WHITE HEATHER (VOL. I)

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A Novel

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WHITE HEATHER

A Novel

BY

WILLIAM BLACK

AUTHOR OF 'MACLEOD OF DARE,'
'JUDITH SHAKESPEARE,' ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES
VOL. I.

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WHITE HEATHER.

CHAPTER I.
A JOURNEY NORTHWARD.

On a certain cold evening in January, and just as the Scotch night-mail was about to start for the north, a stranger drove up to Euston and alighted, and was glad enough to escape from the chill draughts of the echoing station into the glow and warmth and comfort of a sleeping-car. He was a man of means apparently; for one half of this carriage, containing four berths, and forming a room apart, as it were, had been reserved for himself alone; while his travelling impedimenta—fur-lined coats and hoods and rugs and what not—were of an elaborate and sumptuous description. On the other hand, there was nothing of ostentation about either his dress or appearance or demeanour. He was a tall, thin, quiet-looking man, with an aquiline nose, sallow complexion, and keen but not unkindly gray eyes. His short-cropped hair was grizzled, and there were deep lines in the worn and ascetic face; but this may have been the result of an exhausting climate rather than of any mental care, for there was certainly no touch of melancholy in his expression. His costume was somewhat prim and precise; there was a kind of schoolmasterish look about the stiff white collar and small black tie; his gloves were new and neat. For the rest, he seemed used to travelling; he began to make himself at home at once, and scarcely looked up from this setting of things to rights when the conductor made his appearance.

'Mr. Hodson, sir?' the latter said, with an inquiring glance.

'That's about what they call me,' he answered slowly, as he opened a capacious dressing-bag covered with crocodile-hide.

'Do you expect any friends to join you farther along, sir?'

'Not that I know of,' was the answer—and a pair of dark-blue velvet slippers, with initials worked in gold, were fished out and thrown upon the seat beside him.

But when the conductor had got one of the lower sleeping-berths made ready and the traveller had completed his leisurely arrangements for passing the night in comfort, a somewhat one-sided conversation ensued. This gaunt, slow-speaking, reserved man proved to be quite talkative—in a curious, measured, dry, and staccato fashion; and if his conversation consisted chiefly of questions, these showed that he had a very honest and simple concern in the welfare of this other human being whom chance had thrown in his way, and that he could express his friendly interest without any touch of patronage or condescension. He asked first about the railway-line; how the company's servants were paid; what were their hours on duty; whether they had formed any associations for relief in case of sickness; what this particular man got for his work; whether he could look forward to any bettering of his lot, and so forth. And then, fixing his eyes more scrutinisingly on his companion, he began to ask about his family affairs—where he lived; what children he had; how often he saw them; and the like; and these questions were so obviously prompted by no idle curiosity, but by an honest sympathy, and by the apparent desire of one human being to get to understand fully and clearly the position and surroundings and prospects of this other fellow-creature, that it was impossible for any one to take offence.

'And how old is your little girl?'

'Eight, sir: she will be nine in May next.'

'What do you call her?'

'Caroline, sir.'

'Why, you don't say!' he exclaimed, with his eyes—which were usually calm and observant—lighting up with some surprise. 'That is the name of my girl too—though I can't call her little any more. Well now,' he added, as he took out his purse and selected a sovereign from the mass of coins, 'I think this is about what you ought to do. When you get back to Camden Town, you start an account in the Post Office Savings Bank, in your little girl's name, and you put in this sovereign as a first deposit. Then, whenever you have an odd sixpence or shilling to give her—a birthday present, or that—you keep adding on and on; and there will be a nice little sum for her in after years. And if ever she asks, you can tell her it was the father of an American Caroline who made her this little present; and if she grows up to be as good a girl as the American Carry, she'll do very well, I think.'

The conductor scarcely knew how to express his thanks, but the American cut him short, saying coolly—

'I don't give the sovereign to you at all. It is in trust for your daughter. And you don't look to me the kind of man who would go and drink it.'

He took out an evening newspaper, and, at the hint, the conductor went away to get ready the berths in the other end of the car. When he came back

again to see if the gentleman wanted anything further for the night, they had thundered along the line until they were nearing Rugby.

'Why, yes,' Mr. Hodson said, in answer to the question, 'you might get me a bottle of soda-water when we get to the station.'

'I have soda-water in the car, sir.'

'Bring me a bottle, then, please.'

'And shall I get anything else for you, sir, at Rugby?'

'No, I thank you.'

When the man returned with the soda-water, the traveller had taken from his dressing-bag a bottle labelled 'Bromide of Potassium' and he was just about to mix his customary sleeping-draught when it occurred to him that perhaps this conductor could tell him something of the new and far country into which he was about to adventure for the first time. And in making these inquiries he showed that he was just as frank-spoken about his own plans and circumstances as he expected other people to be about theirs. When the conductor confessed that he knew next to nothing about the north of Scotland, never having been farther than Perth, and even then his knowledge of the country being confined to the railway-line and the stations, Mr. Hodson went on to say—in that methodical way of his, with little rising inflexions here and there—

'Well, it's bound to be different from London, anyway. It can't be like London; and that's the main thing for me. Why, that London fog, never moving, same in the morning, same at night, it's just too dismal for anything; the inside of a jail is a fool to it. 'Pears to me that a London afternoon is just about as melancholy as they make it; if there's anything more melancholy than that anywhere, I don't know it. Well, now, it can't be like that at Cape Wrath.'

'I should think not, sir.'

'I daresay if I lived in the town, and had my club, and knew people, it might be different; and my daughter seems to get through the time well enough; but young folks are easily amused. Say, now, about this salmon fishing in the north: you don't know when it begins?'

'No, sir.'

'You haven't seen anybody going yet with a bundle of rods?'

'No, sir, not this year yet.'

'Hope they haven't been playing it on me—I was told I could begin on the eleventh. But it don't signify much so long's I get out of that infernal cut-throat atmosphere of London.'

At this point the train began to slow into Rugby station, and the conductor left to attend to his duties; and by the time they were moving out again and on their way to the far north, Mr. Hodson had mixed and drunk his nightly potion, and, partially undressed, was wrapped up in the thick and warm coverings of

the sleeping-berth, where, whether owing to the bromide of potassium, or the jog-trot rattle of the wheels, he was soon plunged in a profound slumber.

Well, if part of his design in thus venturing upon a journey to the north in mid-winter was to get away from the monotonous mists of London, the next morning showed him that so far he had been abundantly successful. The day breaking caused him to open his eyes; and instinctively he turned to the window. There before him was a strange, and unusual, and welcome sight. No more dismal grays, and the gathering down of a hopeless dusk; but the clear, glad light of the morning—a band of flashing gold all along the eastern horizon, behind the jet-black stems and branches of the leafless trees; and over that the heavens were all of a pale and luminous lilac, with clouds hanging here and there—clouds that were dark and almost thunderous in their purple look, but that really meant nothing but beauty, as they lay there soft and motionless in the glowing and mystical dawn. Quickly he got up. The windows were thrown open. And this air that rushed in—so fresh, so sweet, so full of all kinds of mellow and fragrant messages from the hills, and the pine-woods, and the wide-lying straths—did it not bring a strange kind of joy and surprise with it?

'A beautiful morning, sir; we are getting near to Perth now,' the conductor said, when he made his appearance.

'Are we in time?'

'Yes, in very good time.'

'And no hurry about breakfast?'

'No, sir; you don't start again till nine o'clock.'

Even this big hollow station, with its wide stone platforms and resounding arch: was it the white light that filled it, or the fresh air that blew through it, that made it quite a cheerful place? He was charmed with the accent of the timid handmaiden who brought him his breakfast in the refreshment room, and who waited on him in such a friendly, half-anxious, shy fashion; and he wondered whether he would dare to offer so pretty and well-mannered a young lady anything over the customary charge in token of his gratitude to her for her gentle ways. Perth itself: well, there had been rain in the night, and the streets near the station were full of mud; but then the cart ruts in the mud were gleaming lines of gold; and the beautiful sky hung over the slowly rising smoke of the houses; and the air was everywhere so sweet and welcome. He had got into a new world altogether; the weight of the London atmosphere was lifted from him; he whistled 'Auld Lang Syne'—which was the only Scotch air he knew—and the lugubrious tune sounded quite pleasant on so joyous a morning.

Moreover, these were but first and commonplace experiences. For by and by, when he had again taken his seat to prosecute his journey—and he found himself the sole occupant of the carriage—the sunrise had widened into the full

splendour of a sunlit day; and as the train sped away to the north, he, sitting at the window there, and having nothing to do but examine the new country he was entering, was wholly amazed at the intensity and brilliancy of the colouring around, and at the extraordinary vividness of the light. The wide stretches of the Tay shone like burnished silver; there were yellow straths and fields; and beech hedges of a rich russet-red; and fir-woods of a deep fresh green; and still farther away low-lying hills of a soft and ruddy purple, touched sharp here and there with patches of snow; and over all these a blue sky as of summer. The moist, warm air that blew in at the window seemed laden with pine odours; the country women at the small stations had a fresh pink colour in their cheeks; everywhere a new and glad and wholesome life seemed to be abroad, and cheerfulness, and rich hues, and sunlight.

'This is good enough,' he said to himself. 'This is something like what I shipped for.'

And so they sped on: through the soft, wide-stretching woods of Murthly, and Birnam, and Dunkeld; through the shadow and sudden gleams of Killiecrankie Pass; on by Blair Athol and the banks of the Garry; until, with slow and labouring breath, the train began to force its way up the heights of the Grampians, in the lone neighbourhood of the Drumouchter Forest. The air was keener here; the patches of snow were nearer at hand; indeed, in some places the line had evidently been cleared, and large snow banks heaped up on each side. But by and by the motion of the train seemed to become easier; and soon it was apparent that the descent had begun; presently they were rattling away down into the wide and shining valley of Strathspey; and far over there on the west and north, and keeping guard over the plain, as it were, rose the giant masses of the Cairngorm Hills, the snow sparkling here and there on their shoulders and peaks.

It was not until half-past four in the afternoon that the long railway journey came to an end; and during that time he had come upon many a scene of historical interest and pictorial beauty. He had been within a short distance of the mournful 'haughs of Cromdale;' he had crossed Culloden Moor. Nearing Forres, he had come within sight of the Northern Sea; and thereafter had skirted the blue ruffled waters of the Moray, and Cromarty, and Dornoch Firths. But even when he had got to Lairg, a little hamlet at the foot of Loch Shin, his travelling for the day was not nearly over; there still remained a drive of four-and-twenty miles; and although it was now dusk and the weather threatened a change, he preferred to push on that night. Travelling did not seem to tire him much; no doubt he was familiar with immeasurably greater distances in his own country. Moreover, he had learned that there was nothing particular to look at in the stretch of wild moorland that lay between him and his destination; and then again, if it was dark now, there would be moonlight later on. So he ate his dinner leisurely and

in content, until a waggonette with two stout horses was brought round; then he got in; and presently they were away from the little hamlet and out in a strange land of darkness and silence, scarcely anything visible around them, the only sound the jog-trot clatter of the horses' feet.

It was a desperately lonely drive. The road appeared to go over interminable miles of flat or scarcely undulating moorland; and even when the moonlight began to make the darkness faintly visible, that only increased the sense of solitude, for there was not even a single tree to break the monotony of the sombre horizon line. It had begun to rain also: not actual rain, but a kind of thin drizzle, that seemed to mix itself up with the ineffectual moonlight, and throw a wan haze over these far-reaching and desolate wastes. Tramp, tramp went the horses' feet through this ghostly world; the wet mist grew thicker and thicker and clung around the traveller's hair; it was a chilling mist, moreover, and seemed to search for weak places about the throat. The only sharply defined objects that the eye could rest on were the heads and upthrown ears of the horses, that shone in the light sent forward by the lamps: all else was a formless wilderness of gloom, shadows following shadows, and ever the desolate landscape stretching on and on, and losing itself in the night.

The American stood up in the waggonette, perhaps to shake off for a second the clammy sensation of the wet.

'Say, young man,' he observed—but in an absent kind of way, for he was regarding, as far as that was possible, the dusky undulations of the mournful landscape—'don't you think now, that for a good wholesome dose of God-forsakenness, this'll about take the cake?'

'Ah beg your paurdon, sir,' said the driver, who was apparently a Lowlander.

The stranger, however, did not seem inclined to continue the conversation; he sank into his seat again; gathered his rugs round him; and contented himself as heretofore by idly watching the lamplight touching here and there on the harness and lighting up the horses' heads and ears.

Mile after mile, hour after hour, went by in this monotonous fashion; and to the stranger it seemed as if he were piercing farther and farther into some unknown land unpeopled by any human creatures. Not a ray of light from any hut or farmhouse was visible anywhere. But as the time went on, there was at least some little improvement in the weather. Either the moonlight was growing stronger, or the thin drizzle clearing off; at all events he could now make out ahead of him—and beyond the flat moorland—the dusky masses of some mountains, with one great peak overtopping them all. He asked the name.

'That is Ben Clebrig, sir.'

And then through the mist and the moonlight a dull sheet of silver began to disclose itself dimly.

'Is that a lake down there?'

'Loch Naver, sir.'

'Then we are not far from Inver-Mudal?'

'No far noo; just a mile or two, sir,' was the consoling answer.

And indeed when he got to the end of his journey, and reached the little hostelry set far amid these moorland and mountain wilds, his welcome there made ample amends. He was ushered into a plain, substantially furnished, and spacious sitting-room, brightly lit up by the lamp that stood on the white cloth of the table, and also by the blazing glare from the peats in the mighty fireplace; and when his eyes had got accustomed to this bewilderment of warmth and light, he found, awaiting his orders, and standing shyly at the door, a pretty, tall, fair-haired girl, who, with the softest accent in the world, asked him what she should bring him for supper. And when he said he did not care to have anything, she seemed quite surprised and even concerned. It was a long, long drive, she said, in her shy and pretty way; and would not the gentleman have some hare-soup—that they had kept hot for him? and so forth. But her coaxing was of no avail.

'By the way, what is your name, my girl?' he said.

'Nelly, sir.'

'Well, then, Nelly, do you happen to know whether Lord Ailine's keeper is anywhere in the neighbourhood?'

'He is in the unn, sir, waiting for you.'

'Oh, indeed. Well, tell him I should like to see him. And say, what is his name?'

'Ronald, sir.'

'Ronald?'

'That is his first name,' she explained.

'His "first name"? I thought that was one of our Americanisms.'

She did not seem to understand this.

'Ronald Strang is his name, sir; but we jist call him Ronald.'

'Very well, Nelly; you go and tell him I want to see him.'

'Ferry well, sir,' she said; and away she went.

But little indeed did this indefatigable student of nature and human nature—who had been but half interested by his observations and experiences through that long day's travel—know what was yet in store for him. The door opened; a slim-built and yet muscular young man of eight-and-twenty or so appeared there, clad in a smart deer-stalking costume of brownish green; he held his cap in his hand; and round his shoulder was the strap from which hung behind the brown leather case of his telescope. This Mr. Hodson saw at a glance; and also something more. He prided himself on his judgment of character. And when his quick look had taken in the keen, sun-tanned face of this young fellow,

the square, intellectual forehead, the firm eyebrows, the finely cut and intelligent mouth, and a certain proud set of the head, he said to himself, 'This is a *man*: there's something here worth knowing.'

'Good evening, sir,' the keeper said, to break the momentary silence.

'Good evening,' said Mr. Hodson (who had been rather startled out of his manners). 'Come and sit down by the fire; and let's have a talk now about the shooting and the salmon-fishing. I have brought the letters from the Duke's agent with me.'

'Yes, sir,' said Strang; and he moved a bit farther into the room; but remained standing, cap in hand.

'Pull in a chair,' said Mr. Hodson, who was searching for the letters.

'Thank ye, sir; thank ye,' said the keeper; but he remained standing nevertheless.

Mr. Hodson returned to the table.

'Sit down, man, sit down,' said he, and he himself pulled in a chair. 'I don't know what your customs are over here, but anyhow I'm an American citizen; I'm not a lord.'

Somewhat reluctantly the keeper obeyed this injunction, and for a minute or two seemed to be rather uncomfortable; but when he began to answer the questions concisely put to him with regard to the business before them, his shyness wholly wore away, for he was the master of this subject, not the stranger who was seeking for information. Into the details of these matters it is needless to enter here; and, indeed, so struck was the American with the talk and bearing of this new acquaintance that the conversation went far afield. And the farther afield it went, the more and more was he impressed with the extraordinary information and intelligence of the man, the independence of his views, the shrewdness and sometimes sarcasm of his judgments. Always he was very respectful; but in his eyes—which seemed singularly dark and lustrous here indoors, but which, out of doors and when he was after the wary stag, or the still more wary hinds, on the far slopes of Clebrig, contracted and became of a keen brownish gray—there was a kind of veiled fire of humour which, as the stranger guessed, might in other circumstances blaze forth wildly enough. Mr. Hodson, of Chicago, was entirely puzzled. A gamekeeper? He had thought (from his reading of English books) that a gamekeeper was a velveteen-coated person whose ideas ranged from the ale-house to the pheasant-coverts, and thence and quickly back again. But this man seemed to have a wide and competent knowledge of public affairs; and, when it came to a matter of argument (they had a keen little squabble about the protection tariffs of America) he could reason hard, and was not over-compliant.

'God bless me,' Mr. Hodson was driven to exclaim at last, 'what is a man of

your ability doing in a place like this? Why don't you go away to one of the big cities—or over to America—where a young fellow with his wits about him can push himself forward?'

'I would rather be "where the dun deer lie,"' said he, with a kind of bashful laugh.

'You read Kingsley?' the other said, still more astonished.

'My brother lends me his books from time to time,' Ronald said modestly. 'He's a Free Church minister in Glasgow.'

'A Free Church minister? He went through college, then?'

'Yes, sir; he took his degree at Aberdeen.'

'But—but—' said the newcomer, who had come upon a state of affairs he could not understand at all—'who was your father, then? He sent your brother to college, I presume?'

'Oh no, sir. My father is a small farmer down the Lammermuir way; and he just gave my brother Andrew his wages like the rest, and Andrew saved up for the classes.'

'You are not a Highlander, then?'

'But half-and-half, like my name, sir,' he said (and all the shyness was gone now: he spoke to this stranger frankly and simply as he would have spoken to a shepherd on the hillside). 'My mother was Highland. She was a Macdonald; and so she would have me called Ronald; it's a common name wi' them.'

Mr. Hodson stared at him for a second or two in silence.

'Well,' said he, slowly, 'I don't know. Different men have different ways of looking at things. I think if I were of your age, and had your intelligence, I would try for something better than being a gamekeeper.'

'I am very well content, sir,' said the other placidly; 'and I couldna be more than that anywhere else. It's a healthy life; and a healthy life is the best of anything—at least that is my way of thinking. I wadna like to try the toun; I doubt it wouldn't agree wi' me.' And then he rose to his feet. 'I beg your pardon, sir; I've been keeping ye late.'

Well, Mr. Hodson was nothing loth to let him go; for although he had arrived at the conviction that here was a valuable human life, of exceptional quality and distinction, being absolutely thrown away and wasted, still he had not formed the arguments by which he might try to save it for the general good, and for the particular good of the young man himself. He wanted time to think over this matter—and in cool blood; for there is no doubt that he had been surprised and fascinated by the intellectual boldness and incisiveness of the younger man's opinions and by the chance sarcasms that had escaped him.

'I could get him a good opening in Chicago soon enough,' he was thinking to himself, when the keeper had left, 'but upon my soul I don't know the man who

is fit to become that man's master. Why, I'd start a newspaper for him myself, and make him editor—and if he can't write, he has got mother-wit enough to guide them who can—but he and I would be quarrelling in a week. That fellow is not to be driven by anybody.'

He now rang the bell for a candle; and the slim and yellow-haired Nelly showed him upstairs to his room, which he found to be comfortably warm, for there was a blazing peat fire in the grate, scenting all the air with its delicious odour. He bade her good-night, and turned to open his dressing-bag; but at the same moment he heard voices without, and, being of an inquiring turn of mind, he went to the window. The first thing he saw was that outside a beautiful clear moon was now shining; the leafless elm-trees and the heavy-foliaged pines throwing sharp black shadows across the white road. And this laughing and jesting at the door of the inn?—surely he heard Ronald's voice there—the gayest of any—among the jibes that seemed to form their farewells for the night? Then there was the shutting of a door; and in the silence that ensued he saw the solitary, straight-limbed, clean-made figure of a man stride up the white road, a little dog trotting behind him.

'Come along, Harry, my lad,' the man said to his small companion—and that, sure enough, was the keeper's voice.

And then, in the stillness of the moonlight night, this watcher and listener was startled to hear a clear and powerful tenor voice suddenly begin to sing—in a careless fashion, it is true, as if it were but to cheer the homeward going—

'Come all ye jolly shepherds,
That whistle through the glen,
I'll tell ye of a secret
That courtiers dinna ken.
What is the greatest bliss
That the tongue o' man can name?—
'Tis to woo a bonnie lassie
When the kye come hame.'

'Great heavens!' said Mr. Hodson to himself, 'such a voice—and all Europe waiting for a new tenor! But at seven or eight and twenty I suppose he is beyond training.'

The refrain became more and more distant:

'When the kye come hame,
When the kye come hame,

'Twixt the gloamin' and the mirk,
When the kye come hame.'

Both the keeper and the little trotting terrier had disappeared now, having turned a corner of the road where there was a clump of trees. The traveller who had wandered into these remote wilds sate down for a minute or two to sum up his investigations of the evening, and they were these:

'Accounts of the deer seem shaky; but there may have been bad shooting this last year, as he says. The salmon-fishing sounds more likely; and then Carry could come with us in the boat—which would make it less dull for her. Anyhow, I have discovered the most remarkable man I have met with as yet in the old country; and to think of his being thrown away like that!'

CHAPTER II.

MEENIE.

We may now follow Ronald Strang as he walks along to his cottage, which, with its kennels and its shed for hanging up the slain deer, stands on a little plateau by the roadside, a short distance from the inn. The moonlight night is white and beautiful, but far from silent; for the golden plover are whistling and calling down by the lochside, and the snipe are sending their curious harsh note across the moorland wastes. Moreover, he himself seems to be in a gay mood (perhaps glad to be over the embarrassment of a first meeting with the stranger), and he is conversing amicably with his little terrier. The subject is rats. Whether the wise little Harry knows all that is said need not be determined; but he looks up from time to time and wags his stump of a tail as he trots placidly along. And so they get up to the cottage and enter, for the outer door is on the latch, thieves being unheard of in this remote neighbourhood; though here Harry hesitates, for he is uncertain whether he is to be invited into the parlour or not. But the next moment all consideration of this four-footed friend is driven out of his master's head. Ronald had expected to find the parlour empty, and his little sister, at present his sole housekeeper, retired to rest. But the moment he opens the door, he finds that not only is she there, sitting by the table near to the solitary lamp, but that she has a companion with her. And well he knows who that must be.

