What do you *think*? Don't put me off any longer, but tell me that," Katie cried.

"What do you want my opinion about?" asked the other, with also, in her turn, some impatience in her voice.

Then Katie ceased playing with her bangles, and looked up. She had never before met with such an unsatisfactory response from Oona. She said with a directness which denoted a natural and

hereditary turn for the practical—"Whether he will come; and if he comes, what it will be for?"

"He will certainly come," said Oona, "because he must. You that have lived on the loch so long—you know what the lords of Erradeen have to do."

"And do you mean to say," cried Katie, with indignation, "that an old silly story will bring him—and not me? If that is your opinion, Oona! Do you know that he is a man like ourselves? Lord Innishouran thinks very well of him. He thinks there is something in him. For my part, I have never seen that he was clever; but I should think he had some sense. And how could a man who has any sense allow himself to be led into that?" She jumped up from her seat at Oona's feet in her indignation. "Perhaps you believe in the Warlock lord?" she said, with fine scorn. "Perhaps *he* believes in him? If Lord Erradeen should speak of that to me, I would laugh in his face. With some people it might be excusable, but with a man who is of his century!—The last one was a fool—everybody says so: and had his head full of rubbish, when he was not going wrong. By the by!" Katie cried—then stopped, as if struck by a new thought which had not occurred to her before.

"What is it?" said Oona, who had been listening with mingled resignation and impatience.

"When we took Lord Erradeen up he was with that Captain Underwood, who used to be with the old lord. I told him you would be sorry to see it. Now that I remember, he never asked me the reason why; but Captain Underwood disappeared. That looks as if he had given great importance to what I said to him. Perhaps after all, Oona, it is you of whom he was thinking. That, however, would not justify him in coming after me. I am very fond of you, but I should not care to be talked about all over London because a gentleman was in love with *you*!"

Oona had coloured high, and then grown pale. "You will see, if you think of it, that you must not use such words about me," she said, with an effort to be perfectly calm. "There is no gentleman in love—as you say—with me. I have never put it in any one's power to speak so." As she spoke it was not only once but a dozen times that her countenance changed. With a complexion as clear as the early roses, and blood that ebbs and flows in her veins at every touch of feeling, how can a girl preserve such secrets from the keen perceptions of another? Katie kept an eye upon her, watching from under her downcast eyelids. She had the keenest powers of vision, and even could understand, when thus excited, characters of a higher tone than her own. She did not all at once say anything, but paused to take in this new idea and reconcile it with the other ideas that had been in her mind before.

"This is very funny," said Katie, after an interval. "I never thought anything dramatical was going to happen to me: but I suppose, as they say in books, that your life is always a great deal more near that sort of thing than you suppose."

"What sort of thing?" said Oona, who felt that she had betrayed herself, yet was more determined than ever not to betray herself or to yield a single step to the curiosity of the world as embodied in this inquiring spirit. She added, with a little flush of courage, "When you, a great heiress, come in the way of a young lord, there is a sort of royal character about it. You will—marry for the sake of the world as well as for your own sake; and all the preliminaries, the doubts, and the difficulties, and the obstacles that come in the way, of course they are all like a romance. This interruption will be the most delightful episode. The course of true love never did run——"

"Oh stop!" cried Katie, "that's all so commonplace. It is far more exciting and original, Oona, that we should be rivals, you and I."

"You are making a great mistake," said Oona, rising with the most stately gravity. "I am no one's rival. I would not be even if——. But in this case it is absurd. I scarcely know Lord Erradeen, as I have told you. Let us dismiss him from the conversation," she added, with a movement of her hands as if putting something away. It had been impossible, however, even to say so much without the sudden flush which said more to the eyes of Katie, not herself addicted to blushing, than any words could do to her ears.

"It is very interesting," she said. "We may dismiss him from the conversation, but we can't dismiss him from life, you know. And if he is sure to come to Kinloch Houran, as you say, not for me, nor for you, but for that old nonsense, why then he will be——And we shall be forced to consider the question. For my part, I find it far more interesting than I ever thought it would be. You are proud, and take it in King Cambyses' vein. But I'm not proud," said Katie, "I am a student of human nature. It will take a great deal of thinking over, and it's very interesting. I am fond of you, Oona, and you are prettier and better than I am; but I don't quite think at this moment that I will give in even to you, till——"

"If you insist on making a joke, I cannot help it," said Oona, still stately, "but I warn you, Katie, that you will offend me."

"Oh, offend you! Why should I offend you?" cried Katie, putting her arm within that of the princess. "It is no joke, it is a problem. When I came to ask for your opinion I never thought it would be half so interesting. If he has good taste, of course I know whom he will choose."

"Katie!" cried Oona, with a violent blush, "if you think that I would submit to be a candidate—a competitor—for any man to choose——"

"How can you help it?" said Katie, calmly. "It appears it's nature. We have a great deal to put up with, being women, but we can't help ourselves. Of course the process will go on in his own mind. He will not be so brutal as to let us see that he is weighing and considering. And we can have our

revenge after, if we like: we can always refuse. Come, Oona, I am quite satisfied. You and me, that are very fond of each other, we are rivals. We will not say a word about it, but we'll just go on and see what will happen. And I promise you I shall be as fond of you as ever, whatever happens. Men would say that was impossible—just as they say, the idiots, that women are never true friends. *That* is mere folly; but this is a problem, and it will be very interesting to work it out. I wonder if those boys have eaten all the scones," Katie said, with the greatest simplicity, as she led Oona down-stairs. She was so perfectly at her ease, taking the command of her more agitated companion, and so much pleased with her problem, that Oona's proud excitement of self-defence melted away in the humour of the situation. She threw herself into the gaiety of the merry young party down-stairs, among whom Mrs. Forrester was in her element, dispensing tea and the most liberal supply of scones, which Mysie, with equal satisfaction, kept bringing in in ever fresh supplies, folded in the whitest of napkins. Katie immediately claimed her share of these dainties, intimating at once, with the decision of a connoisseur, the kind she preferred: but when supplied remained a little serious, paying no attention to "the boys," as she, somewhat contemptuously, entitled her attendants, and thinking over her problem. But Oona, in her excitement and self-consciousness, ran over with mirth and spirits. She talked and laughed with nervous gaiety, so that Hamish heard the sound of the fun down upon the beach where he watched over the boats, lest a passing shower should come up and wet the cushions of the magnificent vessel from Birkenbraes, which he admired and despised. "Those Glasgow persons," said Hamish, "not to be disrespectful, they will just be made of money; but Miss Oona she'll be as well content with no cushions at all. And if they'll be making her laugh that's a good thing," Hamish said.

CHAPTER XI.

The first to see the subject of so many thoughts was not any one of those to whom his return was of so much importance. Neither was it at Kinloch Houran that Walter first appeared. On a cold October evening, in one of the early frosts from which everybody augurs a severe winter, and in the early twilight which makes people exclaim how short the days are getting, he knocked suddenly at the door of Mr. Milnathort's house in Edinburgh. Being dark everywhere else, it was darker still in the severe and classic coldness of Moray Place. The great houses gathered round, drawing, one might have thought, a closer and closer circle; the shrubs in the enclosure shivered before the breeze. Up the hill from the Firth came the north-east wind, cutting like a scythe. It was a night when even a lighted window gives a certain comfort to the wayfarer; but the Edinburgh magnates had scarcely yet returned from the country, and most of the houses were dark, swathed in brown paper and cobwebs. But winter or summer made but little difference to the house of Mr. Milnathort, and there a certain light of human welcome was almost always to be found. Lord Erradeen came quickly along the Edinburgh streets, which are grim in the teeth of a north-easter. His frame was unstrung and his spirit unsatisfied as of old. He had been "abroad"—that is to say, he had been hurrying from one place to another in search of the unattainable one which should not be dull. Most places were dull; there was nothing to do in them. He took in at a draught the capabilities of folly that were there, then passed on in the vain quest. Had he been wholly ignoble he would have been more easily satisfied. But he was not satisfied. In the worst he seemed to want something worse, as in the best he wanted something better. He was all astray upon the world, desiring he did not know what, only aware that nothing was sufficient for his desires. Underwood, who was his companion, had catered vulgarly for the unhappy young man, who used with scorn the means of distraction provided him, and was not distracted, and upon whom disgust so soon followed novelty that his companion was at his wits' end. And now he had come back, obeying an impulse which he neither understood nor wished to obey. A necessity seemed laid upon him; all in a moment it had risen up in his mind, a sense that he must get back. It was so involuntary, so spontaneous, that it did not even occur to him at first to resist it, or to think of it as anything but a natural impulse.

He had not been able to rest after this strange inclination came upon him, and it seemed to him in the heat of it that he had always had the same desire, that all the time this was what he had wanted, to get back. He hurried along over land and water, sometimes in the stream of summer tourists coming home, sometimes crossing the other tide of the sick and feeble going away—and when he touched English soil again, that he should have hurried to Edinburgh of all places in the world, was beyond Walter's power of explanation even to himself. He had felt a barrier between himself and the home of his youth. His mother was separated altogether from his new existence. She could not comprehend it, he thought, and his heart turned from the explanations that would be necessary. He could not go to her; and to whom could he go? The suggestion that came into his mind was as fantastical as the whole strange story of his recent life. He was nothing indeed but a bundle of caprices, moved and played upon as if by the winds. And it had seemed a sort of relief to his uncertain mind and consuming thoughts when it occurred to him to come to Moray Place to see the invalid who had known so much about him, while he knew nothing of her. It relieved him, as any resolution relieves an uncertain mind. It was something between him and that future which always failed to his expectations. When he had made up his mind he reflected no more, but went on, and even had an uneasy nap in the railway-carriage as he came north; nor ever asked himself why he was coming till he went up the steps at Mr. Milnathort's door, and then it was too late for any such question. He mounted the long stone staircase with all the throbbings of fatigue in his brain, the sweep and movement of a long journey. Only once before had he been in this house, yet it seemed familiar to him as if it had been his home, and the unchanged aspect of everything affected him as it affects men who have been away for half a life-time—so many things happening to him, and nothing here. This gave him a certain giddiness as

he followed the same servant up the same stairs. He was not the same. He had been unconscious of all the peculiarities of his fate when he crossed that threshold before. He had known the good, but not the evil; and now the very carpets, the sound of the door rumbling into the echoes of the tall, silent house, were the same—but he so far from being the same! Then in a moment out of the dim night, the half-lighted stair, he came upon the soft blaze of light in which Miss Milnathort delighted. She lay on her sofa as if she had never stirred, her old-young face in all its soft brightness, her small delicate hands in continual motion. She gave a little cry at the sight of Walter, and held out those hands to him.

"You have come!" she cried. "I was looking for you;" raising herself on her couch as much as was possible to her, as if she would have thrown herself into his arms. When she felt the pressure of his hands, tears sprang to her eyes. "I knew," she cried, "that you would come. I have been looking for you, and praying for you, Lord Erradeen."

"Perhaps," said Walter, moved too, he could scarcely tell why, "that is how I have come."

"Oh, but I am glad, glad to see you," the poor lady said. "You never came back last year; but I will not reproach you—I am too glad to have you here. And where have you been, and what have you been doing? To see you is like a child coming home."

"I have been in many different places, and uneasy in all," said Walter; "and as for what I have been doing, it has not been much good: wandering about the face of the earth, seeking I don't know what; not knowing, I think, even what I want."

She held out her hand to him again: her eyes were full of pity and tenderness.

"Oh how I wanted you to come back that I might have spoken freely to you. I will tell you what you want, Lord Erradeen."

"Stop a little," he said, "I don't wish to plunge into that. Let us wait a little. I think I am pleased to come back, though I hate it. I am pleased always more or less to do what I did not do yesterday."

"That is because your mind is out of order, which is very natural," she said. "How should it be in order with so much to think of? You will have been travelling night and day?"

"Rather quickly; but that matters nothing; it is easy enough travelling. I am not so effeminate as to mind being tired; though as a matter of fact I am not tired," he said. "So far as that goes, I could go on night and day."

She looked at him with that mingling of pleasure and pain with which a mother listens to the confidences of her child.

"Have you been home to see your mother?" she asked.

Walter shook his head.

"I have had no thought but how to get to Scotland the quickest way. I have felt as if something were dragging me. What is it? All this year I have been struggling with something. I have sometimes thought if I had come back here you could have helped me."

"I would—I would! if I could," she cried.

"It is not a thing that can be endured," said Walter; "it must come to an end. I don't know how or by what means; but one thing is certain, I will not go on bearing it. I will rather make an end of myself."

She put a hand quickly upon his arm.

"Oh do not say that; there is much, much that must be done before you can despair: and *that* is the thought of despair. Some have done it, but you must not. No—not you—not you."

"What must I do then?"

She caressed his arm with her thin, little, half-transparent hand, and looked at him wistfully with her small face, half child, half old woman, suffused and tremulous.

"Oh!" she said, "my bonnie lad! you must be good—you must be good first of all."

Walter laughed; he drew himself back a little out of her reach.

"I am not good," he said. "I have never been good. Often enough I have been disgusted with myself, and miserable by moments. But if that is the first thing, I do not know how to attain to it, for I am not good."

She looked at him without any change in her face while he made this confession. It did not seem to make much impression upon her.

"I can tell you," she said, "how to overcome the devil and all his ways; but it costs trouble, Lord Erradeen. Without that you will always be as you are, full of troubles and struggles: but you should thank your God that you cannot be content with ill-doing like those that are the children of perdition. To be content with it—that is the worst of all."

"Well, then I am in a hopeful way, it appears," said Walter with a sort of laugh, "for I am certainly far enough from being content." After a minute's pause he added—"I said we should not plunge

into this subject at once; tell me about yourself. Are you well? Are you better?"

"I am well enough," she said, "but never will I be better. I have known that for many years—almost from the moment when, to get away from *him*, I fell off yon old walls, and became what you see."

"To get away from—whom?" He glanced round him as she spoke with a look which was half alarmed and half defiant. "I know," he said, in a low voice, "what delusions are about."

"From Him. What he is, or who he is, I know no more than you. I have thought like you that it was my own delusion. I have wondered from year to year if maybe I had deceived myself. But the upshot of all is what I tell you. I am lying here these thirty years and more, because, being very young, I had no command of myself, but was frightened and flew from Him."