'Dear me, Miss Douglas,' he exclaimed, 'have I kept you so late!'

The young lady, who now rose, with something of a flush over her features—for she had been startled by his sudden entrance—was certainly an extraordinarily pretty creature: not so much handsome, or distinguished, or striking, as altogether pretty and winning and gentle-looking. She was obviously of a pure Highland type: the figure slender and graceful, the head small and beautifully formed; the forehead rather square for a woman, but getting its proper curve from the soft and pretty hair; the features refined and intelligent; the mouth sensitive; the expression a curious sort of seeking to please, as it were, and ready to form itself into an abundant gratitude for the smallest act of kindness. Of course, much of this look was owing to her eyes, which were the true Highland eyes; of a blue gray these were, with somewhat dark lashes; wide apart, and shy, and apprehensive, they reminded one of the startled eyes of some wild animal; but they were, entirely human in their quick sympathy, in their gentleness, in their appeal to all the world, as it were, for a favouring word. As for her voice—well, if she used but few of the ordinary Highland phrases, she had undoubtedly a considerable trace of Highland accent; for, although her father was an Edinburgh man, her mother (as the elderly lady very soon let her neighbours know) was one of the Stuarts of Glengask and Orosay; and then again Meenie had lived nearly all her life in the Highlands, her father never having risen above the position of a parish doctor, and welcoming even such local removals as served to improve his position in however slight a way.

'Maggie,' said Miss Douglas (and the beautiful wide-apart eyes were full of a shy apology), 'was feeling a little lonely, and I did not like to leave her.'

'But if I had known,' said he, 'I would not have stayed so late. The gentleman that is come about the shooting is a curious man; it's no the salmon and the grouse and the deer he wants to know about only; it's everything in the country. Now, Maggie, lass, get ye to bed. And I will see you down the road, Miss Douglas.'

'Indeed there is no need for that,' said Meenie, with downcast eyes.

'Would ye have a bogle run away with ye?' he said good-naturedly.

And so she bade good-night to the little Maggie, and took up some books and drawings she had brought to beguile the time withal; and then she went out into the clear night, followed by the young gamekeeper.

And what a night it was—or rather, might have been—for two lovers! The wide waters of the loch lay still and smooth, with a broad pathway of silver stretching away into the dusk of the eastern hills; not a breath of wind stirred bush or tree; and if Ben Clebrig in the south was mostly a bulk of shadow, far away before them in the northern skies rose the great shoulders of Ben Loyal, pallid in the moonlight, the patches of snow showing white up near the stars.

They had left behind them the little hamlet—which merely consisted of a few cottages and the inn; they were alone in this pale silent world. And down there, beneath the little bridge, ran the placid Mudal Water: and if they had a Bible with them?—and would stand each on one side of the stream?—and clasp hands across? It was a night for lovers' vows.

'Maggie is getting on well with her lessons,' the pretty young lady said, in that gentle voice of hers. 'She is very diligent.'

'I'm sure I'm much obliged to ye, Miss Douglas,' was the respectful answer, 'for the trouble ye take with her. It's an awkward thing to be sae far from a school. I'm thinking I'll have to send her to my brother in Glasgow, and get her put to school there.'

'Oh, indeed, indeed,' said she, 'that will be a change now. And who will look after the cottage for you, Ronald?'

She addressed him thus quite naturally, and without shyness; for no one ever dreamed of calling him anything else.

'Well, I suppose Mrs. MacGregor will give the place a redd[#] up from time to time. But a keeper has but half learned his business that canna shift for himself; there's some of the up-country lodges with ne'er a woman-body within a dozen miles o' them.'

[#] 'Redd,' a setting to rights.

'It is your brother the minister that Maggie will be going to?' she said.

'Oh yes; he is married, and has a family of his own; she will be comfortable there.'

'Well, it is strange,' said she, 'that you should have a brother in Glasgow, and I a sister, and that your mother should be Highland and mine too.'

But this was putting himself and her on much too common a footing; and he was always on his guard against that, however far her gentleness and good-nature might lead her.

'When is your father coming back, Miss Douglas?' said he.

'Well, I really do not know,' she said. 'I do not think he has ever had so wide a district to attend to, and we are never sure of his being at home.'

'It must be very lonely for a young lady brought up like you,' he ventured to say, 'that ye should have no companions. And for your mother, too; I wonder she can stand it.'

'Oh no,' she said, 'for the people are so friendly with us. And I do not know of any place that I like better.'

By this time they were come to the little wooden gate of the garden, and he opened that for her. Before them was the cottage, with its windows, despite

the moonlight on the panes, showing the neat red blinds within. She gave him her hand for a second.

'Good night, Ronald,' said she pleasantly.

'Good night, Miss Douglas,' said he; 'Maggie must not keep you up so late again.'

And therewith he walked away back again along the white road, and only now perceived that by some accident his faithful companion Harry had been shut in when they left. He also discovered, when he got home, that his sister Maggie had been so intent puzzling over some arithmetical mysteries which Meenie had been explaining to her, that she had still further delayed her going to bed.

'What, what?' said he, good-humouredly. 'Not in bed yet, lass?'

The little red-headed, freckled-faced lassie obediently gathered up her belongings, but at the door she lingered for a moment.

'Ronald,' said she, timidly, 'why do ye call Meenie "Miss Douglas?" It's not friendly.'

'When ye're a bit older, lass, ye'll understand,' he said, with a laugh.

Little Maggie was distressed in a vague way, for she had formed a warm affection for Meenie Douglas, and it seemed hard and strange that her own brother should show himself so distant in manner.

'Do you think she's proud? for she's not that,' the little girl made bold to say.

'Have ye never heard o' the Stuarts of Glengask?' said he; and he added grimly, 'My certes, if ye were two or three years older, I'm thinking Mrs. Douglas would have told ye ere now how Sir Alexander used to call on them in Edinburgh every time he came north. Most folk have heard that story. But however, when Meenie, as ye like to call her, goes to live in Edinburgh or Glasgow, or some o' the big towns, of course she'll be Miss Douglas to every one, as she ought to be here, only that she's taken a fancy to you, and, my lass, fairly spoils ye with her kindness. Now, off with ye, and dinna fash your head about what I or any one else calls her; if she's content to be Meenie to you, ye should be proud enough.'

As soon as she was gone he stirred up the peats, lit his pipe, and drew in a chair to the small table near the fire. It was his first pipe that evening, and he wished to have it in comfort. And then, to pass the time, he unlocked and opened a drawer in the table, and began to rummage through the papers collected there—all kinds of shreds and fragments they were, scored over mostly in pencil, and many of them bearing marks as if the writing had been done outside in the rain.

The fact was, that in idle times, when there was no trapping to be done, or shooting of hoodie-crows, or breaking-in of young dogs, he would while away many an hour on the hillside or along the shores of the loch by stringing verses together. They were done for amusement's sake. Sometimes he jotted them

down, sometimes he did not. If occasionally, when he had to write a letter to a friend of his at Tongue, or make some request of his brother in Glasgow, he put these epistles into jingling rhyme, that was about all the publication his poetical efforts ever achieved; and he was most particular to conceal from the 'gentry' who came down to the shooting any knowledge that he scribbled at all. He knew it would be against him. He had no wish to figure as one of those local poets (and alas! they have been and are too numerous in Scotland) who, finding within them some small portion of the afflatus of a Burns, or a Motherwell, or a Tannahill, are seduced away from their lawful employment, gain a fleeting popularity in their native village, perhaps attain to the dignity of a notice in a Glasgow or Edinburgh newspaper, and subsequently and almost inevitably die of drink, in the most abject misery of disappointment. No; if he had any ambition it was not in that direction; it was rather that he should be known as the smartest deerstalker and the best trainer of dogs in Sutherlandshire. He knew where his strength lay, and where he found content. And then there was another reason why he could not court newspaper applause with these idle rhymes of his. They were nearly all about Meenie Douglas. Meenie-olatry was written all across those scribbled sheets. And of course that was a dark secret known only to himself; and indeed it amused him, as he turned over the loose leaves, to think that all the Stuarts of Glengask and Orosay (and that most severe and terrible of them all, Mrs. Douglas) could not in the least prevent his saying to Meenie just whatever he pleased—within the wooden confines of this drawer. And what had he not said? Sometimes it was but a bit of careless singing—

Roses white, roses red,
Roses in the lane,
Tell me, roses red and white,
Where is Meenie gane?

O is she on Loch Loyal's side?
Or up by Mudal Water?
In vain the wild doves in the woods
Everywhere have sought her.

Roses white, roses red,
Roses in the lane,
Tell me, roses red and white,
Where is Meenie gane?

Well, now, supposing you are far away up on Ben Clebrig's slopes, a gun over

your shoulder, and idly looking out for a white hare or a ptarmigan, if you take to humming these careless rhymes to some such tune as 'Cherry Ripe,' who is to hinder? The strongest of all the south winds cannot carry the tidings to Glengask nor yet to Orosay's shores. And so the whole country-side—every hill and stream and wood and rock—came to be associated with Meenie, and saturated with the praise and glory of her. Why, he made the very mountains fight about her!

Ben Loyal spake to Ben Clebrig,
And they thundered their note of war:
'You look down on your sheep and your sheepfolds;
I see the ocean afar.

'You look down on the huts and the hamlets,
And the trivial tasks of men;
I see the great ships sailing
Along the northern main.'

Ben Clebrig laughed, and the laughter
Shook heaven and earth and sea:
'There is something in that small hamlet
That is fair enough for me—

'Ay, fairer than all your sailing ships
Struck with the morning flame:
A fresh young flower from the hand of God—
Rose Meenie is her name!'

But at this moment, as he turned over this mass of scraps and fragments, there was one, much more audacious than the rest, that he was in search of, and when he found it a whimsical fancy got into his head. If he were to make out a fair copy of the roughly scrawled lines, and fold that up, and address it to Meenie, just to see how it looked? He took out his blotting-pad, and selected the best sheet of note-paper he could find; and then he wrote (with a touch of amusement, and perhaps of something else, too, in his mind the while) thus—

O wilt thou be my dear love?
(Meenie and Meenie),
O wilt thou be my ain love?
(My sweet Meenie),

Were you wi' me upon the hill,
It's I would gar the dogs be still,
We'd lie our lane and kiss our fill,
(My love Meenie).

Aboon the burn a wild bush grows
(Meenie and Meenie),
And on the lush there blooms a rose
(My sweet Meenie);
And wad ye tak the rose frae me,
And wear it where it fain would be,
It's to your arms that I would flee,
(Rose-sweet Meenie!)

He carefully folded the paper and addressed it outside—so:

Miss Wilhelmina Stuart Douglas, ***Care of James Douglas, Esq., M.D.,*** ***Inver-Muda***
Sutherlandshire.

And then he held it out at arm's length, and regarded it, and laughed, in a contemptuous kind of way, at his own folly.

'Well,' he was thinking to himself, 'if it were not for Stuart of Glengask, I suppose the day might come when I could send her a letter like that; but as it is, if they were to hear of any such madness, Glengask and all his kith and kin would be for setting the heather on fire.'

He tossed the letter back on the blotting-pad, and rose and went and stood opposite the blazing peats. This movement aroused the attention of the little terrier, who immediately jumped up from his snooze and began to whimper his expectation. Strang's heart smote him.

'God bless us!' he said aloud. 'When a lass gets into a man's head, there's room for nothing else; he'll forget his best friends. Here, Harry, come along, and I'll get ye your supper, my man.'

He folded up the blotting-pad and locked it in the drawer, blew out the candles, called Harry to follow him into the kitchen, where the small terrier was duly provided for and left on guard. Then he sought out his own small room. He was whistling as he went; and, if he dreamt of anything that night, be sure it was not of the might and majesty of Sir Alexander Stuart of Glengask and Orosay.

These verses to Meenie were but playthings and fancies—for idle hours.

CHAPTER III.
ON THE LOCH.

A considerable wind arose during the night; Mr. Hodson did not sleep very well; and, lying awake towards morning, he came to the conclusion that he had been befooled, or rather that he had befooled himself, with regard to that prodigy of a gamekeeper. He argued with himself that his mental faculties must have been dulled by the long day's travel; he had come into the inn jaded and tired; and then finding himself face to face with an ordinarily alert and intrepid intellect, he had no doubt exaggerated the young man's abilities, and made a wonder of him where no wonder was needed. That he was a person of considerable information and showed common sense was likely enough. Mr. Hodson, in his studies of men and things, had heard something of the intelligence and education to be found among the working classes in Scotland. He had heard of the handloom weavers who were learned botanists; of the stone-masons who were great geologists; of the village poets who, if most of their efforts were but imitations of Ferguson and Burns and Tannahill, would here and there, in some chance moment of inspiration, sing out some true and pathetic song, to be taken to the hearts of their countrymen, and added to a treasure-store of rustic minstrelsy such as no other nation in the world has ever produced. At the same time he was rather anxious to meet Strang again, the better to get the measure of him. And as he was also curious to see what this neighbourhood into which he had penetrated looked like, he rose betimes in the morning—indeed, before the day was fully declared.

The wind still moaned about the house, but outside there was no sign of any storm; on the contrary, everything was strangely calm. The lake lay a dark lurid purple in the hollow of the encircling hills; and these, along the eastern heavens, were of the deepest and softest olive green; just over them was a line of gleaming salmon-red, keen and resplendent as if molten from a furnace; and over that again soft saffron-dusky clouds, deepening in tone the higher they hung in the clear pale steel hues of the overhead sky. There was no sign of life anywhere—nothing but the birch woods sloping down to the shore; the moorland wastes of the lower hills; and above these the giant bulk and solemn shadows of Ben Clebrig,[#] dark against the dawn. It was a lovely sight; he began to think he had

never before in his life felt himself so much alone. But whence came the sound of the wind that seemed to go moaning down the strath towards the purple lake?

[#] That is, the Hill of the Playing Trout.

Well, he made no doubt that it was up towards the north and west that the storm was brewing; and he remembered that a window in the sitting-room below looked in that direction; there he would be able to ascertain whether any fishing was practicable. He finished his dressing and went down. The breakfast table was laid; a mighty mass of peats was blazing cheerfully in the spacious fireplace. And the storm? Why, all the wide strath on this northern side of the house was one glow of yellow light in the now spreading sunrise; and still farther away in the north the great shoulders of Ben Loyal[#] had caught a faint roseate tinge; and the same pale and beautiful colour seemed to transfuse a large and fleecy cloud that clung around the snow-scarred peak. So he came to the conclusion that in this corner of the glen the wind said more than it meant; and that they might adventure on the loch without risk of being swamped or blown ashore.

[#] More properly Ben Laoghal, the Hill of the Calves.

The slim tall Highland lass made her appearance with further plenishings for the table, and 'Good moarning!' she said, in her pretty way, in answer to his greeting.

'Say, now, has that man come down from Tongue yet?'

'No, sir,' said Nelly, 'he wass no come down yet.' And then she looked up with a demure smile. 'They would be keeping the New Year at Tongue last night.'

'Keeping the New Year on the 14th of January?'

'It's the twelfth is the usual day, sir,' she explained, 'but that was Saturday, and they do not like a Saturday night, for they have to stop at twelve o'clock, and so most of them were for keeping it last night.'

'Oh, indeed. Then the festive gentleman won't show up to-day?'

'But it is of no matter whateffer whether he comes or no; for I am sure that Ronald will be willing to lend a hand. Oh, I am sure of it. I will ask him myself.'

'*You* will ask him?' was Mr. Hodson's internal soliloquy. 'It is to *you* he will grant the favour. Indeed!'

He fixed his eyes on her,

'He is a good-looking young fellow, that Ronald.'

She did not answer that; she was putting the marmalade, and the honey, and the cream on the table.

'He is not married?'

'No, sir.'

'Well, now, when he thinks about getting married, I suppose he'll pretty well have his choice about here?'

'Indeed there iss others besides him,' said Nelly rather proudly, but her face was red as she opened the door.

Well, whether it was owing to the intervention of Nelly or not, as soon as Mr. Hodson was ready to start he found Ronald waiting for him without; and not only that, but he had already assumed command of the expedition, having sent the one gillie who had arrived down to bale the boat. And then he would overhaul Mr. Hodson's fishing-gear—examining the rods, testing the lines and traces, and rejecting all the spoon baits, angels, sand-eels, and what not, that had been supplied by the London tackle-maker, for two or three of the familiar phantom minnows. Mr. Hodson could scarcely believe that this was the same man who last night had been discussing the disestablishment of state churches and the policy of protecting native industries. He had not a word for anything but the business before him; and the bold fashion in which he handled those minnows, all bristling with hooks, or drew the catgut traces through his fingers (Mr. Hodson shivered, and seemed to feel his own fingers being cut to the bone), showed that he was as familiar with the loch as with the hillside or the kennel.

'I'm not much on salmon-fishing myself,' the American remarked modestly.

'It's rather early in the season, sir, I'm afraid,' was the answer. 'But we might get a fish after all; and if we do it'll be the first caught in Scotland this year, I warrant.'

They set out and walked down to the shore of the loch, and there Mr. Hodson seated himself on the gunwale of the flat-bottomed coble, and watched the two men putting the rods together and fixing the traces. The day had now declared itself; wild and stormy in appearance, but fair on the whole; great floods of sunshine falling suddenly on the yellow slopes and the russet birch woods; and shadows coming as rapidly across the far heights of Clebrig, steeping the mountains in gloom. As for the gillie who had been proof against the seductions of keeping the New Year, and who was now down on one knee, biting catgut with his teeth, he was a man as tall and as sallow as Mr. Hodson himself, but with an added expression of intense melancholy and hopelessness. Or was that but temporary?

'Duncan doesna like that boat,' Ronald said, glancing at Mr. Hodson.

The melancholy man did not speak, but shook his head gloomily.

'Why?'

As the gillie did not answer, Ronald said—

'He thinks there is no luck with that boat.'

'That boat?' the gillie said, with an angry look towards the hapless coble.

'She has the worst luck of any boat in Sutherland—*tam her*,' he added, under his breath.

'In my country,' the American said, in his slow way, 'we don't mind luck much; we find perseverance about as good a horse to win with in the end.'

He was soon to have his perseverance tried. Everything being ready they pushed off from the shore, Ronald taking stroke oar, the gillie at the bow; Mr. Hodson left to pay out the lines of the two rods, and fix these in the stern, when about five-and-thirty yards had gone forth. At first, it is true, he waited and watched with a trifle of anxiety. He wanted to catch a salmon; it would be something to write about to his daughter; it would be a new experience for himself. But when time passed and the boat was slowly rowed along the loch at a measured distance from the shore, without any touch of anything coming to make the point of either rod tremble, he rather gave up his hope in that direction, and took to talking with Ronald. After all, it was not salmon-fishing alone that had brought him into these wilds.

'I suppose it is really too early in the season,' he observed, without much chagrin.

'Rayther,' said Ronald.

'Rawther,' said the melancholy gillie.

But at that instant something happened that startled every one of them out of their apathy. The top of one of the rods was violently pulled at, and then there was a long shrill yell of the reel.

'There he is, sir! there he is, sir!' Ronald called.

Mr. Hodson made a grab blindly—for he had been looking at the scenery around—at one of the rods. It was the wrong one. But before he knew where he was, Ronald had got hold of the other and raised the top so as to keep a strain on the fish. The exchange of the rods was effected in a moment. Then when Ronald had wound in the other line and put the rod at the bow, he took to his oar again, leaving Mr. Hodson to fight his unknown enemy as best he might, but giving him a few words of direction from time to time, quietly, as if it were all a matter of course.

'Reel in, sir, reel in—keep an even strain on him—let him go—let him go if he wants—–'

Well, the fish was not a fierce fighter; after the first long rush he scarcely did anything; he kept boring downwards, with a dull, heavy weight. It seemed easy work; and Mr. Hodson—triumphant in the hope of catching his first salmon—was tempted to call aloud to the melancholy gillie—

'Well, Duncan, how about luck now?'

'I think it's a kelt,' the man answered morosely.

But the sinister meaning of this reply was not understood.

'I don't know what you call him,' said Mr. Hodson, holding on with both hands to the long, lithe grilse-rod that was bent almost double. 'Celt or Saxon, I don't know; but I seem to have got a good grip of him.'

'Then he heard Ronald say, in an undertone, to the gillie—

'A kelt? No fears. The first rush was too heavy for that.'

And the gillie responded sullenly—

'He's following the boat like a cow.'

'What is a kelt, anyway?' the American called out. 'Something that swims, I suppose? It ain't a man?'

'I hope it's no a kelt, sir,' said Ronald—but doubtfully.

'But what is a kelt, then, when he's at home?'

'A salmon, sir, that hasna been down to the sea; we'll have to put him back if he is.'

Whirr! went the reel again; the fish, kelt or clean salmon, had struck deep down. But the melancholy creature at the bow was taking no further interest in the fight. He was sure it was a kelt. Most likely the minnow would be destroyed. Maybe he would break the trace. But a kelt it was. He knew the luck of this 'tammed' boat.

The struggle was a tedious one. The beast kept boring down with the mere force of its weight, but following the coble steadily; and even Ronald, who had been combating his own doubts, at length gave in: he was afraid it was a kelt. Presently the last suspicion of hope was banished. With a tight strain on him, the now exhausted animal began to show near the surface of the water—his long eel-like shape and black back revealing too obviously what manner of creature he was. But this revelation had no effect on the amateur fisherman, who at last beheld the enemy he had been fighting with so long. He grew quite excited. A kelt?—he was a beautiful fine fish! If he could not be eaten he could be stuffed! Twenty pounds he was, if an ounce!—would he throw back such a trophy into the loch?

Ronald was crouching in the stern of the boat, the big landing-net in his hand, watching the slow circling of the kelt as it was being hauled nearer and nearer. His sentiments were of a different kind.

'Ah, you ugly brute!—ah, you rascal!—ah—ah!'—and then there was a deep scoop of the landing-net; and the next minute the huge eel-like beast was in the bottom of the boat, Duncan holding on to its tail, and Ronald gripping it by the gills, while he set to work to get the minnow out of its jaws. And then without further ado—and without stopping to discuss the question of stuffing—the creature was heaved into the water again, with a parting benediction of 'Bah, you brute!' It took its leave rapidly.

'Well, it's a pity, sir,' Ronald said; 'that would have been a twenty-four-

pound salmon if he had been down to the sea.'