"It is against all possibility, all good sense, against everything one believes. I will not believe it," cried Walter; "you were young as you say, and frightened. And I was—a fool—unprepared, not knowing what to think."

Miss Milnathort shook her head. She made no further reply; and there was a little interval of silence which Walter made no attempt to break. What could he say? It was impossible: and yet he had no real scepticism to oppose to this strange story. In words, in mind, he could not allow that either he or she were more than deceived; but in himself he had no doubt on the subject. His intelligence was easily convinced, indeed, that to attribute the events that happened to him to supernatural influence was in contradiction to everything he had ever been taught, and that it was superstition alone which could invest the mysterious inhabitant of Kinloch Houran with power to act upon his mind across great seas and continents, or to set any occult forces to work for that purpose. Superstition beyond all excuse; and yet he was as thoroughly convinced of it in the depths of his being as he was defiant on the surface. There was perfect silence in the room where these two sat together with a sense of fellowship and sympathy. As for Lord Erradeen, he had no inclination to say anything more. It was impossible, incredible, contrary to everything he believed: and yet it was true: and he did not feel the contradiction to be anything extraordinary, anything to be protested against, in this curious calm of exhaustion in which he was. While he sat thus quite silent Miss Milnathort began to speak.

"Thirty years ago," she said, "there was a young Lord Erradeen that was something like yourself. He was a distant cousin once, that never thought to come to the title. He was betrothed when he was poor to a young girl of his own condition in life. When he became Lord Erradeen he was bidden to give her up and he refused. Oh, if he had lived he would have broken the spell! He would not give up his love. I will not say that he was not terribly beaten down and broken with what he heard and saw, and what he had to bear; but he never said a word to me of what was the chief cause. When the summons came he got us all to go to see the old castle, and perhaps, with a little bravado, to prove that he would never, never yield. How it was that I was left alone I can never remember, for my head was battered and stupid, and it was long, long, before I got the command of my senses again. It was most likely when Walter (he was Walter too; it is the great Methven name) was attending to the others, my brother and my mother, who was living then. I was a romantic bit girlie, and fond of beautiful views and all such things. When I was standing upon the old wall, there suddenly came forward to speak to me a grand gentleman. I thought I had never seen such a one before. You have seen him and you know; often and often have I thought I have seen him since. And it may be that I have," she said, pausing suddenly. It was perhaps the interruption in the soft flowing of her voice that startled Walter. He made a sudden movement in his chair, and looked round him as if he too felt another spectator standing by.

"I am not frightened now," said the invalid with her calm little voice, "lying here so long putting things together I am frightened no more. Sometimes I am sorry for him, and think that it is not all ill that is in that burdened spirit. I have taken it upon me even," she said, folding her little, worn hands, "to say a word about him now and then when I say my prayers. I never thought at that time that he was anything more than the grandest gentleman I ever saw. He began to speak to me about my engagement, and if I thought of the harm I was doing Walter, and that it was his duty to think of the family above all. It was like death to hear it, but I had a great deal of spirit in those days, and I argued with him. I said it was better for the family that he should marry me, than marry nobody—and that I had no right to take my troth from him. Then he began to argue too. He said that to sacrifice was always best, that I could not love him, if I would not give up everything for him. It might have been Scripture. What could I answer to that? I was just dazed by it, and stood and looked in his face: he looked like a prophet of God, and he said I should give up my love, if I knew what true love was. I have little doubt I would have done it, after that; but just then my Walter's voice sounded up from where he was calling out to me. 'Where are you, where are you? nothing can be done without you,' he cried. Oh, how well I remember the sound of his voice filling all the air! I turned round and I said, 'No, no, how can I break his heart':—when there came an awful change upon the face you know. His eyes flared like a great light, he made a step forward as if he would have seized me with his hands. And then terror took hold upon me, a kind of horrible panic. They say I must have started back. I mind nothing more for months and months," the soft little voice said.

The young man listened to this strange tragedy with an absorbed and wondering interest; and the sufferer lay smiling at him in a kind of half childlike, half angelic calm. One would have said she had grown no older since that day; and yet had lived for long ages with her little crushed frame and heart. He was overawed by the simplicity of the tale. He said after a pause, "And Walter—? how did it end?"

For a moment she did not say anything, but lay smiling, not looking at him. At last she answered softly with a great gravity coming over her face—"Lord Erradeen, after some years and many struggles, married the heiress of the Glen Oriel family, and brought a great deal of property to the house. He was to me like an angel from heaven. And his heart was broken. But how could I help him, lying crushed and broken here? What he did was well. It was not the best he could have done; because you see he could not give his heart's love again, and that is essential: but he did no harm. There was just an ending of it for one generation when I fell over yon wall. And his son died young, without ever coming to the age to bear the brunt, and the late lord, poor man, was just confused from the commencement, and never came to any good."

"What is the best he could have done?"

She turned to him with a little eagerness. "I have no instruction," she said, "I have only the sense that comes with much thinking and putting things together, if it is sense. I have lain here and thought it over for years and years, both in the night when everybody was sleeping, and in the day when they were all thinking of their own concerns. I think one man alone will never overcome that man we know. He is too much for you. If I have gleaned a little in my weakness, think what he must have found out in all these years. But I think if there were two, that were but one—two that had their hearts set upon what was good only, and would not listen to the evil part—I think before them he would lose his strength: he could do no more. But oh, how hard to be like that and to find the other? I am afraid you are far, far from it, Lord Erradeen."

"Call me Walter—like my predecessor," he said.

"You are not like him. He was never soiled with the world. His mind was turned to everything that was good. And me, though I was but a small thing, I had it in me to stand by him. Two souls that are one! I am thinking—and I have had a long, long time to think in—that this is what is wanted to free the race from that bondage."

"Do you mean—that there has never been such a pair to do what you say?"

"Perhaps it is that there never has been a cripple creature like me," she said with a smile, "to find it out. And at the best it is just a guess of mine. I have thought of everything else, but I can find nothing that will do. If you will think, however," said Miss Milnathort, "you will find it no such a light thing. Two of one mind—and that one mind set intent upon good, not evil. They will have to know. They will have to understand. The woman might miss it for want of knowing. She would have to be instructed in the whole mystery, and set her mind to it as well as the man. Do you think that is too easy? No, oh, no, it is not so very easy, Lord Erradeen."

"It would be impossible to me," said Walter with keen emotion, "my mind is not intent upon good. What I am intent on is—I don't know that there is anything I am intent on: except to pass the time and have my own way."

Miss Milnathort looked at him with the seriousness which changed the character of her face. "He that says that," she said, "is near mending it, Lord Erradeen."

"Do you think so?" he cried with a harsh little laugh, "then I have something to teach you still, ignorant as I am. To know you are wrong, alas! is not the same as being on the way to mend it. I have known that of myself for years, but I have never changed. If I have to decide a hundred times I will do just the same, take what I like best."

She looked at him wonderingly, folding her hands.

"I think you must be doing yourself injustice," she said.

"It is you that do human nature more than justice," said Walter; "you judge by what you know, by yourself; you prefer what is good; but I—don't do so. It is true: to know what is good does not make one like it, as you think. It is not a mistake of judgment, it is a mistake of the heart."

"Oh, my dear," said the poor lady, "you must be wronging yourself; your heart is tender and good, your eyes filled when I was telling you my story. I have seen that when there was any talk of fine and generous things your eyes have filled and your countenance changed. You have forgotten by times, and turned away from the right way; but you will not tell me that, looking it in the face, you prefer what is wrong. Oh no, Lord Erradeen, no, no."

"Perhaps," he said, "I never look anything in the face; that may be the reason or part of the reason; but the fact is that I do not prefer good because it is good. Oh no, I cannot deceive you. To be fully convinced that one is wrong is very little argument against one's habits, and the life that one likes. It does not seem worth while to test small matters by such a big standard, and, indeed one does not test them at all, but does—what happens to come in one's way at the moment."

A shade of trouble came over the soft little face. She looked up wondering and disturbed at the young man who sat smiling upon her, with a smile that was half scorn, half sympathy. The scorn, perhaps, was for himself; he made no pretence to himself of meaning better, or wishing to do better than his performance. And Miss Milnathort's distress was great.

"I thought," she said, faltering, "that the truth had but to be seen, how good it is, and every heart would own it. Oh, my young lord, you have no call to be like one of the careless that never think at all. You are forced to think: and when you see that your weirdless way leads to nothing but

subjection and bondage, and that the good is your salvation, as well for this world as the world to come——"

"Does not every man know that?" cried Walter. "Is it not instinctive in us to know that if we behave badly, the consequences will be bad one way or another? There is scarcely a fool in the world that does not know that—but what difference does it make? You must find some stronger argument. That is your innocence," he said, smiling at her.

At that moment the young man, with his experiences which were of a nature so different from hers, felt himself far more mature and learned in human nature than she; and she, who knew at once so much and so little, was abashed by this strange lesson. She looked at him with a deprecating anxious look, not knowing what to say.

"If the victory is to be by means of two whose heart is set on good, it will never be," said Walter with a sigh, "in my time. I will struggle and yield, and yield and struggle again, like those that have gone before me, and then, like them, pass away, and leave it to somebody else who will be hunted out from the corners of the earth as I was. And so, for all I can tell, it will go on for ever."

Here he made a pause, and another tide of feeling stole over him. "If I were a better man," he said with a changed look, "I think I know where—the other—might be found."

Miss Milnathort's soft, aged, childish countenance cleared, the wistful look vanished from her eyes, her smile came back. She raised herself up among her pillows as if she would have sat upright.

"Oh, my young lord! and does she love you like that?" she cried.

Walter felt the blood rush to his face; he put up his hands as if to stop the injurious thought. "Love me!" he said.

To do him justice, the idea was altogether new to him. He had thought of Oona often, and wondered what was the meaning of that softness in her eyes as she looked after him; but his thoughts had never ventured so far as this. He grew red, and then he grew pale.

"It is a profanity," he said. "How could she think of me at all? I was a stranger, and she was sorry for me. She gave me her hand, and strength came out of it. But if such a woman as that—stood by a true man—Pah! I am not a true man; I am a wretched duffer, and good for nothing. And Oona thinks as much of me, as little of me as—as little as—she thinks of any pitiful, unworthy thing."

He got up from his chair as he spoke, and began to pace about the room in an agitation which made his blood swell in his veins. He was already in so excitable a state that this new touch seemed to spread a sort of conflagration everywhere; his imagination, his heart, all the wishes and hopes—that "indistinguishable throng" that lie dormant so often, waiting a chance touch to bring them to life—all blazed into consciousness in a moment. He who had flirted to desperation with Julia Herbert, who had been on the point of asking Katie Williamson to marry him, was it possible all the time that Oona, and she only, had been the one woman in the world for him? He remembered how she had come before his thoughts at those moments when he had almost abandoned himself to the current which was carrying his heedless steps away. When he had thought of her standing upon the bank on her isle, looking after him with indefinable mystery and wistful softness in her eyes, all the other objects of his various pursuits had filled him with disgust. He said to himself, in the excitement of the moment, that it was this which had again and again stopped him and made his pleasures, his follies, revolting to him. This was the origin of his restlessness, his sometimes savage temper, his fierce impatience with himself and everybody around him. In fact, this was far from the reality of the case; but in a flood of new sensation that poured over him, it bore a flattering resemblance to truth, which dignified the caprice of his existence, and made him feel himself better than he had thought. If love had, indeed, done all this for him, struggling against every vulgar influence, must it not, then, be capable of much more—indeed, of all?

Meanwhile Miss Milnathort lay back upon her pillows, excited, yet pleased and soothed, and believing too that here was all she had wished for, the true love and the helping woman who might yet save Erradeen.

"Oona!" she said to herself, "it's a well-omened name."

This strange scene of sentiment, rising into passion, was changed by the sudden entry of Mr. Milnathort, whose brow was by no means so cloudless or his heart so soft as his sister's. He came in, severe in the consciousness of business neglected, and all the affairs of life arrested by the boyish folly, idleness, and perhaps vice of this young man, with endless arrears of censure to bestow upon him, and of demands to place before him.

"I am glad to see you, my Lord Erradeen," he said briefly. "I have bidden them put forward the dinner, that we may have a long evening; and your things are in your room, and your man waiting. Alison, you forget when you keep Lord Erradeen talking, that he has come off a journey and must be tired."

Walter had not intended to spend the night in Moray Place, and indeed had given orders to his servant to take rooms in one of the hotels, and convey his luggage thither; but he forgot all this now, and took his way instinctively up another flight of those tall stairs to the room which he had occupied before. It brought him to himself, however, with the most curious shock of surprise and

consternation, when he recognised not the servant whom he had brought with him, but old Symington, as precise and serious as ever, and looking as if there had been no break in his punctilious service. He was arranging his master's clothes just as he had done on the winter evening when Lord Erradeen had first been taken possession of by this zealous retainer of the family. Walter was so startled, bewildered, and almost overawed by this sudden apparition, that he said with a gasp—

"You here, Symington!" and made no further objection to his presence.

"It is just me, my lord," Symington said. "I was waiting at the station, though your lordship might not observe me. I just went with your lad to the hotel, and put him in good hands."

"And may I ask why you did that without consulting me; and what you are doing here?" Walter cried, with a gleam of rising spirit.

Symington looked at him with a sort of respectful contempt.

"And does your lordship think," he said, "that it would be befitting to take a young lad, ignorant of the family, *up yonder*?" With a slight pause of indignant yet gentle reproach, after these words, he added—"Will your lordship wear a white tie or a black?" with all the gravity that became the question.

CHAPTER XII.

There is in the winter season, when the stream of tourists is cut off, a sort of family and friendly character about the Highland railways. The travellers in most cases know each other by sight, if no more; and consult over a new-comer with the curiosity of a homely community, amid which a new figure passing in the street excites sentiments of wonder and interest as a novelty. "Who do you suppose that will be at this time of the year?" they say; and the little country stations are full of greetings, and everybody is welcomed who comes, and attended by kindly farewells who goes away. There was no doubt this time as to who Lord Erradeen was as he approached the termination of his journey; and when he had reached the neighbourhood of the loch, a bustle of guards and porters—that is to say, of the one guard belonging to the train, and the one porter belonging to the station, familiarly known by name to all the passengers—ushered up to the carriage in which he was seated the beaming presence of Mr. Williamson.

"So here ye are," said the millionnaire. "Lord Erradeen! I told Tammas he must be making a mistake."

"Na, na, I was making no mistake," said Tammas, in a parenthesis.

"And what have ye been making of yourself all this time?" Mr. Williamson went on. "We have often talked of ye, and wondered if we would see ye again. That was a very sudden parting that we took in London; but Katie is just a wilful monkey, and does what she pleases; but she will be well pleased, and so will I, to see you at Birkenbraes." And the good man took his place beside the new-comer, and talked to him with the greatest cordiality during the rest of the journey.

Thus Walter was received on his second arrival with the friendly familiarity natural to the country-side. There seemed to him something significant even in the change of association with which his visit began. He had to promise to present himself at once at Birkenbraes, and the very promise seemed to revive the feelings and purposes which had been growing in his mind during that interval of social success in London which, on the whole, had been the most comfortable period of his life since he came to his fortune. His mind was occupied by this as he was rowed once more round the half-ruined pile of Kinloch Houran to his renewed trial. The afternoon was bright and clear, one of those brilliant October days that add a glory of colour to the departing summer; the water reflected every tint of the ruddy woods, thrown up and intensified everywhere by the dark background of the firs. He thought of the encounter before him with a fierce repugnance and indignation, rebellious but impotent; but there were no longer in it those elements of apprehension and mystery which had occupied all his being when he came here for the first time. It had acquired all the reality of an event not to be escaped from, not to be eluded; in itself something almost worse than death, and involving consequences more terrible than death—from which some way of escape must be found if heaven or earth contained any way of salvation. He had banished it from his mind as long as it was possible, and had wasted in endeavouring to forget it the time which he might have occupied in searching for the means of overcoming his enemy: and now the crisis was again near, and he knew scarcely more than at first what he was to do.

Walter had listened to Miss Milnathort's suggestion with a momentary elevation of mind and hope; but what was he, a "miserable duffer" as he had truly called himself, to make such an effort? A heart set on good and not evil: he laughed to himself with contemptuous bitterness, when he thought how far this description was from anything he knew of himself. Thus it was from the outset impossible that the redemption of his race could be carried out by him. The only alternative then was to yield. Was it the only alternative? To conduct his own affairs only as the tool and instrument of another, to sacrifice affection, justice, pity, every generous feeling, to the aggrandisement of his family—Walter's heart rose up within him in violent refusal and defiance. And then he thought of Katie Williamson. The storms in his bosom had been quieted from the moment when he had come into contact with her. The evil circumstances around him had

changed; even now a lull came over his mind at the thought of her. It was not the highest or the best course of action. At the utmost it would only be to leave once more to those who should come after him the solution of the problem; but what had he to do with those that came after him, he asked himself bitterly? In all probability it would be a stranger, a distant cousin, some one unknown to him as he had been to his predecessor; and in the mean time he would have peace. As he thought of it, it seemed to him that there was something significant even in that meeting with Mr. Williamson. When he came to the loch for the first time, with high hopes and purposes in his mind, meaning to leave all the frivolities of life behind him and address himself nobly to the duties of his new and noble position, it was Oona Forrester whom he had encountered on the threshold of fate. All the circumstances of his intercourse with her flashed through his mind; the strange scene on the isle in which her touch, her presence, her moral support, had saved him from he knew not what, from a final encounter in which, alone, he must have been overthrown. Had he not been a coward then and fled, had he remained and, with that soft strong hand in his, defied all that the powers of darkness could do, how different might have been his position now! But he had not chosen that better part. He had escaped and postponed the struggle. He had allowed all better thoughts and purposes to slip from him into the chaos of a disordered life. And now that he was forced back again to encounter once more this tyranny from which he had fled, it was no longer Oona that met him. Who was he, to expect that Oona would meet him, that the angels would come again to his succour? He could not now make that sudden unhesitating appeal to her which he had made in his first need, and to which she had so bravely replied. Everything was different; he had forfeited the position on which he could confront his tyrant. But a compromise was very possible, and it seemed to him that peace, and a staving off of trouble, were in Katie Williamson's hand.

It is needless to enter into all the sensations and thoughts with which the young man took possession again of the rooms in which he had spent the most extraordinary crisis of his life. It was still daylight when he reached Kinloch Houran, and the first thing he did was to make a stealthy and cautious examination of his sitting-room, looking into every crevice in an accidental sort of way, concealing even from himself the scrutiny in which he was engaged. Could he have found any trace of the sliding panel or secret entrance so dear to romance, it would have consoled him; but one side of the room was the outer wall, another was the modern partition which separated it from his bed-room, and of the others one was filled up with the bookshelves which he had been examining when his visitor entered on the previous occasion, while the fourth was the wall of the corridor which led into the ruinous part of the castle, and had not a possibility of any opening in it.

He made these researches by intervals, pretending other motives to himself, but with the strangest sense that he was making himself ridiculous, and exposing himself to contemptuous laughter, though so far as his senses were cognisant there was nobody there either to see or to laugh. The night, however, passed with perfect tranquillity, and in the morning he set out early on his way to Birkenbraes. If it was there that the question was to be solved, it was better that it should be done without delay.

CHAPTER XIII.

The party at Birkenbraes was always large. There were, in the first place, many people staying in the house, for Mr. Williamson was hospitable in the largest sense of the word, and opened his liberal doors to everybody that pleased him, and was ready to provide everything that might be wanted for the pleasure of his guests—carriages, horses, boats, even special trains on the railway, not to speak of the steam-yacht that lay opposite the house, and made constant trips up and down the loch. His liberality had sometimes an air of ostentation, or rather of that pleasure which very rich persons often take in the careless exhibition of a lavish expenditure, which dazzles and astonishes those to whom close reckonings are necessary. He had a laugh, which, though perfectly good-natured, seemed to have a certain derision in it of the precautions which others took, as he gave his orders. "Lord, man, take a special!—what need to hurry? I will send and order it to be in waiting. I have my private carriage, ye see, on the railway—always at the use of my friends." And then he would laugh, as much as to say, What a simple thing this is—the easiest in the world! If ye were not all a poor, little, cautious set of people, you would do the same. Not afford it? Pooh! a bagatelle like that! All this was in the laugh, which was even more eloquent than *la langue Turque*. There were sure to be some sensitive people who did not like it; but they were very hard to please. And the rich man was in fact so truly kind and willing to make everybody comfortable, that the most sensible even of the sensitive people forgave him. And as the majority in society is not sensitive when its own advantage and pleasure is concerned, his house was always full of visitors, among whom he moved briskly, always pleased, always endeavouring to elicit the expression of a wish which he could satisfy. Katie took less trouble. She was less conscious of being rich. She was willing to share all her own advantages, but it did not appear to her, as to her father, ridiculous that other people should not be rich too. The house was always full of visitors staying there, and there was not a day that there were not neighbours dropping in to lunch or invited to dinner, keeping up a commotion which delighted Mr. Williamson and amused Katie, who was to the manner born, and understood life only in this way. It happened thus that it was into a large party that Walter, coming with a sense that he was under the dominion of fate, and was about to settle the whole tenor of his life, plunged unaware. He heard the sound of many voices before he had got near the great drawing-room, the door of which stood open, giving vent to the murmur of talk from about twenty people within. He had

scarcely ever gone up so magnificent a staircase, broad, and light, and bright as became a new palace, with footmen moving noiselessly upon the thick pile of the carpets.

"There is a party, I suppose?" he said, hesitating.

"No more than usual, my lord," said the elegant functionary in black, who was about to announce him, with a bland and soft smile of superiority and a little pity like his master's for the man who knew no better, "Two or three gentlemen have dropped in to lunch."

The drawing-room was a large room, with a huge round bow-window giving upon the loch. It was furnished and decorated in the most approved manner, with quantities of pretty things of every costly description: for Katie, like her father, betrayed the constitution and temperament of wealth, by loving cost almost more than beauty. She was, however, too well instructed to be led into the mistake of making that luxurious modern room into the semblance of anything ancient or faded, while Mr. Williamson was too fond of everything bright and fresh to be persuaded even by fashion into such an anachronism. There was a faint suspicion in the mirrors and gilding and all the conveniences and luxuries, of the style of grandeur peculiar to the saloon of a splendid steamer, to which the steam-yacht, which was the chief object in the immediate prospect as seen from the plate-glass window, gave additional likelihood. Walter for his part was strangely startled, when, out of the seriousness of his own lonely thoughts, and the sense of having arrived at a great crisis, he suddenly stepped into the flutter and talk of this large assembly, which was composed of some half-dozen neighbours on the loch, most of them young men in more or less attendance upon Katie, mingled with strangers of all classes whom Mr. Williamson had picked up here and there. There was a little pause in the hum of voices at his own name, and a slight stir of interest, various of the guests turning round to look as he came in. The master of the house advanced with a large hand held out, and an effusive welcome; but the little lady of Birkenbraes paid Walter the much greater compliment of pursuing her conversation undisturbed, without betraying by a movement that she knew he was there. Katie was not rude. It was not her habit to pay so little attention to a new-comer: she was profoundly conscious of his entrance, and of every step he made among the groups distributed about; but as the matter was a little serious, and his appearance of some importance, she showed a slight stir of mind and thoughts, which could scarcely be called agitation, in this way. It was only when her father called loudly, "Katie, Katie, do you not see Lord Erradeen?" that she turned, not moving from her place, and suddenly held out her hand with a smile.

"How do you do? I heard you had come," said Katie; and then returned to her talk. "As for the influence of scenery upon the mind of the common people, I think it has more influence in the Highlands than anywhere, but very little when all is said. You don't think much of what you see every day, unless, indeed, you think everything of it. You must be totally indifferent, or an enthusiast," said the philosophical young lady.

Walter meanwhile stood before her, almost awkwardly, feeling the rigidity upon his countenance of a somewhat unmeaning smile.

"And to which class does Miss Williamson belong?" said her companion, who was a virtuous young member of parliament, anxious to study national peculiarities wherever he might happen to be.

"To neither," said Katie, with a slight coldness, just enough to mark that she did not consider herself as one of the "common people." And she turned to Walter with equally marked meaning, "Have you seen the Forresters since you came, Lord Erradeen?"

"I have seen no one," said Walter, slightly startled by the question. "I came only last night, and am here to-day by your father's invitation——"

"I know," said Katie, with greater cordiality. "You speak as if I wanted you to account for yourself. Oh, no! only one must begin the conversation somehow—unless I plunged you at once into my discussion with Mr. Braithwaite (Mr. Braithwaite, Lord Erradeen) about the characteristics of the inhabitants of a mountain country. Do you feel up to it?" she added, with a laugh.

"But you avoid the question," said the member of parliament. "You say, 'neither.' Now, if it is interesting to know what effect these natural phenomena have upon the common mind, it is still more interesting when it is a highly cultivated intelligence which is in question."

"Help me out!" cried Katie, with a glance at Walter. "I have never been educated—no woman is, you know. How are we to know what the highly cultured feel! Papa is not cultured at all—he does not pretend to it, which is why people approve of him; and as for me!" she spread out her hands like a sort of exclamation. "And Lord Erradeen cannot give you any information either," she added, demurely, "for he has not known the loch very long—and I think he does not like it. No, but you shall see one who can really be of some use this afternoon. Don't you think she is the very person, Lord Erradeen? Oona—for she has lived on the loch, or rather in the loch, all her life."

"And when shall I see this—nymph is she, or water goddess?" said the genial member. "That will indeed be to gather knowledge at the fountain-head."

"Do you think we may say she is a nymph, Lord Erradeen? Oh yes—what do you call those classical ladies that take care of the water—Naiads? Oona is something of that sort. But better than the classics, for she has water above and water below for a great part of the year. You don't know how many superstitions we have remaining in this wild part of the country. We have ghosts,

and wandering Jews, and mysterious lights: Lord Erradeen will tell you——"

Katie paused with the malice bright in her eyes. She did not mean to affront the recovered attendant who might turn out a suitor, and upon whom it was possible she might be induced to smile; so she paused with a little laugh, and allowed Braithwaite to break in.

"Do you call this a wild part of the country, Miss Williamson? Then what must the cultivated portions look like? I see nothing but beautiful villas and palaces, and all the luxuries of art."

"The comforts of the Saut Market," said Katie with a shrug of her shoulders. "It is more easy to carry them about with you than in Bailie Nicol Jarvie's time. But there is luncheon! Papa is always formal about our going in, though I tell him that is out of date nowadays. So you must wait, if you please, Lord Erradeen, and take me." There was then a pause, until, as they brought up the rear of the procession down-stairs, Katie said, with the slightest pressure on his arm to call his attention, "That is a Member of Parliament in search of information and statistics. If you hear me talk more nonsense than usual you will know why."

"Do you expect Miss Forrester this afternoon?" asked Walter quite irrelevant.

Katie's heart gave a little jump. She did not like to be beat. It was the healthful instinct of emulation, not any tremor of the affections. She gave him a keen glance half of anger, half of enjoyment, for she loved a fray.

"Better than that," she cried gaily, "we are going down the loch to see her. Don't you remember Mrs. Forrester's scones, Lord Erradeen! You are ungrateful, for I know you have eaten them. But you shall come, too."

If this had been said on the stairs, Walter, probably, would have given a dignified answer to the effect that his engagements would scarcely permit—but they were by this time in the dining-room in the little flutter of taking places which always attends the sitting down of a party, an operation which Katie, with little rapid indications of her pleasure, simplified at once; and Walter found himself seated by her side and engaged in conversation by the enterprising Braithwaite at his other hand before he could utter any remonstrance. Mr. Braithwaite set it down in his journal that Lord Erradeen was a dull young fellow, petted by the women because he was a lord, no other reason being apparent—and wondered a little at the bad taste of Miss Williamson who ought to have known better. As for Katie, she exerted herself to smooth down Walter's slightly ruffled plumes. There was no use, she thought, in handing him over at once to Oona by thus wounding his *amour propre*. She inquired into his travels. She asked where he had disappeared when they all left town.

"I expected we should find you at Auchnasheen for the 12th," she said. "You are the only man I know who is philosopher enough not to care for the grouse. One is driven to believe about that time of the year that men can think of nothing else."