'It's the luck of this tammed boat,' Duncan said gloomily.

But Mr. Hodson could not confess to any such keen sense of disappointment. He had never played so big a fish before, and was rather proud that so slight a grilse-rod and so slender a line should (of course, with some discretion and careful nursing on his part) have overmastered so big a beast. Then he did not eat salmon; there was no loss in that direction. And as he had not injured the kelt in any way, he reflected that he had enjoyed half-an-hour's excitement without doing harm to anything or anybody, and he was well content. So he paid out the two lines again, and set the rods, and began to renew his talk with Ronald touching the customs connected with the keeping of the New Year.

After all, it was a picturesque kind of occupation, kelts or no kelts. Look at the scene around them—the lapping waters of the loch, a vivid and brilliant blue when the skies were shining fair, or black and stormy again when the clouds were heavy in the heavens; and always the permanent features of the landscape—the soft yellows of the lower straths, where the withered grass was mixed with the orange bracken; the soft russet of the leafless birch woods fringing the shores of the lake; the deep violet shadows of Ben Clebrig stretching up into the long swathes of mist; and then the far amphitheatre of hills—Ben Hee, and Ben Hope, and Ben Loyal—with sunlight and shade inter-mingling their ethereal tints, but leaving the snow-streaks always sparkling and clear. He got used to the monotony of the slow circling of the upper waters of the lake. He forgot to watch the points of the rods. He was asking all kinds of questions about the stags and the hinds, about ptarmigan, and white hares, and roe, about the price of sheep, the rents of crofts, the comparative wages of gillies, and shepherds, and foresters, and keepers, and stalkers, and the habits and customs of land-agents and factors. And at length, when it came to lunch-time, and when they landed, and found for him a sheltered place under the lee of a big rock, and when Ronald pointed out to him a grassy bank, and said rather ruefully—

'I dinna like to see that place empty, sir. That's where the gentlemen have the salmon laid out, that they may look at them at lunch-time—'

Mr. Hodson, as he opened the little basket that had been provided for him, answered cheerfully enough—

'My good friend, don't you imagine that I feel like giving it up yet. I'm not finished with this lake, and I'll back perseverance against luck any day. Seems to me we've done very well so far; I'm con-tent.'

By and by they went back into the coble again, and resumed their patient pursuit; and there is little doubt that by this time Ronald had come to the conclusion that this stranger who had come amongst them was a singularly odd and whimsical person. It was remarkable enough that he should have undertaken

this long and solitary journey in order to fish for salmon, and then show himself quite indifferent as to whether he got any or not; and it was scarcely human for any one to betray no disappointment whatever when the first fish caught proved to be a kelt; but it was still stranger that a man rich enough to talk about renting a deer-forest should busy himself with the petty affairs of the very poorest people around. Why, he wanted to know how much Nelly the housemaid could possibly save on her year's wages; whether she was supposed to lay by something as against her wedding-day; or whether any of the lads about would marry her for her pretty face alone. And when he discovered that Mr. Murray, the innkeeper, was about to give a New Year supper and dance to the lads and lasses of the neighbourhood, he made no scruple about hinting plainly that he would be glad of an invitation to join that festive party.

'Not if I'm going to be anything of a wet blanket,' he said candidly. 'My dancing days are over, and I'm not much in the way of singing; but I'll tell them an American story; or I'll present them with a barrel of whisky—if that will keep the fun going.'

'I'm sure they'll be very glad, sir,' Ronald said, 'if ye just come and look on. When there's gentlemen at the Lodge, they generally come down to hear the pipes, and the young gentlemen have a dance too.'

'What night did you say?'

'Monday next, sir.'

Well, he had only intended remaining here for a day or two, to see what the place was like; but this temptation was too great. Here was a famous opportunity for the pursuit of his favourite study—the study of life and manners. This, had Ronald but known it, was the constant and engrossing occupation that enabled this contented traveller to accept with equanimity the ill-luck of kelt-catching; it was a hobby he could carry about with him everywhere; it gave a continuous interest to every hour of his life. He cared little for the analyses of science; he cared less for philosophical systems; metaphysics he laughed at; but men and women—the problems of their lives and surroundings, their diverse fortunes and aspirations and dealings with each other—that was the one and constant subject that engrossed his interest. No doubt there was a little more than this; it was not merely as an abstract study that he was so fond of getting to know how people lived. The fact was that, even after having made ample provision for his family, he still remained possessed of a large fortune; his own expenditure was moderate; and he liked to go about with the consciousness that here or there, as occasion served, he could play the part of a little Providence. It was a harmless vanity; moreover, he was a shrewd man, not likely to be deceived by spurious appeals for charity. Many was the young artist whom he had introduced to buyers; many the young clerk whom he had helped to a better situation; more than

one young woman in the humblest of circumstances had suddenly found herself enabled to purchase her wedding outfit (with a trifle over, towards the giving her greater value in her lover's eyes), through the mysterious benevolence of some unknown benefactor. This man had been brought up in a country where every one is restlessly pushing forward; and being possessed of abundant means, and a friendly disposition, it seemed the most natural thing in the world that here or there, at a fitting opportunity, he should lend a helping hand. And there was always this possibility present to him—this sense of power—as he made those minute inquiries of his into the conditions of the lives of those amongst whom he chanced to be living.

The short winter day was drawing to a close; the brilliant steely blue of the driven water had given place to a livid gray; and the faint gleams of saffron-yellow were dying out in the western skies.

'Suppose we'd better be going home now,' Mr. Hodson remarked at a venture, and with no great disappointment in his tone.

'I'm afraid, sir, there's no much chance now,' Ronald said.

'We must call again; they're not at home to-day,' the other remarked, and began with much complacency to reel in one of the lines.

He was doing so slowly, and the men were as slowly pulling in for the shore in the gathering dusk, when *whirr!* went the other reel. The loud and sudden shriek in this silence was a startling thing; and no less so was the springing into the air—at apparently an immense distance away—of some creature, kelt or salmon, that fell into the water again with a mighty splash. Instinctively Mr. Hodson had gripped this rod, and passed the other one he had been reeling in to Strang. It was an anxious moment. *Whirr!* went another dozen yards of line; and again the fish sprang into the air—this time plainly visible.

'A clean fish, sir! a clean fish!' was the welcome cry.

But there was no time to hazard doubts or ask questions; this sudden visitor at the end of the line had not at all made up his mind to be easily captured. First of all he came sailing in quietly towards the boat, giving the fisherman all he could do to reel in and keep a strain on him; then he whirled out the line so suddenly that the rod was nearly bent double; and then, in deep water, he kept persistently sulking and boring, refusing to yield an inch. This was a temporary respite.

'Well, now, is this one all right?' Mr. Hodson called out—but he was rather bewildered, for he knew not what this violent beast might not be after next, and the gathering darkness looked strange, the shadows of Clebrig overhead seeming to blot out the sky.

'A clean fish, sir,' was the confident answer.

'No doubt o' that, sir,' even the melancholy Duncan admitted; for he foresaw a dram now, if not a tip in actual money.

Then slowly and slowly the salmon began to yield to the strain on him—which was considerable, for this was the heavier of the two rods—and quickly the line was got in, the pliant curve of the rod remaining always the same; while Mr. Hodson flattered himself that he was doing very well now, and that he was surely becoming the master of the situation. But the next instant something happened that his mind was not rapid enough to comprehend: something dreadful and horrible and sudden: there was a whirring out of the reel so rapid that he had to lower the point of the rod almost to the water; then the fish made one flashing spring along the surface—and this time he saw the creature, a gleam of silver in the dusk—and then, to his unspeakable dismay and mortification, he felt the line quite slack. He did utter a little monosyllable.

'He's off, sir,' the melancholy gillie said in a tone of sad resignation.

'Not a bit, sir, not a bit! Reel in, quick!' Ronald called to him: and the fisherman had sense enough to throw the rod as far back as he could to see if there was yet some strain on it. Undoubtedly the fish was still there. Moreover, this last cantrip seemed to have taken the spirit out of him. By and by, with a strong, steady strain on him, he suffered himself to be guided more and more towards the boat, until, now and again, they could see a faint gleam in the dark water; and now Ronald had relinquished his oar, and was crouching down in the stern—this time not with the landing-net in his hand, but with the bright steel clip just resting on the gunwale.

'He's showing the white feather now, sir; give him a little more of the butt.'

However, he had not quite given in yet: each time he came in sight of the boat he would make another ineffectual rush, but rarely getting down deeper than three or four yards. And then, with a short line and the butt well towards him, he began to make slow semicircles this way and that; and always he was being steadily hauled nearer the coble; until with one quick dip and powerful upward pull Ronald had got him transfixed on the gaff and landed—the huge, gleaming, beautiful silver creature!—in the bottom of the boat.

'Well done, sir!—a clean fish!—a beauty—the first caught in Scotland this year, I know!'—these were the exclamations he heard now; but he scarcely knew how it had all happened, for he had been more excited than he was aware of. He felt a vague and general sense of satisfaction; wanted to give the men a glass of whisky, and had none to give them; thought that the capture of a salmon was a noble thing; would have liked his daughter Carry to hear the tidings at once; and had a kind of general purpose to devote the rest of that year to salmon-fishing in the Highlands. From this entrancement he was awakened by a dispute between the two men as to the size of the fish.

'He's twelve pounds, and no more,' the melancholy Duncan said, eyeing him all over.

'Look at his shoulders, man,' Ronald rejoined. 'Fourteen pounds if he's an ounce. Duncan, lad, ye've been put off your guessing by the sight of the kelt.'

'He's a good fish whateffer,' Duncan was constrained to admit—for he still foresaw that prospect of a dram when they returned to the inn, with perhaps a more substantial handselling of good luck.

Of course, they could do no more fishing that afternoon, for it was nearly dark; but it was wonderful how the capture of this single salmon seemed to raise the spirits of the little party as they got ashore and walked home. There was a kind of excitement in the evening air. They talked in a rapid and eager way—about what the fish had done; what were the chances of such and such a rush; the probable length of time it had been up from the sea; the beauty of its shape; the smallness of its head; the freshness of its colour, and so forth—and there was a kind of jubilation abroad. The first fish caught in Scotland that year!—of course, it must be packed forthwith and sent south to his daughter Carry and her friends. And Mr. Hodson was quite facetious with the pretty Nelly when she came in to lay the table for dinner; and would have her say whether she had not yet fixed her mind on one or other of these young fellows around. As for the small hamlet of Inver-Mudal, it was about as solitary and forlorn a habitation as any to be found in the wilds of northern Scotland; and he was there all by himself; but with the blazing peat-fire, and the brilliant white cloth on the dinner-table, and the consciousness that the firm, stout-shouldered, clean-run fourteen-pounder was lying in the dairy on a slab of cold stone, he considered that Inver-Mudal was a most enjoyable and sociable and comfortable place, and that he had not felt himself so snug and so much at home for many and many a day.

CHAPTER IV.
A LETTER.

After dinner he found himself with a pretty long evening before him, and thought he could not do better than devote the major part of it to writing to his daughter. He would not confess to himself that he wanted her to know at once that he had caught his first salmon; that was but a trivial incident in the life of a philosopher and student of mankind; still she would be glad to hear of his adventures; and it was not an unpleasant way of passing the time. So he wrote as follows:—

'MY DARLING CARRY—You will be rejoiced to learn that I have discovered

a harbour of refuge for you, where that minute organ you call your mind may lay aside its heaviest load of trouble. Here, at last, is one corner of Europe where you need have no fear of anybody mistaking you for one of the Boston girls of fiction; indeed you might go about all day talking your beloved Texas with impunity; although, my dear young lady, that is a habit you would do well to drop, for sooner or later it will get you into trouble when you are least expecting it. But short of scalping children or using a bowie-knife for a fork, I think you might do or say anything you pleased here; it is the most out-of-the-world sort of place; a community of fifteen or twenty, I should guess, hidden away in a hole of a valley, and separated from the rest of the universe by great ranges of mountains and interminable miles of moorland. The people seem very friendly, but shy; and I don't quite catch on to them yet, for their speech bothers me—scarcely any two of them seem to have the same accent; but I hope to get to know something more about them next Monday, when they have a New Year celebration, which I am invited to the same. Would you like to join in? By all means come if you care to; the station is Lairg; wire, and I will meet you there. You will miss the wild excitement of paying afternoon calls and drinking tea; but you will get sunlight and fresh air into your lungs. The talk about the fierce weather is all nonsense. There is a sprinkling of snow on the higher hills, but the temperature is quite agreeable. In any case I expect you to come here with me in March, when the salmon-fishing will begin in earnest; and I have no doubt you will have made the acquaintance of the whole of the people in a couple of days, shy as they are. There is another point I have not forgotten. As you seem determined to set yourself up for your lifetime with reminiscences of your travels in Europe, I have had to consider what you could carry away from here. I am afraid that Inver-Mudal jewellery wouldn't make much of a show; and I haven't seen any shell necklaces or silk scarves or blue pots about. But what about a Highland maid? I suppose the N.Y. Customs officers wouldn't charge much for that article of *vertu*. Now the maid who waits on me here is very pretty and gentle in manner; and I suppose she could be induced to go—for a proper consideration; and you could begin the training of her now, and have her quite accomplished by the time we got home. Sounds rather like slavery, don't it?—but she would be going to the land of the free, and the banner would wave over her. She gets eighty dollars a year and her board; I'd go better than that, if you took a fancy to her.

'But the most remarkable person here—perhaps it is the contrast between his personal abilities and his position that is the striking thing—is a deerstalker and gamekeeper whom they familiarly call Ronald; and I confess that, with all I had heard of the intelligence of the Scotch peasantry, this fellow, before I had been talking with him ten minutes, rather made me open my eyes. And yet, looking back over the different subjects we fell upon, I don't know that he said anything

so very remarkable on any one of them. I think it is rather the personal character of the man that is impressive—the manliness and independence of his judgment, and yet his readiness to consider the other side if you can convince him; his frank (and, I should say, foolish) recognition of the differences of social position; and then a kind of curious self-respect he has which refuses to allow him to become quite friendly, though you may be willing enough to forget that you are talking of taking a shooting on which he is one of the *employés*, and anxious only to converse with him as man to man. I'm afraid this is rather mixed, but you would have to see him to understand quite well what manner of person he is—a good-looking fellow too, well knit together, with a keen, hard face, full of life and a half-concealed force of humour. I should judge he would make a pretty fair king of good company in the unrestrained intercourse of a few boon companions; and I imagine he has a hard head if there should be any drinking going on. What to do with him I don't know. It is absurd he should be where he is. His brother has been to college, taken his degree, and is now in the Scotch Church somewhere. But this fellow seems quite content to trap foxes and shoot gray crows, and, in the autumn, look after the grouse-shooting and deerstalking of other people. A man of his brains would not be in that position for a fortnight in our country. Here everything is fixed. He thinks it is *natural* for him to be in a subservient position. And yet there is a curious independence about the fellow; I don't know what inducement I could put before him to get him out of it. Suppose we said, "Come you with us to America, and we'll run you for President;" I'm afraid he'd quote Kingsley in our face, and be off to "where the dun deer lie." In fact his reverence for the star-spangled banner appears to be of a mitigated description. I found he knew more than I expected about our wire-pulling gentry at home; but then, on the other hand, I discovered that he knew nothing about the necessity of protecting the industries of a young country beyond what he had read in the English papers, and you know what high old Mother Hubbardism that is. Now I want to do something for this fellow, and don't know how. He's too good a man to be thrown away—a kind of upper servant, as it were, of his lordship. He has plenty of ability and he has plenty of knowledge in a dozen different directions, if they could only be *applied*. But then he is a dogged kind of a creature—he is not pliant; if you can show him sufficient reason for changing he might change, otherwise not one inch will he budge. What is the inducement to be? It is useless offering him an allotment of land in Nebraska; here he has miles and miles of the most picturesque territory conceivable, of which, save for a month or two in the autumn, he is the absolute master. He enjoys an ownership over these hills and moors and lochs more obvious than that of the Duke himself; he would not exchange that for the possession of a bit of table-land on the Platte Valley, unless he were a fool, and that he is far from being. The Presidentship? Well, I waved

your beloved banner over him, but he didn't enthuse worth a cent. However, I must cast about and see what is to be done with him, for I am really interested in the man.'

At this moment there was a tapping at the door, and Nelly appeared with a huge armful of peats, which she began to build up dexterously in the fireplace, always leaving a central funnel open.

'Say, my girl, when will this letter go south?' Mr. Hodson asked.

'To-morrow moarning,' was the answer.

'And the fish, too?'

'Yes, sir, by the mail cart.'

'Has Duncan packed it in the rushes yet?'

'Oh no, sir, Ronald will do that; he can do it better as any of them; he would not let any one else do it, for they're saying it iss the first fish of the year, and he's very proud of your getting the fish, sir.'

'*Ich auch!*' observed Mr. Hodson to himself; and he would probably have continued the conversation, but that suddenly a strange noise was heard, coming from some distant part of the inn—a harsh, high, note, all in monotone.

'What's that now, Nelly?'

'It will be Ronald tuning his pipes,' said she, as she was going to the door.

'Oh, he can play the pipes too?'

'Indeed, yes, sir; and better as any in Sutherland, I hef heard them say,' she added.

Just as she opened the door the drones and chanter broke away into a shrill and lively march that seemed to flood the house with its penetrating tones.

'I think it's "Dornoch Links" he's playing,' Nelly said, with a quiet smile, 'for there's some of the fisher-lads come through on their way to Tongue.'

She left then; but the solitary occupant of the sitting-room thought he could not do better than go to the door and listen for a while to this strange sort of music, which he had never heard played properly before. And while he could scarcely tell one tune from another except by the time—the slow, wailing, melancholy Lament, for example, was easily enough distinguished from the bright and lively Strathspey—here and there occurred an air—the '79th's Farewell,' or the 'Barren Rocks of Aden,' or the 'Pibroch of Donald Dhu,' had he but known the names of them—which had a stately and martial ring about it; he guessed that it was meant to lead the tramp of soldiers. And he said to himself—

'Here, now, is this fellow, who might be piper to a Highland regiment, and I daresay all the use he makes of his skill is to walk up and down outside the dining-room window of the Lodge and play to a lot of white-kneed Englishmen when they come down for the autumn shooting.'

He returned to his letter.

'I have the honour to inform you that the first salmon caught on any Scotch loch this year was caught by me this afternoon, and to-morrow will be on its way to you. If you don't believe the story, look at the salmon itself for evidence. And as regards this loch-fishing, it appears to me you might have a turn at it when we come up in March—taking one of the two rods; a little practice with Indian clubs meanwhile would enable you to make a better fight of it when you have to keep a continuous strain on a fourteen-pound fish for twenty minutes or half an hour. You must have some amusement or occupation; for there is no society—except, by the way, the doctor's daughter, who might be a companion for you. I have not seen her yet; but the handmaiden I have mentioned above informs me that she is "a ferry pretty young lady, and ferry much thought of, and of a ferry great family too." I should not imagine, however, that her Highland pride of blood would bar the way against your making her acquaintance; her father is merely the parish doctor—or rather, the district doctor, for he has either two or three parishes to look after—and I don't suppose his emoluments are colossal. They have a pretty cottage; it is the swell feature of the village, if you can call the few small and widely scattered houses a village. You could practise Texas talk on her all day long; I daresay she wouldn't know.

'Good-night; it's rather sleepy work being out in that boat in the cold. Good-night, good-night; and a kiss from the Herr Papa.'

Well, by this time the fisher-lads had left the inn and were off on the way to Tongue—and glad enough to have a moonlight night for the weary trudge. Ronald remained behind for a while, drinking a glass of ale with the inn-keeper; and generally having to keep his wits about him, for there was a good deal of banter going on. Old John Murray was a facetious person, and would have it that Nelly was setting her cap at Ronald; while the blushing Nelly, for her part, declared that Ronald was nothing but a poor south-country body; while he in fair warfare had to retort that she was 'as Hielan's a Mull-drover.' The quarrel was not a deadly one; and when Ronald took up his pipes in order to go home, he called out to her in parting—

'Nelly, lass, see you get the lads to clean out the barn ere Monday next; and put on your best ribbons, lassie; I'm thinking they'll be for having a spring o' Tullochgorum.'

The pipes were over his shoulder as he walked away along the moonlit road; but he did not tune up; he had had enough playing for that evening. And be sure that in his mind there was no discontent because he had no allotment of land on the Platte Valley, nor yet a place in a Chicago bank, nor the glory of being pipe-major to a Highland regiment. He was perfectly content as he was; and knew naught of these things. If there was any matter troubling him—on this still and moonlight night, as he walked blithely along, inhaling the keen sweet

air, and conscious of the companionship of the faithful Harry—it was that the jog-trot kind of tune he had invented for certain verses did not seem to have sufficient definiteness about it. But then the verses themselves—as they kept time to his tramp on the road—were careless and light-hearted enough:

The blossom was white on the blackthorn tree,
And the mavis was singing rarely;
When Meenie, Love Meenie, walked out wi' me,
All in the springtime early.

'Meenie, Love Meenie, your face let me see,
Meenie, come answer me fairly;
Meenie, Love Meenie, will you wed me,
All in the springtime early?'

Meenie but laughed; and kentna the pain
That shot through my heart fu' sairly:
'Kind sir, it's a maid that I would remain,
All in the springtime early.'

And 'Hey, Harry, lad,' he was saying, as he entered the cottage and went into the little parlour, where a candle had been left burning, 'we'll have our supper together now; for between you and me I'm just as hungry as a gled.'

CHAPTER V.

BEGINNINGS.

Next day promised to give them sharper work on the loch. The weather had changed towards the morning; showers of hail had fallen; and now all the hills around—Ben Hee and Ben Hope and Ben Loyal—had their far peaks and shoulders powdered over, while the higher slopes and summit of the giant Clebrig were one solid mass of white. It was much colder, too; and the gusts of wind that came hurling along Strath Terry[#] struck down on the loch, spreading out like black fans, and driving the darkened water into curling crisp foam. It was a wild,

changeable, blowy morning; sunlight and gloom intermingled; and ever the wind howled and moaned around the house, and the leafless trees outside bent and shivered before the wintry blast.

[#] No doubt corrupted from *Strath Tairibh*, the Strath of the Bull.

When the tall Highland lass brought in breakfast it appeared that the recusant gillie had not yet come down from Tongue; but it was no matter, she said; she would call Ronald. Now this exactly suited Mr. Hodson, who wanted to have some further speech with the young man—in view of certain far-reaching designs he had formed; and what better opportunity for talk than the placid trolling for salmon on the lake there? But courtesy demanded some small protest.

'I am afraid I cannot ask him a second day,' he remarked.