"Perhaps, Katie," said young Tom of Ellermore, "if you were to speak to Lord Erradeen, whom we don't know as yet, as we have never had the chance of calling" (here the young men exchanged bows, accompanied by a murmur from Katie, "Mr. Tom Campbell, Ellermore," while the colour rose in young Tom's cheek), "perhaps he would be charitable to us others that are not philosophers."

"Have ye not enough grouse of your own, Tom Campbell?" cried Mr. Williamson, who, in a pause of the conversation, had heard this address. "Man! if I were you I would think shame to look a bird in the face."

"And why?" cried the young fellow; "that was what they were made for. Do you think otherwise that they would be allowed to breed like *that*, and eat up everything that grows?"

"Heather," said the head of the house, "and bracken. Profitable crops, my word!"

Here Walter interrupted the discussion by a polite speech to young Tom, whose eyes blazed with pleasure and excitement at the offer made him.

"But I hope," he said, "you will join us yourself. It will be like stealing a pleasure to have such an enjoyment, and the master of it not there."

"I have other work in hand," Walter said; at which young Tom stared and coloured still more, and a slight movement showed itself along the table, which Mr. Braithwaite, the knowledge-seeker, being newly arrived, did not understand. Tom cried hastily, "I beg your pardon," and many eyes were turned with sudden interest upon Lord Erradeen. But this was what Walter had anticipated as little as the parliamentary inquirer. He grew so red that Tom Campbell's healthy blush was thrown into the shade. "I ought rather to say," he added hastily, "that my time here is too short for amusement."

There was an uneasy little pause, and then everybody burst into talk. Both the silence and the conversation were significant. Lord Erradeen turned to Katie with an instinctive desire for sympathy, but Katie was occupied, or pretended to be so, with her luncheon. It was not here that sympathy on that point was to be found.

"I wonder," said Katie, somewhat coldly, "that you do not remain longer when you are here. Auchnasheen is very nice, and you ought to know your neighbours, don't you think, Lord Erradeen? If it is merely business, or duty, that brings you——"

"I wish I knew which it was," he said in a low tone.

Katie turned and looked at him with those eyes of common-sense in which there is always a certain cynicism.

"I did not think in this century," she said, "that it was possible for any man not to know why he was doing a thing; but you perhaps like to think that an old family has rules of its own, and ought to keep up the past."

"I should think," said Mr. Braithwaite, not discouraged by the lower tone of this conversation, "that the past must have a very strong hold upon any one who can suppose himself a Highland chieftain."

"A Highland chief!" cried Katie, opening her brown eyes wide: and then she laughed, which was a thing strangely offensive to Walter, though he could scarcely have told why.

"I fear," he said coldly, "that though I am to some extent a Highland laird, I have no pretension to be a chief. There is no clan Methven that I ever heard of: though indeed I am myself almost a stranger and of no authority."

"Mrs. Forrester will tell you, Mr. Braithwaite," said Katie. "She is a sort of queen of the loch. She is one of the old Macnabs who once were sovereign here. These people," she said, waving her hand towards the various scions of the great clan Campbell, "are mushrooms in comparison: which is a comfort to our feelings, seeing that we sink into insignificance as creatures of to-day before them. The very original people for highly consolatory to the upstarts, for we are just much the same as the middling-old people to them. They are worlds above us all."

Here Tom of Ellermore leant over his immediate neighbours and reminded Katie that the days were short in October, and that it was a stiff row to the isle: and the conversation terminated in the hurried retirement of the ladies, and selection of rugs and wrappers to make them comfortable. Mr. Williamson had, as he said, "more sense," than to set out upon any such ridiculous expedition. He stood and watched the preparations, with his thumbs stuck into the arm-holes of his waistcoat.

"Ye had much better take the yacht," he said. "She could get up steam in half an hour, and take you there in ten minutes, and there is plenty of room for ye all, and the cabin in case of rain. But as ye like! A wilful man will have his way. If ye would rather work yourselves than have the work done for ye—and a shower in prospect! But it's your own affair."

The party, however, preferred the boats, and Katie put her father's remonstrance aside with a wave of her hand.

"It is all these boys are ever good for," she said, "and why would you stop them? Besides, it is far nicer than your mechanical steam, and tea on board, and all the rest of it. Lord Erradeen, you are to steer. If you don't know the currents I can tell you. Here is your place beside me: and you can tell me what you have been doing all this time, for there were so many interruptions at lunch I got no good of you," the young lady said.

Thus Walter was swept along in Katie's train. As he was quite unaware of any understanding between the girls he was of course ignorant that any special significance could attach to his arrival in this manner at the isle. And for his own part he was pleased by the thought of seeing Oona for the first time in an accidental way, without any responsibility, so to speak, of his own. It was a little chilly for a water-party, but on the lochs people are prepared for that and it interferes with no one's pleasure. The afternoon was full of sunshine, and every bit of broken bank, and every island and feathery crest of fir-trees, was reflected and beautified in the still water, that broke with a ripple the fantastic doubling of every substance, but lent a glory to the colour and brilliancy to every outline. The gay party swept along over reflected woods, themselves all brilliant in reflection, and making the loch as gay as a Venetian canal. On the little landing-place at the isle the whole small population was collected to meet them: Mrs. Forrester in her white cap, shivering slightly, and glad to draw round her the fur cloak which Mysie was putting on her shoulders from behind, "for the sun has not the strength it once had," she explained, "now that we are just getting round the corner of the year:" Hamish always in his red shirt, kneeling on the little wooden landing which he had wheeled out to receive the party, in order to catch the prow of the first boat; and Oona, a little apart, standing looking out, with a faint thrill of excitement about her, consequent on having just heard the news of Walter's arrival, but no expectation to make this excitement tangible. They made a pretty show upon the little beach, reflected, too, in the clear depths below—the bit of ribbon on the mother's cap, the knot of pale roses on Oona's breast, culminating in Mysie's stronger tints on one side, and the red of Hamish's garment on the other.

"What a pretty picture it would make," Katie said. "'Hospitality,' you ought to call it, or 'Welcome to the isle.' But there ought to be a gentleman to make it perfect; either an old gentleman to represent Oona's father, or a young one for her husband. Don't you think so, Lord Erradeen?"

It was perhaps at this moment when he was listening with a somewhat distracted look, smiling against the grain, and standing up in the boat to steer, that Oona saw him first. It cannot be denied that the shock was great. In her surprise she had almost made a false step on the slippery shingle, and Mrs. Forrester grasped her dress with an "Oona! you'll be in the water if you don't take more care." Oona recovered herself with a blush, which she would have given anything in

the world to banish from her countenance. It was so then! This man, who had, all unawares, produced so much effect upon her life and thoughts, was coming back within her little circle of existence in Katie Williamson's train! She smiled to herself a moment after, holding her head high, and with a sense of ridicule pervading the being which had been momentarily transfixed by that keen arrow of surprise and pain. She said to herself that the humour of it was more than any one could have believed, but that all was well. Oh, more than well!—for was not this the thing of all others that was good for her, that would put the matter on the easiest footing?

All this flew through her mind like lightning while the boat came close, amid the friendly shouts and greetings of the crew, all of them "neighbours' sons." Mr. Braithwaite, the English observer, sat by admiring while these brotherly salutations were gone through. Perhaps he did not note in his diary that the young aborigines called each other by their Christian names, but he did make a remark to that effect in his mind. And then there ensued the little tumult of disembarking, in the midst of which Oona, holding out her hand, frankly greeted Lord Erradeen. "We heard you had come back," she said, giving him a look of full and confident composure which puzzled Walter. She meant him, and not him only, to perceive the frankness of a reception in which there was not a shade of embarrassment, no recollection of the strange moment they had spent together, or of the encounter that had taken place upon the isle. When one pair of eyes look into another with that momentary demonstration it is a proof of some meaning more than meets the eye. And Walter, whose own eyes were full too of a something, subdued and concealed so far as possible—a deprecating wistful look in which there was pardon sought (though he had consciously done her no wrong; but in doing wrong at all had he not offended Oona as Dante offended Beatrice, although she might never know of what sins he had been guilty?) and homage offered—was still more perplexed by that open gaze in which there was nothing of the softness of the look with which Oona had watched him going away, and which had so often recurred to his mind since. What did it mean? It gave him welcome, but a welcome that felt like the closing of a door. He was far too much occupied with investigating this problem to remark the corresponding look, the slight, almost imperceptible smile, that passed between Oona and Katie as they met. In the midst of all the cheerful din, the merry voices on the air, the boats run up upon the beach, the cheerful movement towards the house, such fine shades of feeling and dramatic purpose can make themselves apparent to those who are in the secret, but to no other. A merrier party never ascended the slope, and that is saying much. Mrs. Forrester led the way in the highest satisfaction.

"Mysie, ye will stand on no ceremony about following," she said, "but run on before and see that the tea is masked: but not too much, to get that boiled taste. It is perhaps extravagant, but I like to have just what you may call the first flavour of the tea. And let the scones be just ready to bring ben, for Miss Williamson must not be kept too late on the water at this time of the year. To tell the truth," she said, turning with her smiles to the member of parliament, a functionary for whom she had a great respect, counting him more important than a young lord, who after all was in the position of a "neighbour's son"; "to tell the truth, I have just to be inhospitable at this season and push them away with my own hands: for it is always fresh upon the loch, and a score of young creatures with colds, all because I let them stay half an hour too late, would be a dreadful reflection. This will be your first visit to the loch? Oh, I am sure we are delighted to see you, both Oona and me. We are always pleased to meet with strangers that have an appreciation. Some people would think it was a very lonely life upon the isle; but I assure you if I could give you a list of all the people that come here! It would be rather a good thing to keep a list now that I think of it, you would see some names that would be a pleasure to any one to see. Yes, I think I must just set up a visiting-book, as if we were living in some grand place in London, say Grosvenor Square. What are you saying, Katie, my dear? Oh yes, I have shaken hands with Lord Erradeen. I am very glad to see him back, and I hope he will stay longer and let us see more of him than last year. This is one of our finest views. I always stop here to point it out to strangers," she added, pausing, for indeed it was her favourite spot to take breath.

And then the group gathered at the turning, and looked out upon Kinloch Houran, lying in shadow, in the dimness of one of those quick-flying clouds which give so much charm to a Highland landscape. The old grey ruin lying upon the dulled surface, steel blue and cold, of the water, which round the island was dancing in sunshine, gave a curious effectiveness to the landscape.

"It is the ghost-castle." "It is the haunted house," said one of the visitors, in a whisper, who would have spoken loud enough but for the presence of Walter, who stood and looked, with great gravity, upon his place of trial. When Katie's voice became audible at his side, advising him in very distinct tones to restore the old place, Walter felt himself shrink and grow red, as if some villany had been suggested to him. He made no reply. He had thought himself of something of the same description in his first acquaintance with Kinloch Houran; but how different his feelings were now!

The reader already knows what were Mrs. Forrester's teas. The party filled the pleasant drawing-room in which a fire was burning brightly, notwithstanding the sunshine without, and the scones arrived in bountiful quantity, one supply after another; Mysie's countenance beaming as "a few more" were demanded; while her mistress did nothing but fill out cups of tea and press her young guests to eat.

"Another cup will not hurt you," she said. "That is just nonsense about nerves. If it was green tea, indeed, and you were indulging in it at night to keep you off your sleep—but in a fine afternoon like this, and after your row. Now just try one of these scones; you have not tasted this kind. It is

hot from the griddle, and we all think my cook has a gift. Mysie, tell Margaret that we will have a few more. And, Oona, it is the cream scones that Katie likes: but you must tell Lord Erradeen to try this kind, just to please me."

Thus the kind lady ran on. It gave her the profoundest pleasure to see her house filled, and to serve her young guests with these simple delicacies. "Dear me, it is just nothing. I wish it was better worth taking," she answered to Mr. Braithwaite's compliments, who made the usual pretty speeches of the English tourist as to Scotch hospitality. Mrs. Forrester felt as if these compliments were a half-reproach to her for so simple an entertainment. "You see," she said, "it is all we can do; for, besides that there is no gentleman in the house, which is against dinner-giving, we are not well situated in the isle for evening visits. The nights are cold at this time of the year, and it is not always easy to strike our bit little landing in the dark; so we have to content ourselves with a poor offering to our friends. And I am sure you are very kind to take it so politely. If my boys were at home, I would have it more in my power to show attention; but if you are going further north, I hope you will make your way to Eaglescairn and see my son, who will be delighted to show you the country about him," Mrs. Forrester said. The English M.P. could not but think that it was his reputation which had travelled before him, and gained him so delightful a reception.

As for the rest of the party, they were fully entertained by Oona, who was more than usually lively and bright. She said very little to Lord Erradeen, who was by far the most silent of the assembly, but exerted herself for her other guests, with a little flush upon her which was very becoming, and an excitement completely concealed and kept under, which yet acted upon her like a sort of ethereal stimulant quickening all her powers. They were so gay that Mrs. Forrester's anxiety about their return, which indeed she forgot as soon as they were under her roof, was baffled, and it was not till the glow of the sunset was beginning to die out in the west that the visitors began to move. Then there was a hurrying and trooping out, one group following another, to get to the boats. The landscape had changed since they came, and now the upper end of the loch was all cold and chill in the greyness of early twilight, though the sky behind in the southward was still glowing with colour. Benlui lay in a soft mist having put off his purple and gold, and drawn about him the ethereal violet tones of his evening mantle; but on the slopes beneath, as they fell towards the margin of the water, all colour had died out. Lord Erradeen was one of the last to leave the house, and he was at first but vaguely aware of the little movement and sudden pause of the party upon the first turn of the winding path. He did not even understand for a moment the eager whisper which came almost more distinctly than a shout through the clear still evening air. It was the voice of young Tom of Ellermore.

"Look there! the light—the light! Who says they do not believe in it?" the young fellow said; and then there was a flutter of exclamations and subdued cries of wonder and interest, not without dissentient voices.

"I see some sort of a glimmer," said one.

"It is as clear as day," cried another.

"It must be reflection," a third said.

Walter raised his eyes; he had no sort of doubt to what they referred. His old house lay dark upon the edge of the dark gleaming loch, silent, deserted, not a sign of life about the ruined walls; but upon the tower shone the phantasm of the light, now waning, now rising, as if some unfelt wind blew about the soft light of an unseen lamp. It brought him to himself in a moment, and woke him up from the maze of vague thoughts which had abstracted him even in the midst of the gay movement and bustle. He listened with strange spectatorship, half-stern, half-amused, to all the murmurs of the little crowd.

"If you call that light!" said the voice of Katie; "it is some phosphorescence that nobody has examined into, I suppose. Who knows what decayed things are there? That sort of glimmer always comes of decay. Oh, yes, I once went to chemistry lectures, and I know. Besides, it stands to reason. What could it be else?"

"You know very well, Katie, what they say—that it is the summons of the warlock lord."

"I would like to answer the summons," cried Katie, with a laugh. "I would send for the health inspector, from Glasgow, and clear it all out, every old crevice, and all the perilous stuff. That would be the thing to do. As for the warlock lord, papa shall invite him to dinner if you will find out where he is to be met with, Tom."

"Like the commandant in *Don Giovanni*," somebody said; and there was an echoing laugh, but of a feeble kind.

Walter heard this conversation with a sort of forlorn amusement. He was not excited; his blood was rather congealed than quickened in his veins. But he lingered behind, taking no notice of his late companions as they streamed away to the boats. He seemed in a moment to have been parted miles—nay, worlds away from them. When he thought of the interview that was before him, and of the light-hearted strangers making comments upon the legend of the place with laugh and jest, it seemed to him that he and they could scarcely belong to the same race. He lingered, with no heart for the farewells and explanations that would be necessary if he left them formally: and turning round gazed steadfastly towards Kinloch Houran from behind the shade of the shrubbery. Here Oona found him, as she rushed back to warn him that the boats were

pushing off. She began breathlessly—

"Lord Erradeen, you are called—" then stopped, looked at him, and said no more.

He did not answer her for a moment, but stood still, and listened to the sounds below, the impatient call, the plash of the oars in the water, the grating of the keel of the last boat as it was pushed off. Then he looked at Oona, with a smile.

"I am called—?" he said, "but not that way. Now I must go home."

Her heart beat so that she could scarcely speak. Was this spell to take possession of her again, against her will, without any wish of his, like some enchantment? She fought against it with all her might.

"If that is so," she said, "Hamish will put you across, when you please."

He took no notice of these indifferent words.

"This time," he said, "it is altogether different. I know what is going to happen, and I am not afraid. But it must come to an end."

What was it to her if it came to an end or not? She tried to check the quick-rising sympathy, to offer no response.

"They will be late on the water, but I hope they will get home before dark," she replied.

Then he looked at her wistfully, with a look that melted her very heart.

"Don't you know that it will never come to an end unless you stand by me?" he cried.

CHAPTER XIV.

Mrs. Forrester was most willing to put Hamish and the boat, or anything else she possessed, at Lord Erradeen's service. "It is just the most sensible thing you could do," she said. "They will be very late, and half of them will have colds. Oona, you will just let Hamish know. But Lord Erradeen, since you are here, will you not stay a little longer, and get your dinner before you go? No? Well, I will not say another word if it is not convenient. Just tell Hamish, Oona, my dear."

Walter followed her so closely when she went upon that mission that she could not escape him. They stood together in the grey of the evening light, upon the beach, while Hamish prepared the boat, Oona's mind in a tumult of apprehension and resistance, with an insidious softness behind, which she felt with despair was betraying her over again into the folly she had surmounted. He had not the same commotion in his mind; his thoughts were altogether bent on what was coming. She was his confidant, his support in it, though he had not said a word to her. He took her into account in the matter as a man takes his wife. She was a part of it all, though it was not of her he was thinking. He spoke after a moment in a tone full of this curious claim, which seemed to him at the moment incontestable.

"It will never come to an end unless you stand by me," he said. "Everything can be done if you will stand by me."

Oona, in her strange agitation, felt as if she had surprised him thinking aloud; as if he did not address her, but merely repeated to himself a fact which was beyond dispute. He said no more, neither did she make any reply. And once more, as if in repetition of the former scene, he turned round as he stepped into the heavy boat, and looked back upon her as Hamish began to ply the oars. She stood and watched him from the beach; there was no wave of the hand, no word of farewell. They were both too much moved for expression of any kind; and everything was different though the same. On the former occasion he had been escaping, and was eager to get free, to get out of reach of an oppression he could not bear; but now was going to his trial, to meet the tyrant, with a certainty that escape was impossible. And for Oona there had been the sensation of a loss unspeakable—a loss which she could neither confess nor explain, which took the heart out of her life; whereas now there was a re-awakening, a mysterious beginning which she could not account for or understand. She stood on the beach till the boat had disappeared, and even till the sound of the oars died out in the distance, in an agitation indescribable. The first despairing sense that the influence against which she had struggled was regaining possession of her, was for the moment lost in an overwhelming tide of sympathy and response to the claim he had made. He had no right to make that claim, and it was intolerable that she should have so little power over herself as to yield to it, and allow herself to become thus the subject of another. Her pride, her reason, had been in arms against any such thraldom; but for this moment Oona was again overcome. She had no power of resistance—her very being seemed to go with him, to add itself to his, as he disappeared across the darkling loch. Stand by him! The words went breathing about her in the air, and in her mind, and everything in her echoed and responded—Stand by him! Yes, to the death. This excitement failed in a sudden chill and shiver, and sense of shame which covered her face with blushes which no one saw, as startled by the gathering dark, and the sound of Mysie's step hastening down to the landing-place with a shawl for her, Oona turned again and ran swiftly up the winding way.

The loch was like lead, with a ripple of mysterious changing lights in the darkness, as the boat shot round under the shadow of Kinloch Houran. All was as still as in a world of dreams, the

sound of Hamish's oars in their regular sweep alone breaking the intense stillness. Here and there among the trees a light glimmered on the shore—a window of the Manse—the door of the little inn standing open and betraying the ruddy warmth within: but no sound near enough to interrupt the stillness. Walter felt as though he parted with a certain protection when he stepped upon the bit of mossed causeway which served as a landing pier to the old castle, and, bidding Hamish good-night, stood alone in that solitude and watched the boatman's red shirt, which had forced its colour even upon the twilight, grow black as it disappeared. The sensation in Walter's mind had little akin with that panic and horror which had once overwhelmed him. No doubt it was excitement that filled up his whole being, and made the pulses throb in his ears, but it was excitement subdued; and all he was conscious of was a sort of saddened expectation—a sense of a great event about to take place which he could not elude or stave off—a struggle in which he might be worsted. "Let not him that putteth on his armour boast himself like him that putteth it off." He did not know what might happen to him. But the tremors of his nervous system, or of his agitated soul, or of his physical frame—he could not tell which it was—were stilled. He was intensely serious and sad, but he was not afraid.

Symington, who had been in waiting, listening for his master's return, opened the door and lighted him up the spiral stairs. The room was already lighted and cheerful, the curtains drawn, the fire blazing brightly.

"The days are creeping in," he said, "and there's a nip in the air aneath thae hills—so I thought a fire would be acceptable." In fact the room looked very comfortable and bright, not a place for mysteries. Walter sat down between the cheerful fire and the table with its lights.

There is often at the very crisis of fate a relaxation of the strain upon the mind—a sudden sense as of peril over, and relief. Thus the dying will often have a glimmer in the socket, a sense of betterness and hope before the last moment. In the same way a sensation of relief came on Walter at the height of his expectation. His mind was stilled. A feeling without any justification, yet grateful and consoling, came over him, as if the trial were over, or at least postponed—as if something had intervened for his deliverance. He sat and warmed himself in this genial glow, feeling his pulses calmed and his mind soothed—he could not tell how. How long or how short the interval of consolation was, if a few minutes only, or an hour, or half a life-time, he could not tell. He was roused from it by the sound of steps in the corridor outside. It was a passage which ended in nothing—in the gloom of the ruinous portion of the house—and consequently it was not usual to hear any sound in it, the servants invariably approaching Lord Erradeen's rooms by the stair. On this occasion, however, Walter, suddenly roused, heard some one coming from a distance, with steps which echoed into the vacancy as of an empty place, but gradually drawing nearer, sounding, in ordinary measure, a man's footstep, firm and strong, but not heavy, upon the corridor outside. Then the door was opened with the usual click of the lock and heavy creak with which it swung upon its hinges. He rose up, scarcely knowing what he did.

"You examined everything last night to find a secret passage," said the new-comer with a humorous look, "which indeed might very well have existed in a house of this date. There was actually such a passage once existing, and connected with a secret room which I have found useful in its time. But that was in another part of the house, and the age of concealments and mysteries—of that kind—is past. Won't you sit down?" he added, pleasantly. "You see I put myself at my ease at once."

Walter's heart had given such a bound that the sensation made him giddy and faint. He stood gazing at the stranger, only half comprehending what was happening. All that happened was natural and simple in the extreme. The visitor walked round the table to the other side of the fire, and moving the large chair which stood there into a position corresponding to Walter's, seated himself in the most leisurely and easy way. "Sit down," he repeated after a moment, more peremptorily, and with almost a tone of impatience. "We have much to talk over. Let us do it comfortably, at least."

"I can have nothing to talk over," said Walter, feeling that he spoke with difficulty, yet getting calm by dint of speaking, "with an undesired and unknown visitor."

The other smiled. "If you will think of it you will find that I am far from unknown," he said. "No one can have a larger body of evidence in favour of his reality. What did that poor little woman in Edinburgh say to you?"

"I wonder," cried Walter, unconscious of the inconsistency, "that you can permit yourself to mention her name."

"Poor little thing," he replied, "I am sincerely sorry for her. Had I foreseen what was going to happen I should have guarded against it. You may tell her so. Everything that is subject to human conditions is inconsistent and irregular. But on the whole, taking life altogether, there is not so much to be regretted. Probably she is happier *there* than had she embarked, as she was about to do, in a struggle with me. Those who contend with me have not an easy career before them."

"Yet one day it will have to be done," Walter said.

"Yes. You consent then that I am not unknown, however undesired," the stranger said, with a smile. He was so entirely at his ease, at his leisure, as if he had hours before him, that Walter, gazing in an impatience beyond words, felt the hopelessness of any effort to hurry through the interview, and dropped into his seat with a sigh of reluctance and despair.

"Who are you?" he cried; "and why, in the name of God, do you thus torment and afflict a whole race?"

"The statement is scarcely correct. I was a Highland youth of no pretension once, and you are supposed to be Lord Erradeen, not only a Scotch lord, but an English peer. That is what my tormenting and afflicting have come to, with many solid acres and precious things besides. Very few families of our antiquity have even survived these centuries. Not one has grown and increased to the point at which we stand. I see a great addition within our reach now."

"And what good has it all done?" Walter said. "They say that my predecessor was a miserable man, and I know that I—since this elevation, as you think it—have been——"

"Good for nothing. I allow it fully. What were you before? Equally good for nothing; consuming your mother's means, opposing her wishes, faithful to no one. My friend, a man who sets himself against me must be something different from that."

To this Walter made no reply. He could not be called penitent for the folly of his life; but he was aware of it. And he did not attempt to defend himself. He was entirely silenced for the moment: and the other resumed.

"I have always felt it to be probable that some one capable of resistance might arise in time. In the mean time all that has happened has been gain, and my work has been fully successful. It would rather please me to meet one in the course of the ages who was fit to be my conqueror, being my son. It is a contingency which I have always taken into consideration. But it is not likely to be you," he said, with a slight laugh. "I shall know my victor when he comes."

"Why should it not be I? If it be enough to hate this tyrannical influence, this cruel despotism——"

"As you have hated every influence and every rule all your life," said the other with a smile. "That is not the sort of man that does anything. Do you think it is agreeable to me to be the progenitor of a race of nobodies? I compensate myself by making them great against their will—the puppets! I allow you to wear my honours out of consideration to the prejudices of society: but they are all mine."

"It was not you, however, who got them," said Walter. "Can a grandfather inherit what was given to his descendants?"

"Come," said the stranger, "you are showing a little spirit—I like that better. Let us talk now of the immediate business in hand. You have something in your power which I did not foresee when I talked to you last. Then there were few opportunities of doing anything—nothing in your range that I had observed, but to clear off incumbrances, which, by the way, you refused to do. Now a trifling exertion on your part——"

"You mean the sacrifice of my life."

The stranger laughed—this time with a sense of the ludicrous which made his laugh ring through the room with the fullest enjoyment. "The sacrifice of a life, which has been made happy by —— and by —— and by ——. How many names would you like me to produce? You have perhaps a less opinion of women than I have. Which of them, if they knew all about it, as I do, would pick up that life and unite their own to it? But happily they don't know. She thinks perhaps—that girl on the isle—that I mean her harm. I mean her no harm—why should I harm her? I harm no one who does not step into my way."

"Man!" cried Walter—"if you are a man—would you hurt her for succouring me? Would you treat her as you treated——"

"That was an accident," he said quickly. "I have told you already I would have guarded against it had I divined——But your limited life is the very empire of accident; and those who come across my path must take the consequences. It is their own fault if they put themselves in the way of danger. Let us return to the subject in hand. The woman whom you must marry——"

The words suddenly seemed to close on the air, leaving no sort of echo or thrill in it; and Walter, looking round, saw Symington come in with the scared look he remembered to have seen in the old man's countenance before, though without any sign in him of seeing the stranger. He asked in a hesitating manner, "Did ye ring, my lord? You'll be wanting your dinner. It is just ready to come up."

Walter was about to send the old servant hastily away; but a slight sign from his visitor restrained him. He said nothing, but watched, with feelings indescribable, the proceedings of the old man, who began to lay the table, moving to and fro, smoothing the damask cloth, folding the napkin, arranging the silver. Symington did everything as usual: but there was a tremor in him, unlike his ordinary composure. Sometimes he threw an alarmed and tremulous look round the room, as if something terrifying might lurk in any corner; but while doing so brushed past the very person of that strange visitor in the chair without a sign that he knew any one to be there. This mixture of suppressed panic and inconceivable unconsciousness gave Walter a suffocating sensation which he could not master. He cried out suddenly, in a loud and sharp tone which was beyond his own control, "Symington! Is it possible you don't see——"

Symington let the forks and spoons he was holding drop out of his hands. He cried out, quavering, "Lord, have a care of us!" Then he stopped trembling to gather up the things he had

dropped, which was a great trouble, so nervous and tremulous was he. He collected them all at the very foot of the man who sat smiling in the great chair.