'Oh,' said she (for she did not wish the gentleman to imagine that she thought over much of the smart young keeper), 'he ought to be ferry glad if he can be of use to any one. He is jist amusing himself with the other lads.'

Which was strictly true at this moment. On the little plateau outside Ronald's cottage two or three of them were standing together. They had got a heavy iron ball, to which was attached about a yard and a half of rope, and one after another was trying who could launch this ball the farthest, after swinging it three or four times round his head. It came to Ronald's turn. He was not the most thick-set of those young fellows; but he was wiry and muscular. He caught the rope with both hands, swung the heavy weight round his head some four or five times—his teeth getting ever and ever more firmly clenched the while—and then away went the iron ball through the air, not only far outstripping all previous efforts, but unluckily landing in a wheelbarrow and smashing sadly a jacket which one of the lads had thrown there when he entered upon this competition. When he somewhat ruefully took up the rent garment, there was much ironical laughing; perhaps that was the reason that none of them heard Nelly calling.

'Ronald!'

The tall, slim Highland maid was pretty angry by this time. She had come out of the house without any head-gear on; and the cold wind was blowing her yellow hair about her eyes; and she was indignant that she had to walk so far before attracting the attention of those idle lads.

'Ronald, do you hear!' she called; and she would not move another yard towards them.

And then he happened to notice her.

'Well, lass, what is't ye want?'

'Come away at once!' she called, in not the most friendly way. 'The gentleman wants you to go down to the loch.'

But he was the most good-natured of all these young fellows; the lasses about ordered him this way or that just as they pleased.

'What!' he called to her, 'hasna Fraser come down from Tongue yet?'

'No, he has not.'

'Bless us; the whisky must have been strong,' said he, as he picked up his jacket. 'I'll be there in a minute, Nelly.'

And so it was that when Mr. Hodson went into the little front hall, he found everything in trim readiness for getting down to the loch—the proper minnows selected; traces tried; luncheon packed; and his heavy waterproof coat slung over Ronald's arm.

'Seems you think I can't carry my own coat?' Mr. Hodson said; for he did not like to see this man do anything in the shape of servant work; whereas Ronald performed these little offices quite naturally and as a matter of course.

'I'll take it, sir,' said he; 'and if you're ready now we'll be off. Come along, Duncan.'

And he was striding away with his long deerstalker step, when Mr. Hodson stopped him.

'Wait a bit, man; I will walk down to the loch with you.'

So Duncan went on, and the American and Ronald followed.

'Sharp this morning.'

'Rayther sharp.'

'But this must be a very healthy life of yours—out in the fresh air always—plenty of exercise—and so forth.'

'Just the healthiest possible, sir.'

'But monotonous a little?'

"Deed no, sir. A keeper need never be idle if he minds his business; there's always something new on hand.'

'Then we'll say it is a very enjoyable life, so long as your health lasts, and you are fit for the work?'

This was apparently a question.

'Well, sir, the head stalker on the Rothie-Mount forest is seventy-two years of age; and there is not one of the young lads smarter on the hill than he is.'

'An exception, doubtless. The betting is all against your matching that record. Well, take your own case: what have you to look forward to as the result of all your years of labour? I agree with you that in the meantime it is all very fine; I can understand the fascination of it, even, and the interest you have in becoming acquainted with the habits of the various creatures, and so forth. Oh yes, I admit that—the healthiness of the life, and the interest of it; and I daresay you get more enjoyment out of the shooting and stalking than Lord Ailine, who pays such a preposterous price for it. But say we give you a fairly long lease of

health and strength sufficient for the work: we'll take you at sixty; what then? Something happens—rheumatism, a broken leg, anything—that cripples you. You are superseded; you are out of the running; what is to become of you?'

'Well, sir,' said Ronald instantly, 'I'm thinking his lordship wouldna think twice about giving a pension to a man that had worked for him as long as that.'

It was a luckless answer. For Mr. Hodson, whose first article of belief was that all men are born equal, had come to Europe with a positive resentment against the very existence of lords, and a detestation of any social system that awarded them position and prestige merely on account of the accident of their birth. And what did he find now? Here was a young fellow of strong natural character, of marked ability, and fairly independent spirit, so corrupted by this pernicious system that he looked forward quite naturally to being helped in his old age by his lordship—by one of those creatures who still wore the tags and rags of an obsolete feudalism, and were supposed to 'protect' their vassals. The House of Peers had a pretty bad time of it during the next few minutes; if the tall, sallow-faced, gray-eyed man talked with little vehemence, his slow, staccato sentences had a good deal of keen irony in them. Ronald listened respectfully. And perhaps the lecture was all the more severe that the lecturer had but little opportunity of delivering it in his own domestic circle. Truly it was hard that his pet grievance won for him nothing but a sarcastic sympathy there; and that it was his own daughter who flouted him with jibes and jeers.

'Why, you know, pappa dear,' she would say as she stood at the window of their hotel in Piccadilly, and watched the carriages passing to and fro beneath her, 'lords may be bad enough, but you know they're not half as bad as the mosquitoes are at home. They don't worry one half as much; seems to me you might live in this country a considerable time and never be worried by one of them. Why, that's the worst of it. When I left home, I thought the earls and marquises would just be crowding us; and they don't seem to come along at all. I confess they are a mean lot. Don't they know well enough that the first thing ['the fooist thing,' she said, of course; but her accent sounded quite quaint and pretty if you happened to be looking at the pretty, soft, opaque, dark eyes] the first thing an American girl has to do when she gets to Europe is to have a lord propose to her, and to reject him? But how can I? They won't come along! It's just too horrid for anything; for of course when I go back home they'll say—"It's because you're not a Boston girl. London's full of lords; but it's only Boston girls they run after; and, poor things, they and their coronets are always being rejected. The noble pride of a Republican country; wave the banner!"'

But here Mr. Hodson met with no such ill-timed and flippant opposition. Ronald the keeper listened respectfully, and only spoke when spoken to; perhaps the abstract question did not interest him. But when it came to the downright

inquiry as to whether he, Strang, considered his master, Lord Ailine, to be in any way whatever a better man than himself, his answer was prompt.

'Yes, sir, he is,' he said, as they walked leisurely along the road. 'He is a better man than me by two inches round the chest, as I should guess. Why, sir, the time that I hurt my kneecap, one night we were coming down Ben Strua, our two selves, nothing would hinder his lordship but he must carry me on his back all the way down the hill and across the burn till we reached the shepherd's bothy. Ay, and the burn in spate; and the night as dark as pitch; one wrong step on the swing-bridge, and both of us were gone. There's Peter McEachran at Tongue, that some of them think's the strongest man in these parts; and I offered to bet him five shillings he wouldna carry me across that bridge—let alone down the hill—on a dark night. But would he try? Not a bit, sir.'

'I should think Peter Mac—what's his name?—was a wiser man than to risk his neck for five shillings,' Mr. Hodson said drily. 'And you—you would risk yours—for what?'

'Oh, they were saying things about his lordship,' Ronald said carelessly.

'Then he is not worshipped as a divinity by everybody?' the American said shrewdly.

But the keeper answered, with much nonchalance—

'I suppose he has his ill-wishers and his well-wishers, like most other folk; and I suppose, like most other folk, he doesna pay ower great attention to what people say of him.'

They did not pursue the subject further at this moment, for a turn of the road brought them suddenly within sight of a stranger, and the appearance of a stranger in these parts was an event demanding silence and a concentration of interest. Of course, to Ronald Strang Miss Meenie Douglas was no stranger; but she was obviously a source of some embarrassment: the instant he caught sight of her his face reddened, and as she approached he kept his eyes fixed on the ground. It was not that he was ashamed she should see him acting the part of a gillie; for that he did not care in the least, it was as much a part of his work as anything else; what vexed him was lest some sign of recognition should show the stranger gentleman that Miss Douglas had formed the acquaintance of the person who was at the moment carrying his waterproof and his fishing-rods. And he hoped that Meenie would have the sense to go by without taking any notice of him; and he kept his eyes on the road, and walked forward in silence.

'Who is she?' Mr. Hodson asked, in an undertone, and with some astonishment, for he had no idea there was any such neatly-dressed and pretty young lady in the neighbourhood.

Ronald did not answer, and they drew nearer. Indeed, Meenie was looking quite beautiful this morning; for the cold air had brightened up the colour in

her cheeks; and the wide-apart blue-gray eyes were clear and full of light; and her brown hair, if it was tightly braided and bound behind, had in front been blown about a little by the wind, and here and there a stray curl appeared on the fair white forehead. And then again her winter clothing seemed to suit the slight and graceful figure; she looked altogether warm, and furry, and nice, and comfortable; and there was a sensible air about her dress—the blue serge skirt, the tight-fitting sealskin coat (but this was a present from the laird of Glengask and Orosay) and the little brown velvet hat with its wing of ptarmigan plumage (this was a present not from Glengask, and probably was not of the value of three halfpence, but she wore it, nevertheless, when she was at her smartest). And if Ronald thought she was going to pass him by without a word, he was mistaken. It was not her way. As she met them, one swift glance of her Highland eyes was all she bestowed on the stranger; then she said, pleasantly, as she passed—

'Good morning, Ronald.'

He was forced to look up.

'Good morning, Miss Douglas,' said he, with studied respect; and they went on.

'Miss Douglas?' Mr. Hodson repeated, as soon as they were beyond hearing. 'The doctor's daughter, I presume?'

'Yes, sir.'

'But—but—I had no idea—why, she is a most uncommonly pretty young lady—one of the most interesting faces I have seen for many a day. You did not say there was such a charming young person in the place; why, she adds a new interest altogether; I fancy my daughter won't be long in making her acquaintance when she comes here.'

Indeed, as they got down to the boat, and the two men set about getting the rods ready, all his talk was about the pretty young lady he had seen; and he scarcely noticed that Ronald, in answering these questions, showed a very marked reserve. He could not be got to speak of her except in curt answers; perhaps he did not like to have the melancholy Duncan listening; at all events, he showed a quite absorbing interest in the phantom minnows, and traces, and what not. Moreover, when they got into the boat, there was but little opportunity for conversation. The day had become more and more squally; there was a considerable sea on; it was all the two men could do to keep sufficient way on the coble so that the phantoms should spin properly. Then every few minutes a rain-cloud would come drifting across—at first mysterious and awful, as if the whole world were sinking into darkness; then a few big drops would patter about; then down came the sharp clattering shower, only to be followed by a marvellous clearing up again, and a burst of watery sunshine along the Clebrig slopes. But these changes kept Mr. Hodson employed in sheltering himself from the rain while it

lasted, and then getting off his waterproof again lest perchance there might come a salmon at one of the lines. That event did actually occur; and when they least expected it. In one of the heaviest of the squalls they had such a fight to get the boat along that the minnows, sinking somewhat, caught the bottom. Of course the rowers had to back down—or rather to drift down—to get the lines released; and altogether the prospect of affairs seemed so unpromising—the heavens darkening with further rain, the wind blowing in sharper and sharper gusts, and the water coming heavily over the bows—that Mr. Hodson called out that, as soon as he had got the minnows free, they might as well run the coble on to the land, and wait for calmer weather. But this was a lee shore. The men were willing to give up for a time—but not until they had got to the sheltered side; so he was counselled to put out the lines again, slowly, and they began anew their fight against the gale. Well, he was actually paying out the first of the lines with his hand, when suddenly—and without any of the preliminary warnings that usually tell of a salmon being after a minnow—the line was snatched from his fingers, and out went the reel with that sharp long shriek that sends the whole boat's crew into an excitement of expectation. But there was no spring into the air away along there in the darkened and plunging waters; as he rapidly got in his line, he knew only of a dull and heavy strain; and the men had to keep on with their hard pulling against the wind, for the fish seemed following the boat in this sulky and heavy fashion.

'What do you think?' Mr. Hodson said, half turning round, and not giving plainer voice to his anxieties.

'I'm afraid it's a kelt, sir,' the dismal gillie answered.

'Looks like it, don't it?' the fisherman said rather dolefully; for the fish showed no sign of life whatever.

'We'll see by and by,' was Ronald's prudent answer; but even he was doubtful; the only good feature being that, if the fish showed no fight, at least he kept a heavy strain on the rod.

But it seemed as if everything was conspiring against them. The black heavens above them burst into a torrent of rain; and with that came a squall that tore the water white, and blew them down on the fish in spite of their hardest efforts. Shorter and shorter grew the line as it was rapidly got in, and still the fish did not show; it was now so near to the boat that any sudden movement on its part was almost certain to produce a catastrophe. Nor could they drive the boat ashore; the beach was here a mass of sharp stones and rocks; in three minutes the coble would have been stove in. With faces set hard the two men pulled and pulled against the storm of wind and rain; and Mr. Hodson—seated now, for he dared not attempt to stand up, the boat was being thrown about so by the heavy waves—could only get in a little more line when he had the chance, and look

helplessly on, and wait.

Then, all of a sudden, there was a long shrill shriek—heard loud above the din of wind and water—continued and continued, and in vain he tried to arrest this wild rush; and then, some seventy or eighty yards away, there was a great white splash among the rushing black waves—and another—and another—and then a further whirling out of some fifteen yards of line, until he glanced with alarm at the slender quantity left on the reel. But presently he began to get some in again; the men were glad to let the boat drift down slowly; harder and harder he worked at the big reel, and at last he came to fighting terms with the animal—kelt or salmon, as it might be—with some five-and-twenty yards out, and the squall moderating a little, so that the men could keep the boat as they wanted. Nay, he ventured to stand up now, wedging his legs and feet so that he should not be suddenly thrown overboard; and it was quite evident, from the serious purpose of his face, that all possibility of this being a kelt had now been thrown aside.

'No kelt is he, Ronald?' he called aloud.

'Not a bit, sir! There's no kelt about that one. But give him time; he's a good big fish, or I'm sore mistaken.'

They were far from the end yet, however. The long rush and the splashing had exhausted him for a while; and the fisherman, with a firm application of the butt, thought he could make the fish show himself; but still he kept boring steadily down, sometimes making little angry rushes of a dozen yards or so. And then all of a sudden began some wild cantrips. There was another rush of ten or a dozen yards; and a clear leap into the air—a beautiful, great, silvery creature he looked amid all this hurrying gloom; and then another downward rush; and then he came to the surface again, and shook and tugged and struck with his tail until the water was foaming white about him. These were a few terribly anxious seconds, but all went happily by, and then it was felt that the worst of the fighting was over. After that there was but the sullen refusal to come near the boat—the short sheering off whenever he saw it or one of the oars; but now, in the slow curves through the water, he was beginning to show the gleam of his side; and Ronald was crouching down in the stern, gaff in hand.

'Steady, sir, steady,' he was saying, with his eye on those slow circles; 'give him time, he's no done yet; a heavy fish, sir—a good fish that—twenty pounds, I'm thinking—come along, my beauty, come along—*the butt now, sir!*' And then, as the great gleaming fish, head up, came sheering along on its side, there was a quick dive of the steel clip, and the next second the splendid creature was in the bottom of the coble.

Mr. Hodson sank down on to his seat; it had been a long fight—over half an hour; he was exhausted with the strain of keeping himself balanced; and he was

also (what he had not perceived in this long spell of excitement) wet to the skin. He pulled out a spirit-flask from the pocket of his waterproof—as ill-luck would have it, that useful garment happened to be lying in the bottom of the boat when the fight began—and gave the two men a liberal dram; he then took a sip himself; and when there had been a general quarrel over the size of the fish—nineteen the lowest, twenty-two the highest guess—they began to consider what they ought to do next. The weather looked very ugly. It was resolved to get up to the head of the loch anyhow, and there decide; and so the men took to their oars again, and began to force their way through the heavy and white-crested waves.

But long ere they had reached the head of the loch Mr. Hodson had become aware of a cold feeling about his shoulders and back, and quickly enough he came to the conclusion that sitting in an open boat, with clothes wet through, on a January day, did not promise sufficient happiness. He said they might put him ashore as soon as possible.

'Indeed, sir, it's no much use going on in this weather,' Ronald said, 'unless maybe you were to try the fly.'

'I thought you said it was rather early for the fly.'

'Rayther early,' Ronald admitted.

'Rawther,' said Duncan.

'Anyhow,' observed Mr. Hodson, 'I don't feel like sitting in this boat any longer in wet clothes. I'm going back to the inn right now; maybe the afternoon will clear up—and then we might have another try.'

They got ashore at last, and Mr. Hodson at once started off for the inn; and when the two men had got the rods taken down, and the fish tied head and tail for the better carrying of it, they set out too. But Ronald seemed unusually depressed and silent. Where was the careless joke—the verse of an idle song—with which he was wont to brave the discomforts of wind and weather? The two men strode along without a word; and it was not likely that Duncan the dismal should be the first to break the silence. Nay, when they got to the inn, Ronald would not go in for a minute or two, as was his custom, to see the fish weighed and have a chat. He went on to his own cottage; got the key of the kennel; and presently he and the dogs were leaving the little scattered hamlet, taking the lonely moorland road that led away up the Mudal valley.

He knew not why he was so ill at ease; but something had gone wrong. Had his mind been disturbed and disquieted by the American gentleman's plainly hinting to him that he was living in a fool's paradise; and that old age, and illness, and the possible ingratitude of his master were things to be looked forward to? Or was it that the sudden meeting with Meenie, with this stranger looking on, seemed to have revealed to him all at once how far away she was from him? If she and he had met, as every day they did, and passed with the usual

friendly greeting, it would all have been quite simple and ordinary enough; but with this stranger looking on,—and she appearing so beautiful and refined and neatly dressed, and wearing moreover the present given her by Glengask and Orosay—while he, on the other hand, was carrying the gentleman's waterproof and a bundle of rods—well, that was all different somehow. And why had she said 'Good-morning!' with such a pointed friendliness? He did not wish this stranger to imagine that Miss Douglas and he were even acquaintances. And then he thought that that very night he would burn all those stupid verses he had written about her; that secret and half-regretful joy of his—of imagining himself in a position that would entitle him to address her so—was all too daring and presuming. It is true, she wore the ptarmigan's wing she had begged him to get for her (and never in all the years had he so gladly sped up the Clebrig slopes as when she sent him on that errand), but that was a trifle; any young lady, if she wanted such a thing, would naturally ask the nearest gamekeeper. And then the other young lady—the American young lady—when she came, and made Meenie's acquaintance: would not they be much together? Meenie would be still farther and farther away then. He would himself have to keep studiously aloof, if in the generosity of her heart she wished to be as friendly as ever.

Well, these were not very bitter or tragic thoughts; and yet—and yet—there was something wrong. He scarcely knew what it was, but only that the little hamlet—as he returned to it after a long and solitary wandering—did not seem to be the simple and natural and happy place that it used to be. But one thing he was glad of. The second gillie had now arrived from Tongue. Consequently his services would no longer be needed in the coble; he would return to his own ways; and be his own master. And as for companions?—well, Clebrig and he had long been friends.

CHAPTER VI.

A PROGRAMME.

That same evening little Maggie, having made herself as smart and neat as possible, went along the dark road to the doctor's house, was admitted, and forthwith passed upstairs to Miss Douglas's own room. It was an exceedingly small apartment; but on this cold winter night it looked remarkably warm and snug and bright, what with the red peats in the fireplace, and the brilliant little lamp on

the table; and it was prettily decorated too, with evidences of feminine care and industry everywhere about. And Meenie herself was there—in her gown of plain blue serge; and apparently she had been busy, for the table was littered with patterns and designs and knitting-needles and what not, while a large mass of blue worsted was round the back of a chair, waiting for the winding.

'Help me to clear the table, Maggie,' she said good-naturedly, when her visitor entered, 'and then we will get tea over: I declare I have so many things to think of that I am just driven daft.'

And then she said—with some touch of anger—

'Do you know that I saw your brother—on a cold, wet day like this—and he was walking along the road, with his jacket open, and paying no heed at all to the weather? Maggie, why do you not make him take some care of himself? In January—and he goes about as if it were June! How would you like it if he were to catch a bad cold and have to take to his bed? Why do you not make him take care of himself?'

'He would only laugh at me,' the little Maggie said ruefully. 'He doesna mind anything. I do my best to get his clothes dried when he comes in wet; but he doesna like to be bothered—especially if he's writing or reading; he says that a pipe keeps the harm away. I'm sure if you would speak to him, Meenie, he would take a great deal more care.'

'What, me!' the girl said—and there was a touch of colour in the pretty refined face; and then she added, with a good-humoured smile, 'No, he would not mind what I said, I know. But it is little matter; for with such a wilful man you can do nothing except by cunning. Do you see the wool there, Maggie?'

She laughed; but the little, red-haired, freckled girl looked rather frightened.

'Oh no, Meenie, I dare not take it,' she said. 'He would know I had not the money to buy all that wool; and then he would ask; and I should be scolded—

'Nonsense, nonsense!' the other cried, in her friendly way. 'Do you think a man would ask any such questions? It would never occur to him at all! When the jersey is all knitted and complete, you will just say to him, "Ronald, here is a jersey that I have knitted for you all by myself; and you are to put it on whenever there is a cold morning;" and you will see he will think your knitting it yourself explains everything. Ask about the wool?—he will never think of such a thing. If you hang the jersey on the nail of his bedroom door, it will be all a matter of course; I should not wonder, now, if he forgot to say "Thank you."'

'And then there is another thing,' Maggie said, rather timidly and wistfully. 'How am I to tell him that I knitted the jersey when you know that you will do the most of it? For it is always that; you did nearly all the socks that we gave to Ronald; and he thinks it was me.'

But here the good humour left Meenie Douglas's face—that was suddenly grown red and embarrassed.

'How can you talk such foolishness?' she said, rather sharply. 'If I show you here or there how you are to go on, is that doing the knitting for you? I wonder you have no more sense, Maggie. Of course, I will have to begin the jersey for you; and if I cast on the stitches for the width of the neck, what is that? It is what any one would do for you—Mrs. Murray, or one of the girls at the inn. And I hope you are not going away with that idea in your head; or sooner or later you will be telling somebody that I am knitting a jersey for your brother—that would be a fine thing!'

A timid appealing hand was put on her arm.

'I am sure that Ronald would rather never see or hear of any jersey than have anything make you angry, Meenie.'

The trouble was over in a moment: the girl was essentially quick and generous and kind-hearted; and this small lassie was about her only companion. Moreover, tea was brought in at this moment by the maidservant; and so the question of the proportion of work contributed by either of them to Ronald's woollen gear was put aside.