"You gave me a terrible fright, my lord," the old man said, raising himself with a broken laugh: "that was what you meant, no doubt. All this water about and damp makes a man nervish. See! what should I see? I am no one of those," Symington added, with a great attempt at precision and a watery smile, "that see visions and that dream dreams."

"Why should you disturb the man's mind for nothing," said the visitor in that penetrating voice which Walter felt to go through him, penetrating every sense. He had grown reckless in the strange horror of the circumstances.

"Don't you hear that?" he cried sharply, catching Symington by the arm.

The old man gave a cry, his eyes flickered and moved as if they would have leapt from their sockets. He shook so that Walter's grasp alone seemed to keep him from falling. But he remained quite unconscious of any special object of alarm.

"Me! I hear naething," he cried. "There is nothing to hear. You have listened to all those old stories till ye are just out of yourself. But no me," Symington said with a quavering voice, but a forced smile. "No me! I am not superstitious. You will no succeed, my lord, in making a fool of me. Let me go. The trout is done by this time, and I must bring up my dinner," he cried with feverish impatience, shaking himself free.

Walter turned round half-dazed to say he knew not what to the occupant of that chair. But when he looked towards it there was no one there: nor in the room, nor anywhere near was the slightest trace of his visitor to be found.

CHAPTER XV.

It may be supposed that the dinner which was served to Lord Erradeen after this episode was done but little justice to. The trout was delicious, the bird cooked to perfection; but the young man, seated in sight of the apparently vacant chair, where so lately his visitor had been seated, could scarcely swallow a morsel. Was he there still, though no one could see him? or had he departed only to return again when Symington and the meal had been cleared away, and the evening was free? There was a sickening sensation at Walter's heart as he asked himself these questions, and indeed, throughout this portion of his life, his experience was that the actual presence of this extraordinary person was very much less exciting and confusing than the effect produced during his apparent absence, when the idea that he might still be there unseen, or might appear at any moment, seemed to disturb the mental balance in a far more painful way. In the present case the effect was overpowering. Walter had been talking to him almost with freedom: it was impossible, indeed, thus to converse—even though the conversation was something of a struggle, with a man possessed of all the ordinary faculties, and in appearance, though more dignified and stately than most, yet in no way unlike other men—without a gradual cessation of those mysterious tremors with which the soul is convulsed in presence of anything that appears supernatural. The personage who inhabited, or (for it was impossible to think of him as inhabiting a ruin) periodically visited Kinloch Houran had nothing in him save his stateliness of aspect which need have separated him from ordinary men. He would have attracted attention anywhere, but except as a person of unusual distinction, would have startled no one; and even when the young man so cruelly subject to his influence talked with him, it was impossible to keep up the superstitious terror which nature feels for the inexplainable. But as soon as he withdrew, all this instinctive feeling returned. Walter's nerves and imagination sprang up into full play again, and got command of his reason. By moments it seemed to him that he caught a glimpse still of an outline in the chair, of eyes looking at him, of the smile and the voice which expressed so full a knowledge of all his own past history and everything that was in him. This consciousness gave to his eyes the same scared yet searching look which he had seen in those of Symington, took his breath from him, made his head whirl, and his heart fail. Symington waiting behind his chair, but eagerly on the watch for any sign, saw that his young lord was ghastly pale, and perceived the half stealthy look which he cast around him, and especially the entire failure of his appetite. This is a thing which no Scotch domestic can bear.

"You are no eating, my lord," he said in a tone of gentle reproach, as he withdrew the plate with the untasted trout. ("That many a poor gentleman would have been glad of!" he said to himself.)

"No, I am not particularly hungry," Walter said, with a pretence at carelessness.

"I can recommend the bird," said Symington, "if it's no just a cheeper, for the season is advanced, it's been young and strong on the wing; and good game is rich, fortifying both to the body and spirit. Those that have delicate stomachs, it is just salvation to them—and for those that are, as ye may say, in the condition of invalids in the mind——"

Symington had entirely recovered from his own nervousness. He moved about the room with a free step, and felt himself fully restored to the position of counsellor and adviser, with so much additional freedom as his young master was less in a position to restrain him, and permitted him to speak almost without interruption. Indeed Walter as he ineffectually tried to eat was half insensible to the monologue going on over his head.

"Ye must not neglect the body," Symington said, "especially in a place like this where even the maist reasonable man may be whiles put to it to keep his right senses. If ye'll observe, my lord, them that see what ye may call visions are mostly half starvit creatures, fasting or ill-nourished. Superstition, in my opinion, has a great deal to do with want of meat. But your lordship is paying no attention. Just two three mouthfuls, my lord! just as a duty to yourself and all your friends, and to please a faithful auld servant," Symington said, with more and more insinuating tones. There was something almost pathetic in the insistance with which he pressed "a breast of pairtridge that would tempt a saint" upon his young master. The humour of it struck Walter dully through the confusion of his senses. It was all like a dream to him made up of the laughable and the miserable; until Symington at last consented to see that his importunities were unavailing, and after a tedious interval of clearing away, took himself and all his paraphernalia out of the room, and left Walter alone. It seemed to Lord Erradeen that he had not been alone for a long time, nor had any leisure in which to collect his faculties; and for the first few minutes after the door had closed upon his too officious servant a sense of relief was in his mind. He drew a long breath of ease and consolation, and throwing himself back in his chair gave himself up to momentary peace.

But this mood did not last long. He had not been alone five minutes before there sprang up within him something which could be called nothing less than a personal struggle with—he could not tell what. There is a quickening of excitement in a mental encounter, in the course of a momentous discussion, which almost reaches the height of that passion which is roused by bodily conflict, when the subject is important enough, or the antagonists in deadly earnest. But to describe how this is intensified when the discussion takes place not between two, but in the spiritual consciousness of one, is almost too much for words to accomplish. Lord Erradeen in the complete solitude of this room, closed and curtained and shut out from all access of the world, suddenly felt himself in the height of such a controversy. He saw no one, nor did it occur to him again to look for any one. There was no need. Had his former visitor appeared, as before, seated opposite to him in the chair which stood so suggestively between the fire and the table, his pulses would have calmed, and his mind become composed at once. But there was nobody to address him in human speech, to oppose to him the changes of a human countenance. The question was discussed within himself with such rapidity of argument and reply, such clash of intellectual weapons, as never occurs to the external hearing. There passed thus under review the entire history of the struggle which had been going on from the time of Lord Erradeen's first arrival at the home of his race. It ran after this fashion, though with the quickness of thought far swifter than words.

"You thought you had conquered me. You thought you had escaped me."

"I did; you had no power in the glen, or on the isle."

"Fool! I have power everywhere, wherever you have been."

"To betray me into wickedness?"

"To let you go your own way. Did I tempt you to evil before ever you heard of me?"

"Can I tell? perhaps to prepare me for bondage."

"At school, at home, abroad, in all relations? Self-lover! My object at least is better than yours."

"I am no self-lover; rather self-hater, self-despiser."

"It is the same thing. Self before all. I offer you something better, the good of your race."

"I have no race. I refuse!"

"You shall not refuse. You are mine, you must obey me."

"Never! I am no slave. I am my own master."

"The slave of every petty vice; the master of no impulse. Yield! I can crush you if I please."

"Never! I am—Oona's then, who will stand by me."

"Oona's! a girl! who when she knows what you are will turn and loathe you."

"Fiend! You fled when she gave me her hand."

"Will she touch your hand when she knows what it has clasped before?"

Then Walter felt his heart go out in a great cry. If any one had seen him thus, he would have borne the aspect of a madman. His forehead was knotted as with great cords, his eyes, drawn and puckered together in their sockets, shone with a gleam of almost delirious hatred and passion. He held back, his figure all drawn into angles, in a horrible tension of resistance as if some one with the force of a giant was seizing him. He thought that he shrieked out with all the force of mortal agony. "No! If Oona turns from me and all angels—I am God's then at the last!"

Then there seemed to him to come a pause of perfect stillness in the heart of the battle; but not the cessation of conflict. Far worse than the active struggle, it was with a low laugh that his antagonist seemed to reply.

"God's! whom you neither love nor obey, nor have ever sought before."

The room in which Lord Erradeen sat was quite still all through the evening, more silent than the night air that ruffled the water and sighed in the trees permitted outside. The servants did not hear a sound. Peace itself could not have inhabited a more noiseless and restful place.

CHAPTER XVI.

In the early morning there is an hour more like paradise than anything else vouchsafed to our mortal senses as a symbol of the better world to come. The evening is infinitely sweet, but it implies labour and rest and consolation, which are ideas not entirely dissevered from pain; but in the first glory of the morning there is an unearthly sweetness, a lustre as of the pristine world, unsoiled, untried, unalloyed, a heavenly life and calm. The sunshine comes upon us with a surprise, with something of that exultant novelty which it must have had to Adam; the drops of dew shine like little separate worlds; the birds, most innocent of all the inhabitants of earth, have the soft-breathing universe to themselves: all their sweet domestic intercourses, the prattle of the little families, their trills of commentary touching everything that is going on in earth and heaven get accomplished, as the level line of sunshine penetrates from one glade to another, higher and higher, touching as it passes every bough into life. Awakening and vitality are in the very atmosphere which brings a new hope, a new day, a new world of possibility and life. New heavens and a new earth thus present themselves to mortal cognisance, for the most part quite unconscious of them, every day.

If only we brought nothing with us from the old world that ended in the night! But, alas, we bring everything—ourselves, that "heritage of woe," our thoughts, our desires, baffled or eager, for other objects than those which are in harmony with that new life and blessedness. When the sun rose visibly into the blue, skimming the surface of Loch Houran, and waking all the woods, there stood one spectator upon the old battlements of the ruined castle who was altogether out of harmony with the scene. Walter had not slept all night. He had not even gone through the form of going to bed. He had come out as soon as there was a glimmer of daylight, which, in October, is long of coming, to get what refreshment was possible from the breath of the morning air, and thus had assisted at the re-awakening of earth, and all the development of the new-born day. From where he stood there lay before him a paradise of sky and water, with everything repeated, embellished, made into an ideal of twofold sweetness, brightness, and purity, in the broad mirror of the lake. The autumn woods, the tracts of green field, or late yellow of the unreaped corn, all showed like another fairy-land underneath, a country still purer, more dazzling, and brilliant, more still and fresh, than the morning land above. "The light that never was on sea or shore" shone in those glorified and softly rippling woods, trending away into the infinite to the point beyond which mortal vision cannot go. What haunts and refuges of happy life might be there! what dreams of poetry beyond the human! That lovely inversion of all things, that more than mortal freshness and sweetness and liquid glow of light, confused the mind with a kind of involuntary bliss, a vision of a place of escape, the never attained country to which the soul, had it wings, might flee away and be at rest.

But that soul had no wings which looked out from Walter's haggard countenance, as he leant on the half-ruined wall. He gazed at the scene before him like one who had no lot or part in it. Its peace and brightness brought but into greater relief the restlessness of his own soul, the gloom and blackness in his heart. He had been struggling all night in a fierce internal controversy which, to his own consciousness, was with another intelligence more powerful than his own, and yet might have been with himself, with the better part that kept up within him a protest for better things, with such representatives of conscience and the higher affections as still existed within him. However it was, he was exhausted with the struggle, his strength was worn out. That lull of pain which does not mean any cure, or even any beginning of healing, but is merely a sign that the power of the sufferer to endure has come to its limit, gave him a kind of rest. But the rest itself was restless and incapable of composure. He moved about like an uneasy spirit along the broken line of the old battlements, pausing here and there to plunge his eyes into the landscape, to take in the morning air with a long inspiration. And so unlike was the mood of his mind to his usual character and habits, that as he moved, Walter gave vent to a low moaning, such as gives a kind of fictitious relief to the old and suffering—an involuntary utterance which it was terrible to hear coming with his breathing from a young man's lips, and in the midst of such a scene. Was he talking to himself? Was he only moaning as a dumb creature moans? By and by he half flung himself, in his weariness, into one of the ruinous embrasures, and remained there, leaning his back against one side of it. And then he said to himself, repeating the words over and over again —"Neither God's nor Oona's. Neither Oona's nor God's."

Lord Erradeen had arrived at that lowest depth of self-estimation, which means despair. His own life had been forced upon him, represented before his eyes he could not tell how. He had seen its motives disentangled, its course traced, all its wastes laid bare, with a distinctness against which he could offer no appeal. He could deny nothing; it was true; this was what he had done, with a repetition of folly, of selfishness, of baseness, for which he could offer no sort of excuse, which confounded and abased him. He had known it all, it is true, before; time after time he had pulled himself up and looked at the last scrap of his life, and pronounced it indefensible; then had pushed it from him and gone on again, escaping with all the haste he could from contemplation of the phenomena which were inexplicable, and which he did not desire to attempt to explain even to himself. He had said truly to Miss Milnathort that to know you are wrong is not always equivalent to being on the way to mend it. He had always known he was wrong; he had never

been deficient in moral disapproval of others like himself, or even of himself, when in one of the pauses of his career he was brought face to face with that individual. But he had been able to put a sort of accidental gloss upon his own worst actions. He had not intended them; there had been no motive whatever in what he did; he had done so and so by chance—by indolence, because it happened to be put before him to do it; but he had meant nothing by it. Out of this subterfuge he had been driven during the mental conflict of the night. And there was this peculiarity in his state, that he was not thus enlightened and convinced by the exertions of any reformatory influence, by any prophet bidding him repent. Conviction came from entirely the other side, and with a motive altogether different. "Who are you," his antagonist said, or seemed to say, "to take refuge with a pure woman, you who have never been pure? Who are you to lay claim to be God's, after ignoring God's existence altogether; or to be your own master, who have never ruled or guided yourself, but have been the slave of every folly, a feather blown on the wind, a straw carried away by the stream?"

All these accusations had been made as plain to him as the daylight. He had not been allowed to escape; the course of his life had been traced so clearly, that he could not protest, or object, or contradict; he was convinced—the most terrible position in which a man can be. Whether any man, thoroughly persuaded of his own moral wretchedness and debasement ever does escape despair, is a question full of difficulty. The prodigal's sense that in his father's house every servant has enough and to spare while he perishes of hunger is a different matter. "Father, I have sinned, I am no more worthy to be called thy son; make me as one of thy hired servants." There are still possibilities to a soul in such a position. But one who is driven from stronghold to stronghold, until at length he is forced to allow that there is no inducement which has not been tried and failed with him, that he has no claim to the succour of God or man, or woman, that he has turned his back upon all, neglected all, wronged every power in heaven and earth that could help, what is he to do? He may be forgiven; but forgiveness, in the entire abasement of that discovery, is not what he wants. He wants a renovation for which there seems no means left; he wants, in the old language—that language which we are said to have outgrown—to be born again: and that is impossible—impossible! What is there in heaven or earth that will prevent him from doing all over again what he has done before, the moment his circumstances permit it? So long as he is what he is—nothing: and how shall he be made other than what he is?