'And what do you think of this now, Maggie?' the elder said, with some eagerness in her face and eyes. 'You know the great preparations they are making for Monday night—the long barn is to be cleared; and they are going to have a chimney made and a fireplace; and long tables all the way down, and wooden forms to sit on; and some of the lads, they say, are talking of a chandelier to be made out of hoops, and candles stuck all the way round. And all that trouble for the grown-up folk! Is it fair? Oh, it is quite absurd to have such a deal of trouble; and all for the grown-up people. Now, if Ronald would help me—and you know he is such a favourite he always has his own way with everybody—would it not be a fine thing to ask Mr. Murray to leave all those preparations as they are for a day or two—perhaps till Wednesday—and by that time we could have messages sent to the farms round about, and all the children brought in for a soirée? Why should the grown-up people have everything? And there would be nobody but ourselves,—that's Ronald and you and I, Maggie,—for the children would have more freedom and amusement that way—you see my father is not likely to be back by then, or we might ask him—and then, with nearly a week, we could send to Tongue for a great many things—and—and—have a splendid children's party just as fine as fine could be.'

She was quite excited over this matter.

'Look,' she said, going and fetching a sheet of paper which was written over in a bold, large hand (her own handwriting was small and neat enough, but this had been assumed for so important a public purpose); 'look at the programme—it

is all guess work as yet, of course, for I have not asked Ronald; but I am sure he will help us; and if he says it is to be done, then everything will go right—they will keep the barn for us; and the people will send the children; and those of them who can't go back will stay the night at the inn. I have saved my pocket-money for months for it; but who could have expected such a chance—the barn all fitted up, and the fire to keep it warm, and the chandelier? There now, Maggie, what do you think?'

The little Maggie took up the big sheet of paper, wondering; for all this was a wild and startling project amid the monotony of their life in this remote and small hamlet.

CHILDREN'S SOIREE.
Inver-Mudal, Wednesday, January 23.
MR. RONALD STRANG in the Chair.
PROGRAMME.

Psalm . . . . . *Old Hundredth.*
Service of Tea and Cake.
Address . . . . . CHAIRMAN.
Service of Raisins.
Song . . . 'My love she's but a lassie yet.' . . MR. RONALD STRANG.
Reading . . 'The Cameronian's Dream.' . . . . . Miss M. DOUGLAS.
Song . . . 'O dinna cross the burn, Willie.' . . MR. RONALD STRANG.
Pipe-Music 'Lord Breadalbane's March.' . . . . . MR. RONALD STRANG.
Service of Oranges.
Hymn . . . 'Whither, pilgrims, are you going?' . . CHILDREN.
Duet . . . 'Huntingtower.' . . . . . { Miss M. DOUGLAS
{ & Miss M. STRANG.

But at this point Maggie broke into pure affright.

'Oh, Meenie!' she cried—'how can I?—-before them all!'

'But only before children!' was the quick remonstrance. 'Would you have Ronald do everything? Why, look—an address—a song—a song—a march on the pipes—is he to have no rest at all?'

'But you, Meenie—you can sing so well and without trouble—I know I will spoil everything—–'

'No, no, you will spoil nothing; and we will get through very well.'

'Ferry well,' she said, in spite of her Edinburgh birth; and she was evidently vastly proud of her skill in drawing up so brilliant and varied a programme. Mag-

gie continued her reading—but now in some alarm:

Song . . . . 'The Laird o' Cockpen.' . . . . . MR. RONALD STRANG.
Reading . . 'Jeanie Morrison.' . . . . . Miss M. DOUGLAS.
Service of Shortbread.
Song . . . . 'Gloomy Winter's now awa'.' . . . MR. RONALD STRANG.
Song . . . . 'Auld Lang Syne.' . . . . . THE COMPANY.
Vote of thanks to the Chairman . . . . . Miss M. DOUGLAS.
Finale.
Pipe-Music, 'Caidil gu lo' (Sleep on till day) MR. RONALD STRANG.

Meenie looked and laughed with pleasure; she was quite proud of her skill of arrangement.

'But, Meenie,' her companion said, 'why have ye not put down a duet between you and Ronald? He can sing so well; and you; and that would be prettier far than anything. Do ye no mind the time we were a' away fishing at Loch Loyal; and we were walking back; and Ronald was telling us of what he saw in a theatre in Edinburgh? And when he told us about the young lady's sweetheart coming in a boat at night, and singing to her below the window, you knew what it was well enough—and you tried it together—oh! that was so fine! Will ye no ask him to sing that with ye?'

Meenie's face flushed somewhat; and she would have evaded the question with a little laugh but that it was repeated. Whereupon she said—

'Why, now, Maggie, you have such a memory! And I have no doubt there was nonsense going on as we were walking back from Loch Loyal—for a beautiful night it was, in the middle of summer, when there is no darkness at all in the skies all the night long. Oh yes, I remember it too; and very well; but it was amongst ourselves; we are not going to have any such nonsense before other people. And if we were to sing "O hush thee, my baby," would not the children be thinking it was a hint for them to go away to bed? And besides, surely I have asked Ronald to do enough for us; do you not think he will be surprised, and perhaps angry, when he sees how often his name comes there?'

'Indeed no, I'm sure,' Maggie said promptly. 'There's just nothing that he wouldna do for you, Meenie.'

'But I will wait till I see him in a good humour,' said her friend, laughing, 'before I ask him for so much.'

'Mich,' she said; unawares she had caught up a good many of the local touches.

'And do ye think ye could ever find him in an ill-humour wi' you?' Maggie

said, almost reproachfully.

There was no answer to the question; the programme was put aside.

'Very well, then,' Meenie said, 'we will suppose that is settled. And what is next? Why, Maggie, if I had not the brain of a prime minister, I could never get through so many schemes. Oh, this is it: of course we shall be very much obliged to them if they lend us the barn and all its fittings and we should do something for them in return. And I am sure the lads will be thinking of nothing but the carpentering; and the lasses at the inn will be thinking only of the cooking of the supper, and their own ribbons and frocks. Now, Maggie, suppose you and I were to do something to make the barn look pretty; I am sure Ronald would cut us a lot of fir-branches, for there's nothing else just now; and we could fix them up all round the barn; and then—look here.'

She had got a lot of large printed designs; and a heap of stiff paper of various colours.

'We will have to make paper flowers for them, because there's none growing just now; and very well they will look among the fir-branches. Oh yes, very well indeed. Red and white roses do not grow on fir-branches—it does not need the old man of Ross to tell us that; but they will look very well whatever; and then large orange lilies, and anything to make a bold show in so big a place. And if the lads are making a chandelier out of the hoops of a barrel, we will ask them to let us put red worsted round the hoops; that will look very well too. For we must do something to thank them, Maggie; and then, indeed, when it comes to our turn, we will have the chance too of looking at the decorations when we have the children's soirée.'

Maggie looked up quickly.

'But, Meenie, you are coming to the party on Monday night too?'

There was no embarrassment on the beautiful, fine, gentle face. She only said—

'Well, no one has asked me.'

And the little Maggie flushed with shame and vexation.

'Indeed, now! Did Ronald not speak to you about it?'

'Oh, I have known about it for a long time,' she said lightly, 'and I was very glad to hear of it, for I thought it was a great chance for me to get the loan of the barn.'

'But you—you, Meenie—that they did not ask you first of all!' the younger girl cried. 'But it can only be that every one is expected to come—every one except the small children who canna sit up late. And I'm sure I did not expect to go; but Mr. Murray, he was joking and saying that I would have to dance the first dance wi' him; and Ronald said I might be there for a while. But—but—I'm no going if you're no going, Meenie.'

'But that is nonsense, Maggie,' the other said good-naturedly. 'Of course you must go. And I should like well enough——'

'I am sure Mr. Murray would put you at the head of the table—by his own side—and proud, too!' Maggie exclaimed warmly.

'And I am sure I should not wish anything like that,' Meenie said, laughing. 'I would far rather go with you. I would like to see some of the dancing.'

'Oh, Meenie,' her companion said, with eyes full of earnestness, 'did you ever see Ronald dance the sword-dance?'

'No, I have not, Maggie.'

'They say there is none can do it like him. And if he would only go to the Highland meetings, he could win prizes and medals—and for the pipe-playing too, and the tossing the caber. There is not one of the lads can come near him; but it is not often that he tries; for he is not proud.'

'I am glad that he does not go to the Highland meetings,' Meenie said, rather quietly, and with her eyes cast down.

'No, he is not proud,' said Maggie, continuing (for she had but the one hero in all the world), 'although there is nothing he canna do better than any of them. There was one of the gentlemen said to him last year—the gentleman hadna been shooting very well the day before—he said, "Ronald, let one of the gillies look after the dogs to-day, and go you and bring your gun, and make up for my mistakes;" and when he came home in the evening, he said, "It was a clean day's shooting the day; we did not leave one wounded bird or hare behind us." And another gentleman was saying, "Ronald, if ye could sell your eye-sight, I would give ye five hundred pounds for't." And Duncan was saying that this gentleman that's come for the fishing, he doesna talk to Ronald about the salmon and the loch, but about everything in the country, and Ronald knows as well as him about such things. And his lordship, too, he writes to Ronald, "Dear Ronald," and quite friendly; and when he was going away he gave Ronald his own pipe, that has got a silver band on it, and his tobacco-pouch, with the letters of his name worked in silk. And there's not one can say that Ronald's proud.'

Well, this was very idle talk; and moreover it was continued, for the red-haired and freckled little sister was never weary of relating the exploits of her handsome brother—the adventures he had had with wild-cats, and stags, and seals, and eagles, and the like; and, strangely enough, Miss Douglas showed no sign of impatience whatever. Nay, she listened with an interest that scarcely allowed her to interrupt with a word; and with satisfaction and approval, to judge by her expression; and all that she would say from time to time—and absently—was:

'But he is so careless, Maggie! Why don't you speak to him? You really must make him more heedful of himself.'

However, the night was going by; and Maggie's praises and recitals had come to an end. Meenie went down to the door to see her friend comfortably wrapped up; but there was no need of escort; the stars were shining clear, though the wind still howled blusteringly. And so they said good-bye; and Maggie went on through the dark to the cottage, thinking that Meenie Douglas was the most beautiful and sweet and warm-hearted companion she was ever likely to meet with through all her life, and wondering how it came about that Ronald and Mr. Murray and the rest of them had been so disgracefully neglectful in not inviting her to the New Year's festivities on the forthcoming Monday. Ronald, at least, should hear of his remissness, and that at once.

CHAPTER VII.

AN EYRIE.

'Come along, Harry, my lad,' the young keeper cried next morning to his faithful terrier, 'and we'll go and have a look up the hill.'

He slipped a cartridge or two into his pocket, more by custom than design as it were; put his gun over his shoulder; and went out into the cold clear air, the little terrier trotting at his heels. The vague unrest of the previous evening was altogether gone now; he was his natural self again; as he strode along the road he was lightly singing—but also under his breath, lest any herd-laddie should overhear—

Roses red, roses white,
Roses in the lane,
Tell me, roses white and red,
Where is Meenie gane!

And when he got as far as the inn he found that the mail-cart had just arrived, so he turned aside to have a little gossip with the small group of shepherds and others who had come to see whether there were any newspapers or letters for them. He was a great favourite with these; perhaps also an object of envy to the younger of the lads; for he lived the life of a gentleman, one might say, and was his own master; moreover, where was there any one who looked so smart and dressed so neatly—his Glengarry cap, his deerstalking jacket, his knickerbockers,

his hand-knitted socks, and white spats, and shoes, being all so trim and well cared for, even in this wild winter weather? There was some laughing and joking about the forthcoming supper-party; and more than one of them would have had him go inside with them to have 'a glass,' but he was proof against that temptation; while the yellow-haired Nelly, who was at work within, happening to turn her eyes to the window, and catching sight of him standing there, and being jealous of his popularity with all those shepherd-lads and gillies, suddenly said to her mistress—

'There's Ronald outside, mem, and I think he might go away and shoot something for the gentleman's dinner.'

'Very well,' said Mrs. Murray; 'go and say that I would be very much obliged to him indeed if he would bring me a hare or two the first time he is going up the hill, but at his own convenience, to be sure.'

But that was not the message that Nelly went to deliver. She wanted to show her authority before all these half-critical idlers, and also, as a good-looking lass, her independence and her mastery over men-folk.

'Ronald,' said she, at the door of the inn, 'I think you might just as well be going up the hill and bringing us down a hare or two, instead of standing about here doing nothing.'

'Is that Highland manners, lass?' he said, but with perfect good humour. 'I'm thinking ye might say "if ye please." But I'll get ye a hare or two, sure enough, and ye'll keep the first dance for me on Monday night.'

'Indeed I am not sure that I will be at the dancing at all,' retorted the pretty Nelly; but this was merely to cover her retreat—she did not wish to have any further conversation before that lot of idle half-grinning fellows.

As for Ronald, he bade them good-morning, and went lightly on his way again. He was going up the hill anyway; and he might as well bring down a brace of hares for Mrs. Murray; so, after walking along the road for a mile or so, he struck off across some rough and partly marshy ground, and presently began to climb the lower slopes of Clebrig, getting ever a wider and wider view as he ascended, and always when he turned finding beneath him the wind-stirred waters of the loch, where a tiny dark object, slow-moving near the shores, told him where the salmon fishers were patiently pursuing their sport.

No, there were no more unsettling notions in his brain; here he was master and monarch of all he surveyed; and if he was profoundly unconscious of the ease with which he breasted this steep hillside, at least he rejoiced in the ever-widening prospect—as lochs and hills and stretches of undulating moorland seemed to stretch ever and ever outward until, afar in the north, he could make out the Kyle of Tongue and the faint line of the sea. It was a wild and changeable day; now filled with gloom, again bursting forth into a blaze of yellow sunshine;

while ever and anon some flying tag of cloud would come sweeping across the hillside and engulf him, so that all he could then discern was the rough hard heather and bits of rock around his feet. It was just as one of these transient clouds was clearing off that he was suddenly startled by a loud noise—as of iron rattling on stones; and so bewildering was this unusual noise in the intense silence reigning there that instinctively he wheeled round and lowered his gun. And then again, the next second, what he saw was about as bewildering as what he had heard—a great creature, quite close by, and yet only half visible in the clearing mist, with huge outspread wings, dragging something after it across the broken rocks. The truth flashed upon him in an instant; it was an eagle caught in a fox-trap; the strange noise was the trap striking here and there on a stone. At once he put down his gun on an exposed knoll and gave chase, with the greatest difficulty subduing the eager desire of the yelping Harry to rush forward and attack the huge bird by himself. It was a rough and ludicrous pursuit but it ended in capture—though here, again, circumspection was necessary, for the eagle, with all his neck-feathers bristling, struck at him again and again with the talons that were free, only one foot having been caught in the trap. But the poor beast was quite exhausted; an examination of the trap showed Ronald that he must have flown with this weight attached to his leg all the way from Ben Ruach, some half dozen miles away; and now, though there was yet an occasional automatic motion of the beak or the claws, as though he would still strike for liberty, he submitted to be firmly seized while the iron teeth of the trap were being opened. And then Ronald looked at his prize (but still with a careful grip). He was a splendid specimen of the golden eagle—a bird that is only found here and there in Sutherlandshire, though the keepers are no longer allowed to kill them—and, despite himself, looking at the noble creature, he began to ask himself casuistical questions. Would not this make a handsome gift for Meenie?—he could send the bird to Macleay at Inverness, and have it stuffed and returned without anybody knowing. Moreover, the keepers were only charged to abstain from shooting such golden eagles as they might find on their own ground; and he knew from the make of the trap that this one must have come from a different shooting altogether; it was not a Clebrig eagle at all. But he looked at the fierce eye of the beast, and its undaunted mien; he knew that, if it could, it would fight to the death; and he felt a kind of pride in the creature, and admiration for it, and even a sort of sympathy and fellow-feeling.

'My good chap,' said he, 'I'm not going to kill you in cold blood—not me. Go back to your wife and weans, wherever they are. Off!'

And he tried to throw the big beast into the air. But this was not like flinging up a released pigeon. The eagle fell forward, and stumbled twice ere it could get its great wings into play; and then, instead of trying to soar upward, it went

flapping away down wind—increasing in speed, until he could see it, now rising somewhat, cross the lower windings of Loch Naver, and make away for the northern skies.

'It's a God's mercy,' he was saying to himself, as he went back to get his gun, 'that I met the creature in the daytime; had it been at night, I would hae thought it was the devil.'

Some two or three hundred feet still farther up the hillside he came to his own eyrie—a great mass of rock, affording shelter from either southerly or easterly winds, and surrounded with some smaller stones; and here he sate contentedly down to look around him—Harry crouched at his feet, his nose between his paws, but his eyes watchful. And this wide stretch of country between Clebrig and the northern sea would have formed a striking prospect in any kind of weather—the strange and savage loneliness of the moorlands; the solitary lakes with never a sign of habitation along their shores; the great ranges of mountains whose silent recesses are known only to the stag and the hind; but on such a morning as this it was all as unstable and unreal as it was wildly beautiful and picturesque;—for the hurrying weather made a kind of phantasmagoria of the solid land; bursts of sunlight that struck on the yellow straths were followed by swift gray cloud-wreaths blotting out the world; and again and again the white snow-peaks of the hills would melt away and become invisible only to reappear again shining and glorious in a sky of brilliant blue; until, indeed, it seemed as if the earth had no substance and fixed foundation at all, but was a mere dream, an aerial vision, changed and moved and controlled by some unseen and capricious hand.

And then again, on the dark and wind-driven lake far below him, that small object was still to be made out—like some minute, black, crawling water insect. He took out his glass from its leather case, adjusted it, and placed it to his eye. What was this? In the world suddenly brought near—and yet dimly near, as though a film interposed—he could see that some one was standing up in the stern of the boat, and another crouching down, by his side. Was that a clip or the handle of the landing-net; in other words, was it a salmon or a kelt that was fighting them there? He swept the dull waters of the loch with his glass; but could make out no splashing or springing anywhere near them. And then he could see by the curve of the rod that the fish was close at hand; there was a minute or two longer of anxiety; then a sudden movement on the part of the crouching person—and behold a silver-white object gleams for a moment in the air and then disappears!

'Good!' he says to himself—with a kind of sigh of satisfaction as if he had himself taken part in the struggle and capture.

How peaceful looks the little hamlet of Inver-Mudal! The wild storm-

clouds, and the bursts of sunlight, and the howling winds seem to sail over it unheeded; down in the hollow there surely all is quiet and still. And is Meenie singing at her work, by the window; or perhaps superintending Maggie's lessons; or gone away on one of the lonely walks that she is fond of—up by the banks of the Mudal Water? It is a bleak and a bare stream; there is scarce a bush on its banks; and yet he knows of no other river—however hung with foliage and flowers—that is so sweet and sacred and beautiful. What was it he wrote in the bygone year—one summer day when he had seen her go by—and he, too, was near the water, and could hear the soft murmuring over the pebbles? He called the idle verses

MUDAL IN JUNE.

Mudal, that comes from the lonely mere,
Silent or whispering, vanishing ever,
Know you of aught that concerns us here?—
You, youngest of all God's creatures, a river.

Born of a yesterday's summer shower,
And hurrying on with your restless motion,
Silent or whispering, every hour,
To lose yourself in the great lone ocean.

Your banks remain; but you go by,
Through day and through darkness swiftly sailing:
Say, do you hear the curlew cry,
And the snipe in the night-time hoarsely wailing?

Do you watch the wandering hinds in the morn;
Do you hear the grouse-cock crow in the heather;
Do you see the lark spring up from the corn,
All in the radiant summer weather?

O Mudal stream, how little you know
That Meenie has loved you, and loves you ever;
And while to your ocean home you flow,
She says good-bye to her well-loved river!—

O see you her now—she is coming anigh—
And the flower in her hand her aim discloses:

Laugh, Mudal, your thanks as you're hurrying by—
For she flings you a rose, in the month of roses!

Well, that was written as long ago as last midsummer; and was Meenie still as far away from him as then, and as ignorant as ever of his mute worship of her, and of these verses that he had written about her? But he indulged in no day-dreams. Meenie was as near to him as he had any right to expect—giving him of an assured and constant friendship; and as for these passing rhymes—well, he tried to make them as worthy of her as he could, though he knew she should never see them; polishing them, in so far as they might be said to have any polish at all, in honour of her; and, what is more to the point, at once cutting out and destroying any of them that seemed to savour either of affectation or of echo. No: the rude rhymes should at least be honest and of his own invention and method; imitations he could not, even in fancy, lay at Meenie's feet. And sometimes, it is true, a wild imagination would get hold of him—a whimsical thing, that he laughed at: supposing that life—the actual real life here at Inver-Mudal—were suddenly to become a play, a poem, a romantic tale; and that Meenie was to fall in love with him; and he to grow rich all at once; and the Stuarts of Glengask to be quite complaisant: why, then, would it not be a fine thing to bring all this collection of verses to Meenie, and say 'There, now, it is not much; but it shows you that I have been thinking of you all through these years?' Yes, it would be a very fine thing, in a romance. But, as has been said, he was one not given to day-dreams; and he accepted the facts of life with much equanimity; and when he had written some lines about Meenie that he regarded with a little affection—as suggesting, let us say, something of the glamour of her clear Highland eyes, and the rose-sweetness of her nature, and the kindness of her heart—and when it seemed rather a pity that she should never see them—if only as a tribute to her gentleness offered by a perfectly unbiassed spectator—he quickly reminded himself that it was not his business to write verses but to trap foxes and train dogs and shoot hoodie-crows. He was not vain of his rhymes—except where Meenie's name came in. Besides, he was a very busy person at most seasons of the year; and men, women, and children alike showed a considerable fondness for him, so that his life was full of sympathies and interests; and altogether he cannot be regarded, nor did he regard himself, as a broken-hearted or blighted being. His temperament was essentially joyous and healthy; the passing moment was enough; nothing pleased him so much as to have a grouse, or a hare, or a ptarmigan, or a startled hind appear within sure and easy range, and to say 'Well, go on. Take your life with you. Rather a pleasant day this: why shouldn't you enjoy it as well as I?'

However, on this blustering and brilliant morning he had not come all the

way up hither merely to get a brace of hares for Mrs. Murray, nor yet to be a distant spectator of the salmon-fishing going on far below. Under this big rock there was a considerable cavity, and right at the back of that he had wedged in a wooden box lined with tin, and fitted with a lid and a lock. It was useful in the autumn; he generally kept in it a bottle of whisky and a few bottles of soda-water, lest any of the gentlemen should find themselves thirsty on the way home from the stalking. But on this occasion, when he got out the key and unlocked the little chest, it was not any refreshment of that kind he was after. He took out a copy-book—a cheap paper-covered thing such as is used in juvenile schools in Scotland—and turned to the first page, which was scrawled over with pencilled lines that had apparently been written in time of rain, for there were plenty of smudges there. It had become a habit of his that, when in these lonely rambles among the hills, he found some further rhymes about Meenie come into his head, he would jot them down in this copy-book, deposit it in the little chest, and probably not see them again for weeks and weeks, when, as on the present occasion, he would come with fresh eyes to see it there were any worth or value in them. Not that he took such trouble with anything else. His rhyming epistles to his friends, his praises of his terrier Harry, his songs for the Inver-Mudal lasses to sing—these things were thrown off anyhow, and had to take their chance. But his solitary intercommunings away amid these alpine wastes were of a more serious cast; insensibly they gathered dignity and repose from the very silence and awfulness of the solitudes around; there was no idle and pastoral singing here about roses in the lane. He regarded the blurred lines, striving to think of them as having been written by somebody else:

Through the long sad centuries Clebrig slept,
Nor a sound the silence broke,
Till a morning in Spring a strange new thing
Betrayed him and he awoke;

And he laughed, and his joyous laugh was heard
From Erribol far to Tongue;
And his granite veins deep down were stirred,
And the great old mountain grew young.

'Twas Love Meenie he saw, and she walked by the shore,
And she sang so sweet and so clear,
That the sound of her voice made him see again
The dawn of the world appear;

And at night he spake to the listening stars
And charged them a guard to keep
On the hamlet of Inver-Mudal there
And the maid in her innocent sleep,

Till the years should go by; and they should see
Love Meenie take her stand
'Mong the maidens around the footstool of God—
She gentlest of all the band!

He tore the leaf out, folded it, and put it in his pocket.

'Another one for the little bookie that's never to be seen,' said he, with a kind of laugh; for indeed he treated himself to a good deal of satire, and would rather have blown his brains out than that the neighbourhood should have known he was writing these verses about Meenie Douglas.

'And hey, Harry, lad!' he called, as he locked the little cupboard again, 'I'm thinking we must be picking up a hare now, if it's for soup for the gentleman's dinner the night. So ye were bauld enough to face an eagle? I doubt, if both his feet had been free, but ye might have had a lift in the air, and seen the heavens and the earth spread out below ye.'

He shouldered his gun and set out again—making his way towards some rockier ground, where he very soon bagged the brace of hares he wanted. He tied their legs together, slung them over his shoulder, and began to descend the mountain again—usually keeping his eye on the minute black speck on the loch, lest there might be occasion again for his telescope.

He took the two hares—they looked remarkably like cats, by the way, for they were almost entirely white—into the inn, and threw them on to the chair in the passage.

'There you are, Nelly, lass,' said he, as the fair-haired Highland maid happened to go by.

'All right,' said she, which was no great thanks.

But Mr. Murray, in the parlour, had heard the keeper's voice.

'Ronald,' he cried, 'come in for a minute, will ye?'

Mr. Murray was a little, wiry, gray-haired, good-natured looking man, who, when Ronald entered the parlour, was seated at the table, and evidently puzzling his brains over a blank sheet of paper that lay before him.

'Your sister Maggie wass here this morning,' the inn-keeper said—still with his eyes fixed upon the paper—'and she wass saying that maybe Meenie—Miss Douglas—would like to come with the others on Monday night—ay, and maybe

Mrs. Douglas herself too as well—but they would hef to be asked. And Kott pless me, it is not an easy thing, if you hef to write a letter, and that is more polite than asking—it is not an easy thing, I am sure. Ronald,' he said, raising his eyes and turning round, 'would you tek a message?'

'Where?' said Ronald—but he knew well enough, and was only seeking time to make an excuse.

'To Mrs. Douglas and the young lass; and tell them we will be glad if they will come with the others on Monday night—for the doctor is away from home, and why should they be left by themselves? Will you tek the message, Ronald?'

'How could I do that?' Ronald said. 'It's you that's giving the party, Mr. Murray.'

'But they know you so ferry well—and—and there will be no harm if they come and see the young lads and lasses having a reel together—ay, and a song too. And if Mrs. Douglas could not be bothered, it's you that could bring the young lady—oh yes, I know ferry well—if you will ask her, she will come.'

'I am sure no,' Ronald said hastily, and with an embarrassment he sought in vain to conceal. 'If Miss Douglas cares to come at all, it will be when you ask her. And why should ye write, man? Go down the road and ask her yourself—I mean, ask Mrs. Douglas; it's as simple as simple. What for should ye write a letter? Would ye send it through the post too? That's ceremony for next-door neighbours!'

'But Ronald, lad, if ye should see the young lass herself——'

'No, no; take your own message, Mr. Murray; they can but give you a civil answer.'

Mr. Murray was left doubting. It was clear that the awful shadow of Glengask and Orosay still dwelt over the doctor's household; and that the innkeeper was not at all sure as to what Mrs. Douglas would say to an invitation that she and her daughter Meenie—or Williamina, as the mother called her—should be present at a merry-meeting of farm lads, keepers, gillies, and kitchen wenches.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE NEW YEAR'S FEAST.

Loud and shrill in the empty barn arose the strains of the *Athole March*, warning the young lasses to hasten with the adjustment of their ribbons, and summon-

ing the young lads about to look sharp and escort them. The long and narrow table was prettily laid out; two candelabra instead of one shed a flood of light on the white cover; the walls were decorated with evergreens and with Meenie's resplendent paper blossoms; the peats in the improvised fireplace burned merrily. And when the company began to arrive, in twos and threes, some bashful and hesitating, others merry and jocular, there was a little embarrassment about the taking of places until Ronald laid down his pipes and set to work to arrange them. The American gentleman had brought in Mrs. Murray in state, and they were at the head of the table; while Ronald himself took the foot, in order, as he said, to keep order—if he were able—among the lasses who had mostly congregated there. Then the general excitement and talking was hushed for a minute, while the innkeeper said grace; and then the girls—farm wenches, some of them, and Nelly, the pretty parlour-maid, and Finnuala, the cook's youngest sister, who was but lately come from Uist and talked the quaintest English, and Mr. Murray's two nieces from Tongue, and the other young lasses about the inn—all of them became demure and proper in their manner, for they were about to enjoy the unusual sensation of being waited upon.

This, of course, was Ronald's doing. There had been a question as to which of the maids were to bring in supper for so large a number; so he addressed himself to the young fellows who were standing about.

'You lazy laddies,' he said, 'what are ye thinking o'? Here's a chance for ye, if there's a pennyworth o' spunk among the lot o' ye. They lasses there wait on ye the whole year long, and make the beds for ye, and redd the house; I'm thinking ye might do worse than wait on them for one night, and bring in the supper when they sit down. They canna do both things; and the fun o' the night belongs to them or to nobody at all.'

At first there was a little shamefaced reluctance—it was 'lasses' work,' they said—until a great huge Highland tyke—a Ross-shire drover who happened to be here on a visit—a man of about six feet four, with a red beard big enough for a raven to build in, declared that he would lend a hand, if no one else did; and forthwith brought his huge fist down on the bar-room table to give emphasis to his words. There was some suspicion that this unwonted gallantry was due to the fact that he had a covetous eye on Jeannie, Donald Macrae's lass, who was a very superior dairy-mistress, and was also heir-presumptive to her father's farmstead and about a score of well-favoured cattle; but that was neither here nor there; he was as good as his word; he organised the brigade, and led it; and if he swallowed a stiff glass of whisky before setting out from the kitchen for the barn, with a steaming plate of soup in each hand, that was merely to steady his nerves and enable him to face the merriment of the whole gang of those girls. And then when this red-bearded giant of a Ganymede and his attendants had served every

one, they fetched in their own plates, and sat down; and time was allowed them; for the evening was young yet, and no one in a hurry.

Now if Mr. Hodson had been rather doubtful lest his presence might produce some little restraint, he was speedily reassured, to his own great satisfaction, for he was really a most good-natured person and anxious to be friendly with everybody. In the general fun and jollity he was not even noticed; he could ask Mrs. Murray any questions he chose without suspicion of being observant; the young lady next him—who was Jeannie Macrae herself, and to whom he strove to be as gallant as might be—was very winsome and gentle and shy, and spoke in a more Highland fashion than he had heard yet; while otherwise he did not fare at all badly at this rustic feast, for there were boiled fowls and roast hares after the soup, and there was plenty of ale passed round, and tea for those who wished it. Nay, on the contrary, he had rather to push himself forward and assert himself ere he could get his proper share of the work that was going on. He insisted upon carving for at least half a dozen neighbours; he was most attentive to the pretty Highland girl next him; and laughed heartily at Mrs. Murray's Scotch stories, which he did not quite understand; and altogether entered into the spirit of the evening. But there was no doubt it was at the other end of the table that the fun was getting fast and furious; and just as little doubt that Ronald the keeper was suffering considerably at the hands of those ungrateful lasses for whom he had done so much. Like a prudent man, he held his tongue and waited his opportunity; taking their teasing with much good humour; and paying no heed to the other young fellows who were urging him to face and silence the saucy creatures. And his opportunity came in the most unexpected way. One of the girls, out of pure mischief, and without the least notion that she would be overheard, rapped lightly on the table, and said: 'Mr. Ronald Strang will now favour us with a song.' To her amazement and horror there was an almost instant silence; for an impression had travelled up the table that some announcement was about to be made.

'What is it now? What are you about down there?' their host called to them—and the silence, to her who had unwittingly caused it, was terrible.

But another of the girls, still bent on mischief, was bold enough to say.

'Oh, it's Ronald that's going to sing us a song.'

'Sing ye a song, ye limmer, ere ye're through with your supper?' Ronald said sharply. 'I'd make ye sing yourself—with a leather strap—if I had my will o' ye.'

But this was not heard up the table.

'Very well, then, Ronald,' the innkeeper cried, graciously. 'Come away with it now. There is no one at all can touch you at that.'

'Oh, do not ask him,' the pretty Nelly said—apparently addressing the com-

pany, but keeping her cruel eyes on him. 'Do not ask Ronald to sing. Ronald is such a shy lad.'

He glanced at her; and then he seemed to make up his mind.

'Very well, then,' said he, 'I'll sing ye a song—and let's have a chorus, lads.'

Now in Sutherlandshire, as in many other parts of the Highlands, the chief object of singing in company is to establish a chorus; and the audience, no matter whether they have heard the air or not, so soon as it begins, proceed to beat time with hand and heel, forming a kind of accompanying tramp, as it were; so that by the time the end of the first verse is reached, if they have not quite caught the tune, at least they can make some kind of rhythmic noise with the refrain. And on this occasion, if the words were new—and Ronald, on evil intent, took care to pronounce them clearly—the air was sufficiently like 'Jenny dang the Weaver' for the general chorus to come in, in not more than half a dozen keys. This was what Ronald sang—and he sang it in that resonant tenor of his, and in a rollicking fashion—just as if it were an impromptu, and not a weapon that he had carefully forged long ago, and hidden away to serve some such chance as the present:

O lasses, lasses, gang your ways,
And dust the house, or wash the claes,
Ye put me in a kind o' blaze—
Ye'll break my heart among ye!

The girls rather hung their heads—the imputation that they were all setting their caps at a modest youth who wanted to have nothing to do with them was scarcely what they expected. But the lads had struck the tune somehow; and there was a roaring chorus, twice repeated, with heavy boots marking the time—

Ye'll break my heart among ye!

And then the singer proceeded—gravely—

At kirk or market, morn or e'en,
The like o' them was never seen,
For each is kind, and each a queen;—
Ye'll break my heart among ye!

And again came the roaring chorus from the delighted lads—

Ye'll break my heart among ye!

There was but one more verse—

There's that one dark, and that one fair,
And yon has wealth o' yellow hair;
Gang hame, gang hame—I can nae mair—
Ye'll break my heart among ye!

Yellow hair? The allusion was so obvious that the pretty Nelly blushed scarlet—

all the more visibly because of her fair complexion; and when the thunder of the thrice-repeated refrain had ceased, she leant forward and said to him in a low voice, but with much terrible meaning—

'My lad, when I get you by yourself, I'll give it to you!'

They had nearly finished supper by this time; but ere they had the decks cleared for action, there was a formal ceremony to be gone through. The host produced his *quaich*—a small cup of horn, with a handle on each side; and likewise a bottle of whisky; and as one guest after another took hold of the quaich with the thumb and forefinger of each hand, the innkeeper filled the small cup with whisky, which had then to be drank to some more or less appropriate toast. These were in Gaelic for the most part—'*To the goodman of the inn*'; '*To the young girls that are kind, and old wives that keep a clean house*'; '*Good health; and good luck in finding things washed ashore*,' and so forth—and when it came to Mr. Hodson's turn, he would have a try at the Gaelic too.

'I think I can wrestle with it, if you give me an easy one,' he remarked, as he took the quaich between his fingers and held it till it was filled.

'Oh no, sir, do not trouble about the Gaelic,' said his pretty neighbour Jeannie—blushing very much, for there was comparative silence at the time.

'But I want to have my turn. If it's anything a white man can do, I can do it.'

'Say *air do shlàinte*—that is, your good health,' said Jeannie, blushing more furiously than ever.

He carefully balanced the cup in his hands, gravely turned towards his hostess, bowed to her, repeated the magic words with a very fair accent indeed, and drained off the whisky—amid the general applause; though none of them suspected that the swallowing of the whisky was to him a much more severe task than the pronunciation of the Gaelic. And then it came to Ronald's turn.

'Oh no, Mr. Murray,' said the slim-waisted Nelly, who had recovered from her confusion, and whose eyes were now as full of mischief as ever, 'do not ask Ronald to say anything in the Gaelic; he is ashamed to hear himself speak. It is six years and more he has been trying to say "a young calf," and he cannot do it

yet.'

'And besides, he's thinking of the lass he left behind in the Lothians,' said her neighbour.

'And they're all black-haired girls there,' continued the fair-haired Nelly. 'Ronald, drink "*mo nighean dubh*."'

He fixed his eyes on her steadily, and said: '*Tir nam beann, nan gleann, s'nan gaisgeach;*[#] and may all the saucy jades in Sutherland find a husband to keep them in order ere the year be out.'

[#] The land of hills and glens and heroes.

And now two or three of the lasses rose to clear the table; for the red-bearded drover and his brigade had not the skill to do that; and the men lit their pipes; and there was a good deal of joyous *schwärmerei*. In the midst of it all there was a rapping of spoons and knuckles at the upper end of the table; and it was clear, from the importance of his look, that Mr. Murray himself was about to favour the company—so that a general silence ensued. And very well indeed did the host of the evening sing—in a shrill, high-pitched voice, it is true, but still with such a multitude of small flourishes and quavers and grace notes as showed he had once been proud enough of his voice in the days gone by. 'Scotland yet' he sang; and there was a universal rush at the chorus—

'And trow ye as I sing, my lads,
The burden o't shall be,
Auld Scotland's howes, and Scotland's knowes,
And Scotland's hills for me,
I'll drink a cup to Scotland yet,
Wi' a' the honours three.'

And was their American friend to be excluded?—not if he knew it. He could make a noise as well as any; and he waved the quaich—which had wandered back to him—round his head; and strident enough was his voice with

I'll drink a cup to Scotland yet,
Wi' a' the honours three.'

'I feel half a Scotchman already,' said he gaily to his hostess.

'Indeed, sir, I wish you were altogether one,' she said in her gentle way. 'I am sure I think you would look a little better in health if you lived in this country.'

'But I don't look so ill, do I?' said he—rather disappointed; for he had been striving to be hilarious, and had twice drank the contents of the quaich, out of pure friendliness.

'Well, no, sir,' said Mrs. Murray politely, 'not more than most of them I hef seen from your country; but surely it cannot be so healthy as other places; the young ladies are so thin and delicate-looking whatever; many a one I would like to hef kept here for a while—for more friendly young ladies I never met with anywhere—just to see what the mountain air and the sweet milk would do for her.'

'Well, then, Mrs. Murray, you will have the chance of trying your doctoring on my daughter when she comes up here a few weeks hence; but I think you won't find much of the invalid about her—it's my belief she could give twenty pounds to any girl I know of in a go-as-you-please race across the stiffest ground anywhere. There's not much the matter with my Carry, if she'd only not spend the whole day in those stores in Regent Street. Well, that will be over when she come here; I should think it'll make her stare some, if she wants to buy a veil or a pair of gloves.'

But the girls at the foot of the table had been teasing Ronald to sing something; silence was forthwith procured; and presently—for he was very good natured, and sang whenever he was asked—the clear and penetrating tenor voice was ringing along the rafters:

'The news frae Moidart cam' yestreen,
Will soon gar many ferlie,[#]
For ships o' war hae just come in
And landed royal Charlie.'

[#] 'Ferlie,' wonder.

It was a well-known song, with a resounding chorus:

'Come through the heather, around him gather,
Ye're a' the welcomer early;
Around him cling wi' a' your kin,
For wha'll be king but Charlie?'

Nay, was not this the right popular kind of song—to have two choruses instead of one?—

'Come through the heather, around him gather,

Come Ronald, and Donald, come a'thegither
And claim your rightfu' lawfu' king,
For who'll be king but Charlie?'

This song gave great satisfaction; for they had all taken part in the chorus; and they were pleased with the melodious result. And then the lasses were at him again:

'Ronald, sing "Doon the burn, Davie lad."'

'Ronald, will you not give us "Logan Water" now?'

'Ronald, "Auld Joe Nicholson's Bonnie Nannie" or "My Peggy is a young thing" whichever you like best yourself.'

'No, no,' said the pretty Nelly, 'ask him to sing, "When the kye come hame," and he will be thinking of the black-haired lass he left in the Lothians.'

'Gae wa', gae wa',' said he, rising and shaking himself free from them. 'I ken what'll put other things into your heads—or into your heels, rather.'

He picked up his pipes, which had been left in a corner, threw the drones over his shoulder, and marched to the upper end of the barn; then there was a preliminary groan or two, and presently the chanter broke away into a lively reel tune. The effect of this signal, as it might be called, was magical; every one at once divined what was needed; and the next moment they were all helping to get the long table separated into its component parts and carried out into the dark. There was a cross table left at the upper end, by the peat-fire, for the elderly people and the spectators to sit at, if they chose; the younger folk had wooden forms at the lower end; but the truth is that they were so eager not to have any of the inspiriting music thrown away that several sets were immediately formed, and off they went to the brisk strains of *Miss Jenny Gordon's Favourite*—intertwisting deftly, setting to partners again, fingers and thumbs snapped in the air, every lad amongst them showing off his best steps, and ringing whoops sent up to the rafters as the reel broke off again into a quick strathspey. It was wild and barbaric, no doubt; but there was a kind of rhythmic poetry in it too; Ronald grew prouder and prouder of the fire that he could infuse into this tempestuous and yet methodical crowd; the whoops became yells; and if the red-bearded drover, dancing opposite the slim-figured Nelly, would challenge her to do her best, and could himself perform some remarkable steps and shakes, well, Nelly was not ashamed to raise her gown an inch or two just to show him that he was not dancing with a flat-footed creature, but that she had swift toes and graceful ankles to compare with any. And then again they would trip off into the figure 8, swinging round with arms interlocked; and again roof and rafter would 'dirl' with the triumphant shouts of the men. Then came the long wailing monition

from the pipes; the sounds died down; panting and laughing and rosy-cheeked the lasses were led to the benches by their partners; and a general halt was called.

Little Maggie stole up to her brother.

'I'm going home now, Ronald,' she said.

'Very well,' he said. 'Mind you go to bed as soon as ye get in. Good-night, lass.'

'Good-night, Ronald.'

She was going away, when he said to her—

'Maggie, do ye think that Miss Douglas is not coming along to see the dancing? I thought she would do that if she would rather no come to the supper.'

In truth he had had his eye on the door all the time he was playing *Miss Jenny Gordon's Favourite*.

'I am sure if she stays away,' the little Maggie said, 'it is not her own doing. Meenie wanted to come. It is very hard that everybody should be at the party and not Meenie.'

'Well, well, good-night, lass,' said he; for the young folk were choosing their partners again, and the pipes were wanted. Soon there was another reel going on, as fast and furious as before.

At the end of this reel—Meenie had not appeared, by the way, and Ronald concluded that she was not to be allowed to look on at the dancing—the yellow-haired Nelly came up to the top of the room, and addressed Mrs. Murray in the Gaelic; but as she finished up with the word *quadrille*, and as she directed one modest little glance towards Mr. Hodson, that amiable but astute onlooker naturally inferred that he was somehow concerned in this speech. Mrs. Murray laughed.

'Well, sir, the girls are asking if you would not like to have a dance too; and they could have a quadrille.'

'I've no cause to brag about my dancing,' he said good-humouredly, 'but if Miss Nelly will see me through, I dare say we'll manage somehow. Will you excuse my ignorance?'

Now the tall and slender Highland maid had not in any way bargained for this—it was merely friendliness that had prompted her proposal; but she could not well refuse; and soon one or two sets were formed; and a young lad called Munro, from Lairg, who had brought his fiddle with him for this great occasion, proceeded to tune up. The quadrille, when it came off, was performed with more of vigour than science; there was no ignominious shirking of steps—no idle and languid walking—but a thorough and resolute flinging about, as the somewhat bewildered Mr. Hodson speedily discovered. However, he did his part gallantly, and was now grown so gay that when, at the end of the dance, he inquired of the fair Nelly whether she would like to have any little refreshment, and when she

mildly suggested a little water, and offered to go for it herself, he would hear of no such thing. No, no; he went and got some soda-water, and declared that it was much more wholesome with a little whisky in it; and had some himself also. Gay and gallant?—why, certainly. He threw off thirty years of his life; he forgot that this was the young person who would be waiting at table after his daughter Carry came hither: he would have danced another quadrille with her; and felt almost jealous when a young fellow came up to claim her for the *Highland Schottische*—thus sending him back to the society of Mrs. Murray. And it was not until he had sate down that he remembered he had suggested to his daughter the training of this pretty Highland girl for the position of maid and travelling companion. But what of that? If all men were born equal, so were women; and he declared to himself that any day he would rather converse with Nelly the pretty parlour-maid than (supposing him to have the chance) with Her Illustrious Highness the Princess of Pfalzgrafweiler-Gunzenhausen.