"Ye must be born again." Ah, what preacher can know that as he does? But how—but how? Neither God's nor Oona's—and who, then, was to help him? He had caught at the woman in his despair; he had not even so much as thought of God till the last moment, and then had flown like a coward to a fetish, meaning nothing but to escape. Why should God bend down from those spotless heavens to acknowledge the wretched runaway's clutch at his divine garments in the extremity of mortal terror? Would Oona have given him that hand of hers, had she known how his was stained? And would God attend to that coward's appeal made only when everything else failed?

The young man sat in the corner of the embrasure pressing himself against the rough stone-work for support. Despair had possession of his soul. What had he to do with the best and highest things, with freedom and love? After all, why should he be his own master, why claim the right to judge for himself? If he had this freedom fully, what would he do with it? Throw it away next day in exchange for some nothing, some pleasure that palled in the tasting. Pleasure! There was no pleasure, but only make-beliefs and deceptions. The old fellow was right, he began to say to himself, with a certain bitter humour. Had he exercised no coercion over the race, had the Methvens been left to their own devices, how much of them would have remained now? Instead of a peerage and great estates they would have died out in a ditch or in a sponging-house generations ago. Their lands would have gone bit by bit: their name would have disappeared—all as he said. And supposing now that Walter was left entirely free to do as he pleased, what reason had he to believe that he would not squander everything he could squander, and bring down the posterity of the race into the dust? That is what he would have done if left to himself. He would have resisted all claims of prudence or duty. He would have followed, he knew it, the caprice of the moment, just as he had done now. If no former Methvens had ruined the family it was in himself to do it. All these thoughts were in favour of the submission which seemed to him now almost the only thing before him. He thought of Miss Milnathort and her anxiety for him, and laughed to himself bitterly at her childish hope. Two that should be one, and that should be set on everything that was good. What a simpleton she was! He set on everything that was good! he was incapable of anything that was good. And Oona—could there be a greater folly than to think that Oona, when she knew, would pick him up out of this ruin, and give him a new starting-ground? He laughed at the thought aloud. Oona! Was not her very name the token of purity, the sign of maidenhood and innocence. And to believe that she would mingle herself in his being which was unclean and false from its very beginning! He laughed at his own folly to think so. In ignorance she had been more kind than ever woman was. She had asked no questions, she had given him her hand, she had stood by him. In ignorance: *but when she knew*! He said to himself that he was not cad enough to let her go on in this ignorance. He would have to tell her what he had been, what he would be again if left to circumstances and his own guidance. He would not deceive her; he was not cad enough for that. And when he had told her, and had given up for ever all hope of really making a stand against the tyrant of his race, or carrying out his theories of happiness, what would remain? What would remain? Subjection—misery—

"No," said a voice close by him, "something else—something very good in its way, and with which the greater majority of mankind are quite content, and may be very happy. The second best."

Walter had started at the sound of this voice. He left his seat with nervous haste; and yet he had no longer any sense of panic. He had a certain doleful curiosity to see the man, whom he had only seen in twilight rooms or by artificial light, in the open air and sunshine. Perhaps this strange personage divined his thoughts, for he came forward with a slight smile. There was nothing in his appearance to alarm the most timid. He was, as Miss Milnathort had called him, a grand gentleman. He had the air of one accustomed to command, with that ease of bearing which only comes to those largely experienced in the world. The path along the ruinous battlements was one that craved wary walking, but he traversed it with the boldest step without a moment's hesitation or doubt. He made a little salutation with his hand as he approached. "You were laughing," he said. "You are taking, I hope, a less highflown view of the circumstances altogether. The absolute does not exist in this world. We must all be content with advantages which are comparative. I always regret," he continued, "resorting to heroic measures. To have to do with some one who will hear and see reason, is a great relief. I follow the course of your thoughts with interest. They are all perfectly just; and the conclusion is one which most wise men have arrived at. Men in general are fools. As a rule you are incapable of guiding yourselves; but only the wise among you know it."

"I have no pretension to be wise."

"You are modest—all at once. So long as you are reasonable that will do. Adapt your life now to a new plan. The ideal is beyond your reach. By no fault of circumstances, but by your own, you have forfeited a great deal that is very captivating to the mind of youth, but very empty if you had it all to-morrow. You must now rearrange your conceptions and find yourself very well off with the second best."

There was something in his very tone which sent the blood coursing through Walter's veins, and seemed to swell to bursting the great currents of life. He cried out—

"You have driven me to despair. You have cut off from me every hope. And now you exhort me to find myself very well off, to adapt my life to a new plan. Is that all you know?"

His companion smiled. "You would like me better to repeat to you again that you have no ground to stand upon, and are as unworthy as one can be at your age. All that is very true. But one aspect of the matter is not all. In the mean time you will have to live and get on somehow. Suicide of course is always open to you, but you are not the sort of man for that; besides, it is begging the question, and solves no problem. No, you must live—on the second level. Your ideal has always been impossible, for you have never had heart or will to keep up to it. Why you should have had this fit of fantastic wilfulness now, and really believed that by means of vague aspirations you were to get the better of me and all your antecedents, I cannot tell. You must now find out practically how you are to live."

Walter had reached the lowest depths of despair a little while ago. He had consented that it was all true, that there was no further escape for him; but now again a passionate contradiction surged up within him. "I will not," he said, vehemently, "I will not—take your way."

"I think you will—for why? there is no other half so good. You will be very comfortable, and you will have done a great thing for your house. By-and-by you will settle into a conviction that what you have done is the best thing you could have done. It is one of the privileges of mankind. And I promise you that I will not molest you. Your coming here will be little more than a formula. You will agree with me: why then should there be any controversy between us? Maturity and wealth and well-being will bring you to think with me that a settled advantage like that of one's race is far beyond all evanescent good of the fancy. You will become respectable and happy—yes, quite happy enough—as happy as men have any right to be."

There was a half-tone of mockery, as if the speaker scorned the picture he drew; and at every word the resistance which had been almost stilled in Walter's mind rose up more warmly. "Are you happy yourself," he said, suddenly, "that you recommend this to me?"

The stranger paused a little. "The word is a trivial one. I have many gratifications," he said.

"I don't know what your gratifications can be. Is it worth your while to live through the ages as you say—you, so powerful as you are, with so many great faculties—in a miserable old ruin, to exercise this terrorism upon unoffending men?"

Then Walter's companion laughed aloud. "To live for ages in a miserable old ruin!" he said. "That does not seem a very attractive lot indeed. But set your mind at rest, my kind descendant; I live in a miserable ruin no more than you do. My affairs are everywhere. I have the weakness of a man for my own—perhaps in other regions as well—but that is nothing to you."

"It is everything to me. Give me some explanation of you. If, as you say, you have lived for centuries impossibly, how have you done it? Have you ever come to a blank wall like me—have you ever been abandoned by every hope? or," cried the young man, "am I your superior in this horrible experience? No man could stand as I do—given up to despair: and yet go on living like you."

"It depends upon your point of view. When you have taken my advice (as you will do presently) and have come down from your pinnacle and accepted what is the ordinary lot of mankind, you will find no longer any difficulty in living—as long as is possible; you will not wish to shorten your life by a day."

"And what is the ordinary lot of mankind?" cried Walter, feeling himself once more beaten down, humiliated, irritated by an ascendancy which he could not resist.

"I have told you—the second best. In your case a wife with a great deal of wealth, and many other qualities, who will jar upon your imagination (an imagination which has hitherto entertained itself so nobly!) and exasperate your temper perhaps, and leave your being what you call incomplete: but who will give you a great acquisition of importance and set you at peace with me. That alone will tell for much in your comfort; and gradually your mind will be brought into conformity. You will consider subjects in general as I do, from a point of view which will not be individual. You will not balance the interests of the few miserable people who choose to think their comfort impaired, but will act largely for the continued benefit of your heirs and your property. You will avail yourself of my perceptions, which are more extended than your own, and gradually become the greatest landowner, the greatest personage of your district; able to acquire the highest honours if you please, to wield the greatest influence. Come, you have found the other position untenable according to your own confession. Accept the practicable. I do not hurry you. Examine for yourself into the issues of your ideal—now that we have become friends and understand each other so thoroughly—"

"I am no friend of yours. I understand no one, not even myself."

"You are my son," said the other with a laugh. "You are of my nature; as you grow older you will resemble me more and more. You will speak to your sons as I speak to you. You will point out these duties to them, as I do to you."

"In everything you say," cried Walter, "I perceive that you acknowledge a better way. Your plans are the second best—you say so. Is it worth living so long only to know that you are embracing mediocrity after all, that you have nothing to rise to? and yet you acknowledge it," he said.

The stranger looked at him with a curious gaze. He who had never shown the smallest emotion before grew slightly paler at this question: but he laughed before he replied.

"You are acute," he said. "You can hit the blot. But the question in hand is not my character, but your practical career."

The sound of an oar here broke the extreme silence. The morning had fully come, the night coach from "the south" had arrived at the inn, and Duncan with the postbag was coming along the still water, which cut like a transparent curd before him, and joined again in eddying reflections behind. Duncan bent his back to his oars unconscious of any mystery; his postbag, bringing news of all the world, lay in front of him. He and his boat in every detail of outline and colour swam suspended in the light, in reflection, and swept double over the shining surface. How extraordinary was the contrast between his open-air placidity, his fresh morning countenance, the air of the hills about him, and the haggard countenance of his master, looking upon this country fellow with an envy which was as foolish as it was genuine. Duncan did not know anything about the ideal. And yet in his way he followed his conscience, sometimes with pain and trouble, and at the cost of many a struggle—or else neglected its warnings, and took his own way as his master had done. Walter did not take this into consideration, but looked down upon his boatsman's ruddy, honest countenance and square frame, stretching contentedly to his oars and thinking of nothing, with envy. Would it have been better to be born like that to daily labour and an unawakened intelligence? He turned round to say something, but his visitor had gone. There was not a shadow upon the walls, not the sound of a step. Lord Erradeen had no longer the faintest movement of fear, but in its place a certain impatience and irritability as if this practical joke might be played upon him too often. And presently into the clear air rang the voice of Symington.

"For God's sake, my lord, take care! that is just where the poor lady was killed thirty years ago."

CHAPTER XVII.

The commonplace world has a strange look to a man who has himself come out of any great personal struggle, out of an excitement which no one knows anything about but himself. When he descends, with still the heave of strong emotion in his breast, there is a mixture of contempt and relief in the manner in which he regards the extraordinary stolidity and unimpressionableness of his fellows. He is glad that they are unaware of what has happened to himself, yet cannot help scorning them a little for their want of penetration; and it is a comfort to him to feel himself surrounded with the calm and indifference of strangers, yet he cannot help feeling that had they been of a higher nature, they must have divined the suppressed agitation with which he moves among them, his nerves all trembling with the strain through which they have passed. Thus Walter, when he landed at the village, met the looks of the country folk with a certain expectation of seeing some traces of the wondering curiosity with which they must be asking themselves what ailed Lord Erradeen? and felt himself at once baffled and disappointed and relieved to find them full of their usual friendliness and hospitality, but nothing more.

"We are real glad to see your lordship back," Mrs. Macfarlane said at the inn, "and I hope you mean to bide, and no just run away when you are getting acquaint with the country-side." Big John, who was looking on while his horses were being cared for, gave a tug to his hat in honour of Lord Erradeen, but scarcely withdrew his eyes from the other more interesting spectacle. And finally the minister, who was setting out upon one of his visitations, met his noble parishioner

with the most cheerful good morning, without any indication of deeper insight.

"You are welcome home, Lord Erradeen," he said as the landlady had said, "and this time I hope we'll see more of you. Are you stepping my way? It is just a most beautiful morning for this time of the year, and I am going to one of my outlying corners; but you young gentlemen, what with your shooting, and stalking, and ploys in general, are not generally much addicted to a simple walk."

"I am going your way; I am no great sportsman; I want to see Shaw who lives somewhere in this direction, I think."

"I will show the way with pleasure, Lord Erradeen; but I doubt you will not find him in. He is out upon his rounds before now. He will be tackling you about Peter Thomson, and his farm. And I would be glad to say a word, too, if I might. They had been there all their lives; they never believed it possible that they would be sent away. It is very natural you should want to make the best of your property, but it was a blow; and though he was a little behind in his worldly affairs, he was always good to the poor, and an elder, and well-living person. Such a one is a loss to the country-side; but it is every man's duty, no doubt, to himself and his posterity, to make the best he can of his estate." This the minister said with an air of polite disapproval, yet acquiescence in a doctrine not to be gainsaid. "Political economy," he added, with a laugh, "did not come into my curriculum, although I was at college in Adam Smith's palmy days."

"If you think my actions have anything to do with Adam Smith!" cried Walter. It was a peculiarity of this young man, and perhaps of others beside, to resent above all things the imputation of a prudential motive. "I know nothing about Thomson," he added. "I was absent, and I suppose did—whatever I am supposed to have done—on the impulse of the moment, as I am too apt to do."

"That is a pity," said the minister, "especially when the well-being of others is concerned. You will pardon me, my lord, who am an old-fashioned person. The good of your property (if ye think this is for the good of your property) is always a motive, and some will think a sound one: but to decide what is of great consequence to other folk without thought, because you happen to be tired, or worried, or in an ill way——"

A natural flush of anger came to Walter's face: but notwithstanding all his faults there was something generous in him. He bit his lip to restrain a hasty word which was ready to burst forth, and said, after a moment, "The reproof is just. I had no right to be so inconsiderate. Still, as you say, the advantage of the property is a motive: there are some," he added bitterly, with a sense that he was speaking at some third person, "who think it the best in the world."

"And so it is in the right view," said Mr. Cameron; "that is what I always think when I read what those misguided creatures are wanting in Ireland, to do away with landlords altogether—and some even among ourselves," he added with that sense of the superiority of "ourselves" which dwells so calmly in the Scottish bosom. The last was said regretfully, with a shake of the head.