In the meantime Ronald, his pipes not being then needed, had wandered out into the cold night-air. There were some stars visible, but they shed no great light; the world lay black enough all around. He went idly and dreamily along the road—the sounds in the barn growing fainter and fainter—until he reached the plateau where his own cottage stood. There was no light in it anywhere; doubtless Maggie had at once gone to bed, as she had been bid. And then he wandered on again—walking a little more quietly—until he reached the doctor's house. Here all the lights were out but one; there was a red glow in that solitary window; and he knew that that was Meenie's room. Surely she could not be sitting up and listening?—even the skirl of the pipes could scarcely be heard so far; and her window was closed. Reading, perhaps? He knew so many of her favourites—'The Burial March of Dundee,' 'Jeannie Morrison,' 'Bonny Kilmeny,' 'Christabel,' the 'Hymn before Sunrise in the Valley of Chamounix,' and others of a similar noble or mystical or tender kind; and perhaps, after all, these were more in consonance with the gentle dignity and rose-sweetness of her mind and nature than the gambols of a lot of farm-lads and wenches? He walked on to the bridge, and sate down there for a while, in the dark and the silence; he could hear the Mudal Water rippling by, but could see nothing. And when he passed along the road again, the light in the small red-blinded window was gone; Meenie was away in the world of dreams and phantoms—and he wondered if the people there knew who this was who had come amongst them, with her wondering eyes and sweet ways.

He went back to the barn, and resumed his pipe-playing with all his wonted vigour—waking up the whole thing, as it were; but nothing could induce him to allow one or other of the lads to be his substitute, so that he might go and choose a partner for one of the reels. He would not dance; he said his business was to

keep the merry-making going. And he and they did keep it going till between five and six in the morning, when all hands were piped for the singing of 'Auld Lang Syne:' and thereafter there was a general dispersal, candles going this way and that through the blackness like so many will-o'-the-wisps; and the last good-nights at length sank into silence—a silence as profound and hushed as that that lay over the unseen heights of Clebrig and the dark and still lake below.

CHAPTER IX.
ENTICEMENTS.

At about eleven o'clock on the same morning Miss Douglas was standing at the window of her own little room looking rather absently at the familiar wintry scene without, and occasionally turning to a letter that she held in her hand, and that she had apparently just then written. Presently, however, her face brightened. There was a faint sound in the distance as of some one singing; no doubt that was Ronald; he would be coming along the road with the dogs, and if she were in any difficulty he would be the one to help. So she waited for a second or two, hoping to be able to signal him to stop; and the next minute he was in sight, walking briskly with his long and steady stride, the small terrier at his heels, the other dogs—some handsome Gordon setters, a brace of pointers, and a big brown retriever—ranging farther afield.

But why was it, she asked herself, that whenever he drew near her father's cottage he invariably ceased his singing? Elsewhere, as well she knew, he beguiled the tedium of these lonely roads with an almost constant succession of songs and snatches of songs; but here he invariably became mute. And why did he not raise his eyes to the window—where she was waiting to give him a friendly wave of the hand, or even an invitation to stop and come within-doors for a minute or two? No, on he went with that long stride of his, addressing a word now and again to one or other of the dogs, and apparently thinking of nothing else. So, as there was nothing for it now but to go out and intercept him on his return, she proceeded to put on her ulster and a close-fitting deerstalker's cap; and thus fortified against the gusty north wind that was driving clouds and sunshine across the loch and along the slopes of Clebrig, she left the cottage, and followed the road that he had taken.

As it turned out, she had not far to go; for she saw that he was now seated

on the parapet of the little bridge spanning the Mudal Water, and no doubt he was cutting tobacco for his pipe. When she drew near, he rose; when she drew nearer, he put his pipe in his waistcoat pocket.

'Good-morning, Ronald!' she cried, and the pretty fresh-tinted face smiled on him, and the clear gray-blue Highland eyes regarded him in the most frank and friendly way, and without any trace whatever of maiden bashfulness.

'Good-morning, Miss Douglas,' said he; he was far more shy than she was.

'What a stupid thing happened this morning,' said she. 'When I heard that the American gentleman was going south, I wanted to tell the driver to bring the children from Crask with him as he came back in the evening; and I sent Elizabeth round to the inn to tell him that; and then—what do you think!—they had started away half an hour before there was any need. But now I have written a letter to the Crask people, asking them to stop the waggonette as it comes back in the afternoon, and telling them that we will make the children very comfortable here for the night; and if only I could get it sent to Crask everything would be arranged. And do you think now you could get one of the young lads to take it to Crask if I gave him a shilling?'

She took out her purse, and selected a shilling from the very slender store of coins there.

'It is not much for so long a walk,' she said, rather doubtfully. 'Eight miles there and eight back—is it enough, do you think?'

'Oh, I'll get the letter sent for ye, Miss Douglas, easily enough,' said he—and indeed he had already taken it from her hand.

Then she offered him the shilling, but with a little gesture he refused it. And then—for there flashed upon her mind a sudden suspicion that perhaps he might choose to walk all that way himself just to please her (indeed, he had done things like that before)—she became greatly embarrassed.

'Give me the letter, Ronald,' said she, 'and I will find some one myself. You are going away now with the dogs.'

'Oh no,' said he, 'I will see that the Crask folk get your message.'

'And the money to pay the lad?' said she timidly.

'Dinna bother your head wi' that,' he answered. 'There's enough money scattered about the place just now—the American gentleman was free-handed this morning. Ay, and there's something I've got for you.'

'For me?' she said, with her eyes opening somewhat.

'Well,' said he (and very glad he was to have the letter safe and sound in his possession), 'I was telling him about the children's party to-morrow night; and he's a friendly kind o' man, that; he said he would like to have been at it, if he could have stayed; and I'm sure he would have got on wi' them well enough, for he's a friendly kind o' man, as I say. Well, then, I couldna tell him the exact

number o' the bairns; but no matter what number, each one o' them is to find sevenpence under the teacup—that's a penny for each fish he got. Ay, he's a shrewd-headed fellow, too; for says he "I suppose, now, the old people will be for having the children save up the sixpence, so at least they'll have the penny to spend;" and he was curious even to find out where the bairns in a place like this got their toys, or if sweeties ever came their way. "It's little enough of either o' them," I said to him, "they see, except when Miss Douglas has been to Lairg or Tongue;" and he was very anxious to make your acquaintance, I may tell ye, but he said he would wait till his daughter came with him the next time. I'm thinking the bairns will be pleased to find a little packet of money in the saucers; and it's not too much for a man to pay for the luck o' getting seven salmon in the middle of January—for who could have expected that?'

And then Meenie laughed.

'It's little you know, Ronald, what is in store for you to-morrow night. It will be the hardest night's work you ever undertook in your life.'

'I'm not afraid o't,' he answered simply.

'But you do not know yet.'

She opened her ulster and from an inside pocket produced the formidable document that she had shown to Ronald's sister; and then she buttoned the long garment again, and contentedly sate herself down on the low stone parapet, the programme in her hand. And now all trace of embarrassment was fled from her; and when she spoke to him, or smiled, those clear frank eyes of hers looked straight into his, fearing nothing, but only expecting a welcome. She did not, as he did, continually remember that she was Miss Douglas, the doctor's daughter, and he merely a smart young deerstalker. To her he was simply Ronald—the Ronald that every one knew and liked; who had a kind of masterful way throughout this neighbourhood, and was arbiter in all matters of public concern; but who, nevertheless, was of such amazing good nature that there was no trouble he would not undertake to gratify her slightest wish. And as he was so friendly and obliging towards her, she made no doubt he was so to others; and that would account for his great popularity, she considered; and she thought it was very lucky for this remote little hamlet that it held within it one who was capable of producing so much good feeling, and keeping the social atmosphere sweet and sound.

As for him, he met this perfect friendship of hers with a studied respect. Always, if it was on the one side 'Ronald,' on the other it was 'Miss Douglas.' Why, her very costume was a bar to more familiar relations. At this moment, as she sate on the stone parapet of the bridge, looking down at the document before her, and as he stood at a little distance, timidly awaiting what she had to say, it occurred to him again, as it had occurred before, that no matter what dress

it was, each one seemed to become her better than any other. What was there particular in a tight-fitting gray ulster and a deerstalker's cap? and yet there was grace there, and style, and a nameless charm. If one of the lasses at the inn, now, were sent on an errand on one of these wild and blustering mornings, and got her hair blown about, she came back looking untidy; but if Miss Douglas had her hair blown about, so that bits and curls of it got free from the cap or the velvet hat, and hung lightly about her forehead or her ears or her neck, it was a greater witchery than ever. Then everything seemed to fit her so well and so easily, and to be so simple; and always leaving her—however it was so managed—perfect freedom of movement, so that she could swing a child on to her shoulder, or run after a truant, or leap from bank to bank of a burn without disturbing in the least that constant symmetry and neatness. To Ronald it was all a wonder; and there was a still further wonder always seeming to accompany her and surround her. Why was it that the bleakest winter day, on these desolate Sutherland moors, suddenly grew filled with light when he chanced to see a well-known figure away along the road—the world changing into a joyful thing, as if the summer were already come, and the larks singing in the blue? And when she spoke to him, there was a kind of music in the air; and when she laughed—why, Clebrig and Ben Loyal and the whispering Mudal Water seemed all to be listening and all to be glad that she was happy and pleased. She was the only one, other than himself, that the faithful Harry would follow; and he would go with her wherever she went, so long as she gave him an occasional word of encouragement.

'Will I read you the programme, Ronald?' said she, with just a trace of mischief in the gray-blue eyes. 'I'm sure you ought to hear what has to be done, for you are to be in the chair, you know.'

'Me?' said he, in astonishment. 'I never tried such a thing in my life.'

'Oh yes,' she said cheerfully. 'They tell me you are always at the head of the merry-makings: and is not this a simple thing? And besides, I do not want any other grown people—I do not want Mr. Murray—he is a very nice man—but he would be making jokes for the grown-up people all the time. I want nobody but you and Maggie and myself besides the children, and we will manage it very well, I am sure.'

There was a touch of flattery in the proposal.

'Indeed, yes,' said he at once. 'We will manage well enough, if ye wish it that way.'

'Very well, then,' said she, turning with a practical air to the programme. 'We begin with singing Old Hundred, and then the children will have tea and cake—and the sixpence and the penny. And then there is to be an address by the Chairman—that's you, Ronald.'

'Bless me, lassie!' he was startled into saying; and then he stammered an

apology, and sought safety in a vehement protest against the fancy that he could make a speech—about anything whatever.

'Well, that is strange,' said Meenie looking at him, and rather inclined to laugh at his perplexity. 'It is a strange thing if you cannot make a little speech to them; for I have to make one—at the end. See, there is my name.'

He scarcely glanced at the programme.

'And what have you to speak about, Miss Douglas?'

She laughed.

'About you.'

'About me?' he said, rather aghast.

'It is a vote of thanks to the chairman—and easy enough it will be, I am sure. For I have only to say about you what I hear every one say about you; and that will be simple enough.'

The open sincerity of her friendship—and even of her marked liking for him—was so apparent that for a second or so he was rather bewildered. But he was not the kind of man to misconstrue frankness; he knew that was part of herself; she was too generous, too much inclined to think well of everybody; and the main point to which he had to confine himself was this, that if she, out of her good-nature, could address a few words to those children—about him or any other creature or object in the world—it certainly behoved him to do his best also, although he had never tried anything of the kind before. And then a sudden fancy struck him; and his eyes brightened eagerly. 'Oh yes, yes,' he said, 'I will find something to say. I would make a bad hand at a sermon; but the bairns have enough o' that at times; I dare say we'll find something for them o' another kind—and they'll no be sorry if it's short. I'm thinking I can find something that'll please them.'

And what was this that was in his head?—what but the toast of the Mistress of the Feast! If Meenie had but known, she would doubtless have protested against the introduction of any mutual admiration society into the modest hamlet of Inver-Mudal; but at that moment she was still scanning the programme.

'Now you know, Ronald,' she said, 'it is to be all quiet and private; and that is why the grown-up people are to be kept out except ourselves. Well, then, after they have had raisins handed round, you are to sing "My love she's but a lassie yet"—that is a compliment to the little ones; and then I will read them something; and then you are to sing "O dinna cross the burn, Willie"—I have put down no songs that I have not heard you sing. And then if you would play them "Lord Breadalbane's March" on the pipes——'

She looked up again, with an air of apology.

'Do you think I am asking too much from you, Ronald?' she said.

'Indeed not a bit,' said he promptly. 'I will play or sing for them all the night

long, if you want; and I'm sure it's much better we should do it all ourselves, instead o' having a lot o' grown-up folk to make the bairns shy.'

'It is not the chairman anyway, that will make them shy—if what they say themselves is true,' said Meenie very prettily; and she folded up her programme and put it in her pocket again.

She rose; and he whistled in the dogs, as if he would return to the village.

'I thought you were taking them for a run,' said she.

'Oh, they have been scampering about; I will go back now.'

Nor did it occur to her for a moment that she would rather not walk back to the door of her mother's house with him. On the contrary, if she had been able to attract his notice when he passed, she would have gone down to the little garden-gate, and had this conversation with him in view of all the windows. If she wanted him to do anything for her, she never thought twice about going along to his cottage and knocking at the door; or she would, in the event of his not being there, go on to the inn and ask if any one had seen Ronald about. And so on this occasion she went along the road with him in much good-humour; praising the dogs, hoping the weather would continue fine, and altogether in high spirits over her plans for the morrow.

However, they were not to part quite so pleasantly. At the small garden-gate, and evidently awaiting them, stood Mrs. Douglas; and Ronald guessed that she was in no very good temper. In truth, she seldom was. She was a doll-like little woman, rather pretty, with cold clear blue eyes, fresh-coloured cheeks, and quite silver-white hair, which was carefully curled and braided—a pretty little old lady, and one to be petted and made much of, if only she had had a little more amiability of disposition. But she was a disappointed woman. Her big good-natured husband had never fulfilled the promise of his early years, when, in a fit of romance, she married the penniless medical student whom she had met in Edinburgh. He was not disappointed at all; his life suited him well enough; he was excessively fond of his daughter Meenie, and wanted no other companion when she was about; after the hard work of making a round of professional visits in that wild district, the quiet and comfort and neatness of the little cottage at Inver-Mudal were all that he required. But it was far otherwise with the once ambitious little woman whom he had married. The shadow of the dignity of the Stuarts of Glengask still dwelt over her; and it vexed her that she had nothing with which to overawe the neighbours or to convince the passing stranger of her importance. Perhaps if she had been of commanding figure, that might have helped her, however poor her circumstances might be; as it was, being but five feet two inches in height—and rather toy-like withal—everything seemed against her. It was but little use her endeavouring to assume a majestic manner when her appearance was somehow suggestive of a glass case; and the sharpness of

her tongue, which was considerable, seemed to be but little heeded even in her own house, for both her husband and her daughter were persons of an easy good humour, and rather inclined to pet her in spite of herself.

'Good morning, Mrs. Douglas,' Ronald said respectfully, and he raised his cap as they drew near.

'Good morning, Mr. Strang,' she said, with much precision, and scarcely glancing at him.

She turned to Meenie.

'Williamina, how often have I told you to shut the gate after you when you go out?' she said sharply. 'Here has the cow been in again.'

'It cannot do much harm at this time of the year,' Meenie said lightly.

'I suppose if I ask you to shut the gate that is enough? Where have you been? Idling, I suppose. Have you written to Lady Stuart to thank her for the Birthday Book?'

It seemed to Ronald (who wished to get away, but could scarcely leave without some civil word of parting) that she referred to Lady Stuart in an unmistakably clear tone. She appeared to take no notice of Ronald's presence, but she allowed him to hear that there was such a person as Lady Stuart in existence.

'Why, mother, it only came yesterday, and I haven't looked over it yet,' Meenie said.

'I think when her ladyship sends you a present,' observed the little woman, with severe dignity, 'the least you can do is to write and thank her at once. There are many who would be glad of the chance. Go in and write the letter now.'

'Very well, mother,' said Meenie, with perfect equanimity; and then she called 'Good morning, Ronald!' and went indoors.

What was he to do to pacify this imperious little dame? As a gamekeeper, he knew but the one way.

'Would a hare or two, or a brace of ptarmigan be of any use to you, Mrs. Douglas?' said he.

'Indeed,' she answered, with much dignity, 'we have not had much game of any kind of late, for at Glengask they do not shoot any of the deer after Christmas.'

This intimation that her cousin, Sir Alexander, was the owner of a deer-forest might have succeeded with anybody else. But alas! this young man was a keeper, and very well he knew that there was no forest at all at Glengask, though occasionally in October they might come across a stag that had been driven forth from the herd, or they might find two or three strayed hinds in the woods later on; while, if Mrs. Douglas had but even one haunch sent her in the year—say at Christmas—he considered she got a very fair share of whatever venison was going at Glengask. But of course he said nothing of all this.

'Oh, very well,' said he, 'I'm thinking o' getting two or three o' the lads to

go up the hill for a hare-drive one o' these days. The hares 'll be the better o' some thinning down—on one or two o' the far tops; and then again, when we've got them it's no use sending them south—they're no worth the carriage. So if ye will take a few o' them, I'm sure you're very welcome. Good morning, ma'am.'

'Good morning,' said she, a little stiffly, and she turned and walked towards the cottage.

As for him, he strode homeward with right goodwill; for Meenie's letter was in his pocket; and he had forthwith to make his way to Crask—preferring not to place any commission of hers in alien hands. He got the dogs kennelled up—all except the little terrier; he slung his telescope over his shoulder, and took a stick in his hand. 'Come along, Harry, lad, ye'll see your friends at Crask ere dinner time, and if ye're well-behaved ye'll come home in the waggonette along wi' the bairns.'

It was a brisk and breezy morning; the keen north wind was fortunately behind him; and soon he was swinging along through the desolate solitudes of Strath Terry, his footfall on the road the only sound in the universal stillness. And yet not the only sound, for sometimes he conversed with Harry, and sometimes he sent his clear tenor voice ringing over the wide moorland, and startling here or there a sheep, the solitary occupant of these wilds. For no longer had he to propitiate that domineering little dame; and the awful shadow of Glengask was as nothing to him; the American, with his unsettling notions, had departed; here he was at home, his own master, free in mind, and with the best of all companions trotting placidly at his heels. No wonder his voice rang loud and clear and contented:—

'"'Tis not beneath the burgonet,
Nor yet beneath the crown,
'Tis not on couch of velvet,
Nor yet on bed of down."

Harry, lad, do ye see that hoodie? Was there ever such impudence? I could maist kill him with a stone. But I'll come along and pay a visit to the gentleman ere the month's much older:—

'"'Tis beneath the spreading birch,
In the dell without a name,
Wi' a bonnie, bonnie lassie,
When the kye come hame."

What think ye o' that now?—for we'll have to do our best to-morrow night to

please the bairns. Ah, you wise wee deevil!—catch you drinking out o' a puddle when ye see any running water near.

"When the kye come hame, when the kye come hame,
Twixt the gloaming and the mirk, when the kye come hame."

CHAPTER X.
HIGH FESTIVAL.

A children's tea-party in a Highland barn sounds a trivial sort of affair; and, as a spectacle, would doubtless suffer in contrast with a fancy-dress ball in Kensington or with a State concert at Buckingham Palace. But human nature is the important thing, after all, no matter what the surroundings may be; and if one considers what the ordinary life of these children was—the dull monotony of it in those far and bleak solitudes; their ignorance of pantomime transformation scenes; their lack of elaborately illustrated fairy tales, and similar aids to the imagination enjoyed by more fortunate young people elsewhere—it was surely an interesting kind of project to bring these bairns away from the homely farm or the keeper's cottage, in the depth of mid-winter, and to march them through the blackness of a January evening into a suddenly opening wonderland of splendour and colour and festivity. They were not likely to remember that this was but a barn—this beautiful place, with its blazing candelabra, and its devices of evergreens and great white and red roses, and the long table sumptuously set forth, and each guest sitting down, finding himself or herself a capitalist to the extent of sevenpence. And so warm and comfortable the lofty building was; and so brilliant and luminous with those circles of candles; and the loud strains of the pipes echoing through it—giving them a welcome just as if they were grown-up people: no wonder they stared mostly in silence at first, and seemed awestruck, and perhaps were in doubt whether this might not be some Cinderella kind of feast, that they might suddenly be snatched away from—and sent back again through the cold and the night to the far and silent cottage in the glen. But this feeling soon wore off; for it was no mystical fairy—though she seemed more beautiful and gracious, and more richly attired than any fairy they had ever dreamed about—who went swiftly here and there and everywhere, arranging their seats for them, laughing and talking with them, forgetting not one of their names, and as busy

and merry and high-spirited as so great an occasion obviously demanded.

Moreover, is it not in these early years that ideals are unconsciously being formed—from such experiences as are nearest?—ideals that in after-life may become standards of conduct and aims. They had never seen any one so gentle-mannered as this young lady who was at once their hostess and the little mother of them all, nor any one so dignified and yet so simple and good-humoured and kind. They could not but observe with what marked respect Ronald Strang (a most important person in their eyes) treated her—insisting on her changing places with him, lest she should be in a draught when the door was opened; and not allowing her to touch the teapots that came hot and hot from the kitchen, lest she should burn her fingers; he pouring out the tea himself, and rather clumsily too. And if their ideal of sweet and gracious womanhood (supposing it to be forming in their heads) was of but a prospective advantage, was there not something of a more immediate value to them in thus being allowed to look on one who was so far superior to the ordinary human creatures they saw around them? She formed an easy key to the few imaginative stories they were familiar with. Cinderella, for example: when they read how she fascinated the prince at the ball, and won all hearts and charmed all eyes, they could think of Miss Douglas, and eagerly understand. The Queen of Sheba, when she came in all her splendour: how were these shepherds' and keepers' and crofters' children to form any notion of her appearance but by regarding Miss Douglas in this beautiful and graceful attire of hers? In point of fact, her gown was but of plain black silk; but there was something about the manner of her wearing it that had an indefinable charm; and then she had a singularly neat collar and a pretty ribbon round her neck; and there were slender silver things gleaming at her wrists from time to time. Indeed, there was no saying for how many heroines of history or fiction Miss Meenie Douglas had unconsciously to herself to do duty—in the solitary communings of a summer day's herding, or during the dreary hours in which these hapless little people were shut up in some small, close, overcrowded parish church, supposing that they lived anywhere within half a dozen miles of such a building: now she would be Joan of Arc, or perhaps Queen Esther that was so surpassing beautiful, or Lord Ullin's daughter that was drowned within sight of Ulva's shores. And was it not sufficiently strange that the same magical creature, who represented to them everything that was noble and beautiful and refined and queen-like, should now be moving about amongst them, cutting cake for them, laughing, joking, patting this one or that on the shoulder, and apparently quite delighted to wait on them and serve them?