"I dare say," said Walter, "they have some reason in what they say."

"Some, but not the best. They have the kind of reason that lies on the surface—in so much as to have a thing of your own is better than hiring it from another. But in that way Peter Thomson, honest man, would have been doomed without remedy before your time, Lord Erradeen. He has been getting into troubled waters for some years: he would have had to sell the farm and begone if it had been his: but with a good landlord like what I live in hopes to see—a good man in trouble would be helped over the dangerous moment. He would be backed up when he was feeble. Perhaps it was just at all times an ideal: but that was what the old relationship might be."

"And the ideal is always problematical," said Walter. He was carrying on the same controversy still, taking the other side. "Most men I think would prefer to deal with their own even if it meant selling and losing, than to be subject to another man's will—as it appears Thomson has been to mine. That seems ridiculous indeed," he cried, with a sudden outburst of feeling, "that a good man, as you say, should depend on the fantastic will of—such a fool as I have been."

"My Lord Erradeen!" cried the minister in consternation. He thought the young man was going out of his wits, and began to be nervous. There was something, now he looked at him, wild in his air. "I have no doubt," he said soothingly, "that your decision—must have seemed very reasonable. I would not, though my feelings are enlisted and though I regret, go so far as to blame it myself."

"Why?" said Walter, turning upon him. "Because?—surely every man ought to have the courage of his opinions."

"Not for that reason," said the old minister, with a slight flush. "I have never been one," he went on with a smile, "that have been much moved by the fear of man. No. It is because now they have been forced to make the move it may be better for themselves; they would have struggled on, and perhaps at the end got through, but in Canada they will soon flourish and do well."

"Not without a struggle there either, I suppose," said Walter, with a fanciful disposition to resent the idea that Canada was an infallible cure.

"Not without a struggle—there you are right, my lord. There was first the sore, sore tug to pull up the roots of life that were so deeply implanted here; and the long voyage, which was terrible to the father and mother. It is very likely," he added, "that the old folk will never get over it.

Transplanting does not do at their age. But then the young ones, they are sure to thrive: and the old will die all the sooner, which perhaps is not to be regretted when we get to the evening of life."

"That is surely an inhuman doctrine," Walter cried.

"Do ye think so, my young lord? Well! It becomes the young to think so; but for myself I have always seen a foundation of reason in the savage way of making an end of the old and helpless. It is better, far better for the survivors that they should have a horror of it, but for the aged themselves it is not so clear to me. They would be better away. An old man that has outlived all natural love and succour, and that just lives on against his will because he cannot help it, that is a sad sight."

"But not revolting, as it is to think of the other."

"The other does not revolt me. If my heritors, yourself the first, were to look in some fine day and bid me out to the banks of the loch and give me a heave into it—in deep clear water mind, none of your muddy, weedy bits—I stipulate for clean water," the old minister said with a laugh at his own joke.

"If that is all that is to happen to your emigrants," said Walter, "they surely would have been as well here."

"If that had been possible; but you see, Lord Erradeen, though there are few things that ye cannot manage to get your way in, on your level of life, on the lower level when we cannot get what we want, we have to put up with what we can get."

"Why should you think I can get my way? I have to put up with what I can get, as you say, like everybody else."

"Well, yes," said the minister, "it is a kind of universal rule; and it is just a sign of the disposition that conquers the world, that it will accept what it can get without making a moaning and a fretting over it."

"The second best," said Walter with a half-smile of irony: it was strange to come from a teacher so dissimilar to this experienced old man and hear the same doctrine once more repeated. Mr. Cameron nodded his head several times in sign of assent.

"What seems to our blindness often the second best; though you may be sure it is the best for us, and chosen for us by a better judge than we are. This is my way, to the right, up Glen-Dochart, and yonder is Shaw's house, the white one among the trees. I am extremely glad to have had this conversation with you, my lord. And if I can be of use to you at any time in any question that may puzzle ye—oh, I do not stand upon my superior enlightenment, or even on my office, with the like of you that probably belong to another Church; but I am an old man and have some experience. Good day to you, Lord Erradeen." The old minister looked back after he had left him, and waved his hand with a benevolent smile.

Lord Erradeen walked on. He waved back a kindly salutation; the meeting, the talk with a man who was his equal, his superior, his inferior, all in one, in wholesome human inconsistency, was a kind of event for him, separating him by a distinct interval, from the agitation of the night and morning, the terrible mental struggle, the philosophy that had fallen on his despair, not as healing dew, but like a baptism of fire, scorching his heart. Strange that the same reasoning should have come before him in this strange way, so accidental and without premeditation! Mr. Cameron took everything from a different point of view. The second best to him meant manly resignation, devout religious faith. To accept it "because it was chosen for us by a better guide than we," that was a difference almost incalculable. According to the minister's belief, "what we wanted" was a thing to be given up nobly when it was proved to be God's will so. But this point of view was so unlike the other that it brought a smile to Walter's lips as he went on. God's will, what had that to do with petty schemes to enrich a family? If it should so happen that he, driven by persecution, by temptations too strong to be resisted, by the feebleness of a spirit not capable of contending with fate, yielded once more to this influence which had operated so strangely upon his race, would that be God's will?—would it be ever possible to look upon it as "chosen by a better judge"? Walter was not used to the discussion of such problems; and he was weak with mental struggles and want of rest. He lingered for a moment before Shaw's house as he passed it, then rejected, with the sudden capricious impatience of his nature, the intention, only half formed, of seeing Shaw, and walked on with a fantastic sense of relief in having got rid of this disagreeable duty. "Another time will do just as well," he said to himself, and hurried on as if his walk had now a more definite, as well as a more agreeable, aim. But, as a matter of fact, he had no aim at all, and did not know where he was going or what he intended. Indeed he intended nothing. Perhaps he would have said "to think," had he been closely questioned; but it was a stretch of meaning to apply the term to that confusion of his thoughts in which everything seemed to be turning round and round. It was not like the sharp and keen dialogue of last night, in which, though all went on within his own spirit, there were two minds engaged, himself and another. Now he was left to himself; no one contending with him—no one helping, even by contention, to keep him to an actual point, and give energy and definiteness to the mental process going on within him. That process was still going on; but it was as if the wheels of a complicated and delicate machine had lost their guiding principle, and were all circling and whirring in space without an object, with the same show of motion as when fully employed, the same creak, and jar, and grind. Now and then there would come uppermost a phrase made clear

out of the confusion—"the second best":—"something very good in its way; with which the majority of mankind is quite content and may be very happy;" "what we call in our blindness the second best": as his two oracles had said to him. Whether it was the practical level which every man must content himself with after the failure of the ideal, or whether it was the real best, chosen for us by "a better judge," this was what both had put before him. The two descriptions, so different, yet both perhaps true, came up before him at intervals with something of strange regularity, as if the words had been printed upon the constantly turning wheels. He walked very quickly along the moorland road, not caring where he went, nor seeing what was round him. The fresh air blew in his face, with the force and keenness which an autumn wind has in a deeply-scooped and somewhat narrow glen among the hills, but seemed only to quicken the pace of the turning wheels, and all that machinery circling giddily, grinding out nothing, making his very soul sick and dizzy as it went on and on.

Suddenly the whirr and movement in his head calmed and stopped. A homely figure, in colour and aspect like an embodiment of those wild, sheep-feeding, rugged, but not majestic slopes that hemmed in the valley on either side, became visible coming down a path that led to the main road on which Walter was. It was that of a man, tall and largely developed, but without any superfluous bulk, roughly clad, roughly shod, lifting his feet high, like one accustomed to bog and heather, with the meditative slow pace of a rustic whose work demanded no hurry, and who had time for thought in all he did. Walter, with the quick senses of his youth, quickened still more by the excitement of the circumstances amid which, once and only once, he had seen Duncan Fraser, recognised him at once, and something like the liveliness of a new impulse moved him. Who could tell but that this man of the hills might be an oracle too, and out of the silence of his lowly life might have brought something to help a soul in peril? Walter waited till the cotter came up to him, who was not on his part so quick to recognise his landlord, of whom he had seen so little, and thought it might be some "tourist," or some other Southland person, ignorant of these parts, and wanting information about the way, which was not inducement enough to make Duncan quicken his steps. When they met, he perceived that he had "seen the face before," but went no further, and awaited with a certain air of stolid gravity what the stranger might have to say.

"You are—Fraser—of that glen up there? I almost forget how you call it—Truach-Glas."

"Ay, I am just sae; Duncan Fraser, at your service," replied the man, not without the slight hauteur of a Highlander interrogated imperatively by a personage in whom he acknowledges no right to do so.

"You don't remember me, apparently," Walter said.

"No, I cannot just say that I do; and yet I've seen your face before," said Duncan, with a curious look.

"Never mind that. I want you to tell me if you are contented now, and happy in your glen—now that you are free of all your trouble about rent?"

Duncan's first impulse was to say, What is that to you, I would like to ken? But the words had already set the slower mechanism of his brain to work; and, after a moment, he took his blue bonnet from his head, and with a bow in which there was a certain rustic dignity, said—

"You'll be the laird, my Lord Erradeen? I have good cause to ken your face that was once to us all just like the face of an angel out o' heaven."

"You make too much of it," said Walter, with a smile; for the expression pleased him in spite of himself. "No one could have done otherwise in my place."

"The auld wives," said Duncan, with a little huskiness in his throat, "do not think sae, sir. They mind you at their Books, morning and night."

Walter did not know very well what "minding him at the Books" meant; but he guessed that somehow or other it must refer to prayers; and he said somewhat lightly—

"Do you think that will do me much good?"

Duncan's honest face turned upon him a look of displeasure. The hill-side patriarch put on his bonnet gravely.

"It should, if there's truth in Scripture," he said, somewhat sternly; "but nae doubt it is just one of the most awfu' mysteries how a wilful soul will baffle baith God's goodwill and gude folk's prayers."

This was so curiously unlike anything he had expected, that Lord Erradeen gave his humble monitor one startled glance, and for the moment was silenced. He resumed, however, a minute after, feeling a certain invigoration come to him from his contact with simple nature.

"I acknowledge," he said, "though you are a little hard upon me, Fraser, that I have brought this on myself. But I want to know about you, how things are going. Are you satisfied with your position now? And is everything made smooth for you by the remittal of the rent?"

At this Duncan became in his turn confused.

"Nae doubt," he said, "it has been a great help, sir—my lord. Ye'll excuse me, but I'm little used to

lordships, and I canna get my mouth about it."

"Never mind my lordship. I want to know the real truth. Your minister has been talking to me about Thomson—the man at the farm." Walter pointed vaguely to the hill-side, having no idea where Peter Thomson's farm was, about which so much had been said. "He has been sent away while you have stayed. Let me know which has been the best."

Duncan looked more embarrassed than ever, and shuffled from one foot to the other, looking down upon the wet and brilliant green of the grass on which he stood.

"We were all muckle obliged to you, my lord; and no one of us has grudged to say sae," he said.

"But that is not the question," Walter cried, with a little impatience.

"To flit the old folk would have been impossible," said Duncan, as if speaking to himself. "It was just a deliverance, and the Lord's doing, and wonderful in our eyes. But, sir, there is nothing in this world that is pure good. The soil is cauld: there is little will come out of it: and though we're far out o' the way o' the world in our bit glen, I reckon that what ye ca' progress and a' that, has an effeck whether or no. We want mair than our forbears wanted. No, no just education and advancement: my uncle Willie was brought up a minister, and got a' the education my Robbie is ettling at, though my grandfather had, maybe, less to spare than me. But just there is a difference in the ways o't. And maybe if it had come to the worse, and ye had driven us out, instead of being sae generous——"

"It would have been better for you," said Walter, as his companion paused.

"I'm not saying that. It was just deliverance. I will tell ye mair, my lord. If I had been driven out, me and my auld mother, and my little bairns, I could have found it in my heart to curse ye, sae young, sae rich, sae well off, and sae inhuman. And the auld wife's death would have lain at your door, and the bairns would never have forgotten it, however well they had prospered, no even when they came to be reasonable men, and could see baith sides of the question like me; they would have carried it with them to yon New World, as they call it; it would have grown to be a tradition and a meesery for ever. Now," said Duncan, with a hoarse half-laugh of emotion, "the sting is out of it whatever happens."

"I am glad of that, anyhow," said Walter.

"And so am I—and so am I! When ye have a sense of being wranged in your heart, it's like a burnin' wound, like thae puir Irish, the Lord help them! And what was our pickle siller to the like of you? But——" Duncan said, and paused, not knowing how to proceed with due respect and gratitude for what his landlord had done.

"But—what you expected has not been realised? the rent, after all, made but a small difference—the relief was not what you hoped?"

"I am just incapable, sir, of making ye a right answer," said Duncan, with vehemence. "It's just the effeck of the times, and nae fault o' yours or ours—at least that is all I can make of it. We want mair than our forbears wanted. We are no so easy content. The lads at the college canna live as simple as they once lived. That makes it harder for everybody. The callants! I would not bind them to a life like mine; they would have done better for themselves, though it would have killed granny, and been a sore burden upon Jeannie and me."

"The fact is, Duncan, that to have your own way is not much better than to have some one else's way, and that there is nothing worth making a fight about," Walter said, with a bitterness which his humble companion did not understand, and still less approved.

"No that, my lord," said Duncan, "but just that nothing that is mortal is perfect blessedness, except what is said in the psalm, 'that man—that walketh not astray.' Life is a struggle for the like of us, and maybe for most other folk. We have just to put the evil and the good against one another, and rejoice when the good is a wee predominant over the evil."

He used longer words perhaps than an Englishman of his rank would have used; and there was a something of Celtic fine manners and natural dignity about him which gave importance to his speech.

"That means—a compromise: no ideal in this world, no absolute good, but only a practicable something that we can get along with."

Walter said this with a scorn of it, yet growing belief in it, which gave strange vehemence to his tone. He did not expect his rustic companion to understand him, nor did he think of any response.

"It is just this, sir," said Duncan, "that here we have nae continuing ceety, but look for one to come."

END OF VOL. II.

[Transcriber's Note: Hyphen variations left as printed.]

[The end of *The Wizard's Son, Volume 2* by Margaret Oliphant]

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