The introductory singing of the Old Hundredth Psalm was, it must be confessed, a failure. The large majority of the children present had never either heard or seen a piano; and when Meenie went to that strange-looking instrument (it

had been brought over from her mother's cottage with considerable difficulty), and when she sate down and struck the first deep resounding chords—and when Ronald, at his end of the table, led off the singing with his powerful tenor voice—they were far too much interested and awestruck to follow. Meenie sang, in her quiet clear way, and Maggie timidly joined in, but the children were silent. However, as has already been said, the restraint that was at first pretty obvious very soon wore off; the tea and cake were consumed amid much general hilarity and satisfaction; and when in due course the Chairman rose to deliver his address, and when Miss Douglas tapped on the table to secure attention, and also by way of applause, several of the elder ones had quite enough courage and knowledge of affairs to follow her example, so that the speaker may be said to have been received with favour.

And if there were any wise ones there, whose experience had taught them that tea and cake were but a snare to entrap innocent people into being lectured and sermonised, they were speedily reassured. The Chairman's address was mostly about starlings and jays and rabbits and ferrets and squirrels; and about the various ways of taming these, and teaching them; and of his own various successes and failures when he was a boy. He had to apologise at the outset for not speaking in the Gaelic; for he said that if he tried they would soon be laughing at him; he would have to speak in English; but if he mentioned any bird or beast whose name they did not understand, they were to ask him, and he would tell them the Gaelic name. And very soon it was clear enough that this was no lecture on the wanderings of the children of Israel, nor yet a sermon on justification by faith; the eager eyes of the boys followed every detail of the capture of the nest of young ospreys; the girls were like to cry over the untimely fate of a certain tame sparrow that had strayed within the reach—or the spring rather—of an alien cat; and general laughter greeted the history of the continued and uncalled-for mischiefs and evil deeds of one Peter, a squirrel but half reclaimed from its savage ways, that had cost the youthful naturalist much anxiety and vexation, and also not a little blood. There was, moreover, a dark and wild story of revenge—on an ill-conditioned cur that was the terror of the whole village, and was for ever snapping at girls' ankles and boys' legs—a most improper and immoral story to be told to young folks, though the boys seemed to think the ill-tempered beast got no more than it deserved. That small village, by the way, down there in the Lothians, seemed to have been a very remarkable place; the scene of the strangest exploits and performances on the part of terriers, donkeys, pet kittens, and tame jackdaws; haunted by curious folk, too, who knew all about bogles and kelpies and such uncanny creatures, and had had the most remarkable experiences of them (though modern science was allowed to come in here for a little bit, with its cold-blooded explanations of the supernatural). And

when, to finish up this discursive and apparently aimless address, he remarked that the only thing lacking in that village where he had been brought up, and where he had observed all these incidents and wonders, was the presence of a kind-hearted and generous young lady, who, on an occasion, would undertake all the trouble of gathering together the children for miles around, and would do everything she could to make them perfectly happy, they knew perfectly well whom he meant; and when he said, in conclusion, that if they knew of any such an one about here, in Inver-Mudal, and if they thought that she had been kind to them, and if they wished to show her that they were grateful to her for her goodness, they could not do better than give her three loud cheers, the lecture came to an end in a perfect storm of applause; and Meenie—blushing a little, and yet laughing—had to get up and say that she was responsible for the keeping of order by this assembly, and would allow no speech-making and no cheering that was not put down in the programme.

After this there was a service of raisins; and in the general quiet that followed Mr. Murray came into the room, just to see how things were going on. Now the innkeeper considered himself to be a man of a humorous turn; and when he went up to shake hands with Miss Douglas, and looked down the long table, and saw Ronald presiding at the other end, and her presiding at this, and all the children sitting so sedately there, he remarked to her in his waggish way—

'Well, now, for a young married couple, you have a very large family.'

But Miss Douglas was not a self-conscious young person, nor easily alarmed, and she merely laughed and said—

'I am sure they are a very well-behaved family indeed.'

But Ronald, who had not heard the jocose remark, by the way, objected to any one coming in to claim Miss Douglas's attention on so important an occasion; and in his capacity of Chairman he rose and rapped loudly on the table.

'Ladies and gentlemen,' he said, 'we're not going to have any idlers here the night. Any one that bides with us must do something. I call on Mr. Murray to sing his well-known song, "Bonnie Peggie, O."'

'Indeed no, indeed no,' the innkeeper said, instantly retreating to the door. 'There iss too many good judges here the night. I'll leave you to yourselfs; but if there's anything in the inn you would like sent over, do not be afraid to ask for it, Ronald. And the rooms for the children are all ready, and the beds; and we'll make them very comfortable, Miss Douglas, be sure of that now.'

'It's ower soon to talk about beds yet,' Ronald said, when the innkeeper had gone; and he drove home the wooden bolt of the door, so that no other interloper should get in. Meenie had said she wanted no outsiders present; that was enough.

And then they set about getting through the programme—the details of which need not be repeated here. Song followed song; when there was any pause

Meenie played simple airs on the piano; for 'The Cameraman's Dream,' when it came to her turn to read them something, she substituted 'The Pied Piper of Hamelin,' which was listened to with breathless interest. Even the little Maggie did her part in the 'Huntingtower' duet very creditably—fortified by the knowledge that there were no critics present. And as for the children, they had become quite convinced that there was to be no sermon; and that they were not to be catechised about their lessons, nor examined as to the reasons annexed to the Fourth Commandment; all care was gone from them; for the moment life was nothing but shortbread and raisins and singing, with admiration of Miss Douglas's beautiful hair and beautiful kind eyes and soft and laughing voice.

And then, as the evening wore on, it became time to send these young people to the beds that had been prepared for them at the inn; and of course they could not break up without singing 'Auld Lang Syne'—Meenie officiating at the piano, and all the others standing up and joining hands. And then she had to come back to the table to propose a vote of thanks to the Chairman. Well, she was not much abashed. Perhaps there was a little extra colour in her face at the beginning; and she said she had never tried to make a speech before; and, indeed, that now there was no occasion, for that all of them knew Ronald (so she called him, quite naturally), and knew that he was always willing to do a kindness when he was asked. And she said that he had done a great deal more than had been originally begged of him; and they ought all of them, including herself, to be very grateful to him; and if they wished to give him a unanimous vote of thanks, they were all to hold up their right hand—as she did. So that vote was carried; and Ronald said a few words in reply—mostly about Miss Douglas, in truth, and also telling them to whom they were indebted for the money found in each saucer. Then came the business of finding wraps for them and muffling them up ere they went out into the January night (though many a one there was all unused to such precautions, and wondered that Miss Douglas should be so careful of them), while Ronald, up at the head of the room, was playing them a parting salute on the pipes—*Caidil gu lo* it was, which means 'Sleep on till day.' Finally, when Maggie and Meenie were ushering their small charges through the darkness to the back-door of the inn, he found himself alone; and, before putting out the candles and fastening up, he thought he might as well have a smoke—for that solace had been denied him during the long evening.

Well, he was staring absently into the mass of smouldering peats, and thinking mostly of the sound of Meenie's voice as he had heard it when she sang with the children 'Whither, pilgrims, are you going?' when he heard footsteps behind him, and turning found that both Meenie and Maggie had come back.

'Ronald,' said Meenie, with her pretty eyes smiling at him, 'do you know that Maggie and I are rather tired——'

'Well, I dinna wonder,' said he.

'Yes, and both of us very hungry too. And I am sure there will be no supper waiting for either Maggie or me when we go home; and do you think you could get us some little thing now?'

'Here?' said he, with his face lighting up with pleasure: were those three to have supper all by themselves?

'Oh yes,' said she, in her friendly way. 'I am not sure that my mother would like me to stay at the inn for supper; but this is our own place; and the table laid; and Maggie and I would rather be here, I am sure. And you—are you not hungry too—after so long a time—I am sure you want something besides raisins and shortbread. But if it will be any trouble—

'Trouble or no trouble,' said he quickly, 'has nothing to do wi't. Here, Maggie, lass, clear the end of the table; and we'll soon get some supper for ye.'

And away he went to the inn, summoning the lasses there, and driving and hurrying them until they had arranged upon a large tray a very presentable supper—some cold beef, and ham, and cheese, and bread, and ale; and when the fair-haired Nelly was ready to start forth with this burden, he lit a candle and walked before her through the darkness, lest she should miss her footing. And very demure was Nelly when she placed this supper on the table; there was not even a look for the smart young keeper; and when Meenie said to her—

'I hear, Nelly, you had great goings-on on Monday night'—she only answered—'Oh yes, miss, there was that'—and could not be drawn into conversation, but left the moment she had everything arranged.

But curiously enough, when the two girls had taken their seats at this little cross table, Ronald remained standing—just behind them, indeed, as if he were a waiter. And would Miss Douglas have this? and would Miss Douglas have that? he suggested—mostly to cloak his shamefacedness; for indeed that first wild assumption that they were all to have supper together was banished now as an impertinence. He would wait on them, and gladly; but—but his own supper would come after.

'And what will you have yourself, Ronald?' Meenie asked.

'Oh,' said he, 'that will do by and by. I am not so hungry as you.'

'Did you have so much of the shortbread?' said she, laughing.

He went and stirred up the peats—and the red glow sent a genial warmth across towards them.

'Come, Ronald,' said the little Maggie, 'and have some supper.'

'There is no hurry,' he said evasively. 'I think I will go outside and have a pipe now; and get something by and by.'

'I am sure,' said Meenie saucily, 'that it is no compliment to us that you would rather go away and smoke. See, now, if we cannot tempt you.'

And therewith, with her own pretty fingers, she made ready his place at the table; and put the knife and fork properly beside the plate; and helped him to a slice of beef and a slice of ham; and poured some ale into his tumbler. Not only that, but she made a little movement of arranging her dress which was so obviously an invitation that he should there and then take a place by her, that it was not in mortal man to resist; though, indeed, after sitting down, he seemed to devote all his attention to looking after his companions. And very soon any small embarrassment was entirely gone; Meenie was in an unusually gay and merry mood—for she was pleased that her party had been so obviously a success, and all her responsibilities over. And this vivacity gave a new beauty to her face; her eyes seemed more kind than ever; when she laughed, it was a sweet low laugh, like the cooing of pigeons on a summer afternoon.

'And what are you thinking of, Maggie?' she said, suddenly turning to the little girl, who had grown rather silent amid this talking and joking.

'I was wishing this could go on for ever,' was the simple answer.

'What? A perpetual supper? Oh, you greedy girl! Why, you must be looking forward to the Scandinavian heaven——'

'No, it's to be with Ronald and you, Meenie dear—just like now—for you seem to be able to keep everybody happy.'

Miss Douglas did blush a little at this; but it was an honest compliment, and it was soon forgotten. And then, when they had finished supper, she said—

'Ronald, do you know that I have never played an accompaniment to one of your songs? Would you not like to hear how it sounds?

'But—but I'm not used to it—I should be putting you wrong——'

'No, no; I'm sure we will manage. Come along,' she said briskly. 'There is that one I heard you sing the other day—I heard you, though you did not see me—"Gae bring to me a pint o' wine, and fill it in a silver tassie; that I may drink, before I go, a service to my bonnie lassie"—and very proud she was, I suppose. Well, now, we will try that one.'

So they went to the other end of the barn, where the piano was; and there was a good deal of singing there, and laughing and joking—among this little party of three. And Meenie sang too—on condition (woman-like) that Ronald would light his pipe. Little Maggie scarcely knew which to admire the more—this beautiful and graceful young lady, who was so complaisant and friendly and kind, or her own brother, who was so handsome and manly and modest, and yet could do everything in the world. Nor could there have been any sinister doubt in that wish of hers that these three should always be together as they were then; how was she to know that this was the last evening on which Meenie Douglas and

Ronald were to meet on these all too friendly terms?

CHAPTER XI.
A REVELATION.

Early the next morning, when as yet the sunrise was still widening up and over the loch, and the faint tinge of red had not quite left the higher slopes of Clebrig, Ronald had already finished his breakfast, and was in his own small room, smoking the customary pipe, and idly—and with some curious kind of whimsical amusement in his brain—turning over the loose sheets of scribbled verses. And that was a very ethereal and imaginary Meenie he found there—a Meenie of lonely hillside wanderings—a Meenie of daydreams and visions: not the actual, light-hearted, shrewd-headed Meenie of the evening before, who was so merry after the children had gone, and so content with the little supper-party of three, and would have him smoke his pipe without regard to her pretty silk dress. This Meenie on paper was rather a wistful, visionary, distant creature; whereas the Meenie of the previous evening was altogether good-humoured and laughing, with the quaintest mother-ways in the management of the children, and always a light of kindness shining in her clear Highland eyes. He would have to write something to portray Meenie (to himself) in this more friendly and actual character. He could do it easily enough, he knew. There never was any lack of rhymes when Meenie was the occasion. At other things he had to labour—frequently, indeed, until, reflecting that this was not his business, he would fling the scrawl into the fire, and drive it into the peats with his heel, and go away with much content. But when Meenie was in his head, everything came readily enough; all the world around seemed full of beautiful things to compare with her; the birds were singing of her; the mountains were there to guard her; the burn, as it whispered through the rushes, or danced over the open bed of pebbles, had but the one continual murmur of Meenie's name. Verses? he could have written them by the score—and laughed at them, and burned them, too.

Suddenly the little Maggie appeared.

'Ronald,' she said, 'the Doctor's come home.'

'What—at this time in the morning?' he said turning to her.

'Yes, I am sure; for I can see the dog-cart at the door of the inn.'

'Well now,' said he, hastily snatching up his cap, 'that is a stroke of luck—if

he will come with us. I will go and meet him.'

But he need not have hurried so much; the dog-cart was still at the door of the inn when he went out; and indeed remained there as he made his way along the road. The Doctor, who was a most sociable person, had stopped for a moment to hear the news; but Mr. Murray happened to be there, and so the chat was a protracted one. In the meantime Ronald's long swinging stride soon brought him into their neighbourhood.

'Good morning, Doctor!' he cried.

'Good morning, Ronald,' said the other, turning round. He was a big man, somewhat corpulent, with an honest, wholesome, ruddy face, soft brown eyes, and an expressive mouth, that could temper his very apparent good-nature with a little mild sarcasm.

'You've come back in the nick of time,' the keeper said—for well he knew the Doctor's keen love of a gun. 'I'm thinking of driving some of the far tops the day, to thin down the hares a bit; and I'm sure ye'd be glad to lend us a hand.'

'Man, I was going home to my bed, to tell ye the truth,' said the Doctor; 'it's very little sleep I've had the last ten days.'

'What is the use of that?' said Ronald, 'there's aye plenty o' time for sleep in the winter.'

And then the heavy-framed occupant of the dog-cart glanced up at the far-reaching heights of Clebrig, and there was a grim smile on his mouth.

'It's all very well,' said he, 'for herring-stomached young fellows like you to face a hill like that; but I've got weight to carry, man; and—

'Come, come, Doctor; it's not the first time you've been on Clebrig,' Ronald said—he could see that Meenie's father wanted to be persuaded. 'Besides, we'll no try the highest tops up there—there's been too much snow. And I'll tell ye how we'll make it easy for ye; we'll row ye down the loch and begin at the other end and work home—there, it's a fair offer.'

It was an offer, at all events, that the big doctor could not withstand.

'Well, well,' said he, 'I'll just drive the dog-cart along and see how they are at home; and then if the wife lets me out o' her clutches, I'll come down to the loch side as fast as I can.'

Ronald turned to one of the stable-lads (all of whom were transformed into beaters on this occasion).

'Jimmy, just run over to the house and fetch my gun; and bid Maggie put twenty cartridges—number 4, she knows where they are—into the bag; and then ye can take the gun and the cartridge-bag down to the boat—and be giving her a bale-out till I come along. I'm going to the farm now, to get two more lads if I can; tell the Doctor I'll no be long after him, if he gets down to the loch first.'

Some quarter of an hour thereafter they set forth; and a rough pull it was

down the loch, for the wind was blowing hard, and the waves were coming broadside on. Those who were at the oars had decidedly the best of it, for it was bitterly cold; but even the others did not seem to mind much—they were chiefly occupied in scanning the sky-line of the hills (a habit that one naturally falls into in a deer country), while Ronald and the Doctor, seated in the stern, were mostly concerned about keeping their guns dry. In due course of time they landed, made their way through a wood of young birch-trees, followed the channel of a burn for a space, and by and by began to reach the upper slopes, where the plans for the first drive were carefully drawn out and explained.

Now it is unnecessary to enter into details of the day's achievements, for they were neither exciting nor difficult nor daring. It was clearly a case of shooting for the pot; although Ronald, in his capacity of keeper, was anxious to have the hares thinned down, knowing well enough that the over-multiplying of them was as certain to bring in disease as the overstocking of a mountain farm with sheep. But it may be said that the sport, such as it was, was done in a workmanlike manner. In Ronald's case, each cartridge meant a hare—and no praise to him, for it was his business. As for the Doctor, he was not only an excellent shot, but he exercised a wise and humane discretion as well. Nothing would induce him to fire at long range on the off-chance of hitting; and this is all the more laudable in the shooting of mountain hares, for these, when wounded, will frequently dodge into a hole among the rocks, like a rabbit, baffling dogs and men, and dying a miserable death. Moreover, there was no need to take risky shots. The two guns were posted behind a stone or small hillock—lying at full length on the ground, only their brown-capped heads and the long barrels being visible. Then the faint cries in the distance became somewhat louder—with sticks rattled on rocks, and stones flung here and there; presently, on the sky-line of the plateau, a small object appeared, sitting upright and dark against the sky; then it came shambling leisurely along—becoming bigger and bigger and whiter and whiter every moment, until at length it showed itself almost like a cat, but not running stealthily like a cat, rather hopping forward on its ungainly high haunches; and then again it would stop and sit up, its ears thrown back, its eyes not looking at anything in front of it, its snow-white body, with here and there a touch of bluish-brown, offering a tempting target for a pea-rifle. But by this time, of course, numerous others had come hopping over the sky-line; and now as the loud yells and shouts and striking of stones were close at hand, there was more swift running instead of hobbling and pausing among the white frightened creatures; and as they cared for nothing in front (in fact a driven hare cannot see anything that is right ahead of it, and will run against your boots if you happen to be standing in the way), but sped noiselessly across the withered grass and hard clumps of heather—bang! went the first barrel, and then another and another, as quick as

fingers could unload and reload, until here, there, and everywhere—but always within a certain radius from the respective posts—a white object lay on the hard and wintry ground. The beaters came up to gather them together; the two guns had risen from their cold quarters; there were found to be thirteen hares all told—a quite sufficient number for this part—and not one had crawled or hobbled away wounded.

But we will now descend for a time from these bleak altitudes and return to the little hamlet—which seemed to lie there snugly enough and sheltered in the hollow, though the wind was hard on the dark and driven loch. Some hour or so after the shooters and beaters had left, Meenie Douglas came along to Ronald's cottage, and, of course, found Maggie the sole occupant, as she had expected. She was very bright and cheerful and friendly, and spoke warmly of Ronald's kindness in giving her father a day's shooting.

'My mother was a little angry,' she said, laughing, 'that he should go away just the first thing after coming home; but you know, Maggie, he is so fond of shooting; and it is not always he can get a day, especially at this time of the year: and I am very glad he has gone; for you know there are very few who have to work so hard.'

'I wish they may come upon a stag,' said the little Maggie—with reckless and irresponsible generosity.

'Do you know, Maggie,' said the elder young lady, with a shrewd smile on her face, 'I am not sure that my mother likes the people about here to be so kind; she is always expecting my father to get a better post—but I know he is not likely to get one that will suit him as well with the fishing and shooting. There is the Mudal—the gentlemen at the lodge let him have that all the spring through; and when the loch is not let, he can always have a day by writing to Mr. Crawford; and here is Ronald, when the hinds have to be shot at Christmas, and so on. And if the American gentleman takes the shooting as well as the loch, surely he will ask my father to go with him a day or two on the hill; it is a lonely thing shooting by one's self. Well now, Maggie, did you put the curtains up again in Ronald's room?'

'Yes, I did,' was the answer, 'and he did not tear them down this time, for I told him you showed me how to hang them; but he has tied them back so that they might just as well not be there at all. Come and see, Meenie dear.'

She led the way into her brother's room; and there, sure enough, the window-curtains (which were wholly unnecessary, by the way, except from the feminine point of view, for there was certainly not too much light coming in by the solitary window) had been tightly looped and tied back, so that the view down the loch should be unimpeded.

'No matter,' said Meenie; 'the window is not so bare-looking as it used to

be. And I suppose he will let them remain up now.'

'Oh yes, when he was told that you had something to do with them,' was the simple answer.

Meenie went to the wooden mantelpiece, and put the few things there straight, just as she would have done in her own room, blowing the light white peat-dust off them, and arranging them in neater order.

'I wonder, now,' she said, 'he does not get frames for these photographs; they will be spoiled by finger marks and the dust.'

Maggie said shyly—

'That was what he said to me the other day—but not about these—about the one you gave me of yourself. He asked to see it, and I showed him how careful I was in wrapping it up; but he said no—the first packman that came through I was to get a frame if he had one, and glass too; or else that he would send it in to Inverness to be framed. But you know, Meenie, it's not near so nice-looking—or anything, anything like so nice-looking—as you are.'

'Nothing could be that, I am sure,' said Meenie lightly; and she was casting her eyes about the room, to see what further improvements she could suggest.

But Maggie had grown suddenly silent, and was standing at the little writing-table, apparently transfixed with astonishment. It will be remembered that when Ronald, in the morning, heard that the Doctor was at the door of the inn, he had hurriedly hastened away to intercept him; and that, subsequently, in order to save time, he had sent back a lad for his gun and cartridges, while he went on to the farm. Now it was this last arrangement that caused him to overlook the fact that he had left his writing materials—the blotting-pad and everything—lying exposed on the table; a piece of neglect of which he had scarcely ever before been guilty. And as ill-luck would have it, as Maggie was idly wandering round the room, waiting for Meenie to make any further suggestions for the smartening of it, what must she see lying before her, among these papers, but a letter, boldly and conspicuously addressed?

'Well!' she exclaimed, as she took it up. 'Meenie, here is a letter for you! why didna he send it along to you?'

'A letter for me?' Meenie said, with a little surprise. 'No! why should Ronald write a letter to me?—I see him about every day.'

'But look!'

Meenie took the letter in her hand; and regarded the address; and laughed.

'It is very formal,' said she. 'There is no mistake about it. "*Miss Wilhelmina Stuart Douglas*"—when was I ever called that before? And "*Inver-Mudal, Sutherlandshire, N.B.*" He should have added *Europe*, as if he was sending it from the moon. Well, it is clearly meant for me, any way—oh, and open too—'

The next minute all the careless amusement fled from her face; her cheeks

grew very white, and a frightened, startled look sprang to her eyes. She but caught the first few lines—

'O wilt thou be my dear love?
(Meenie and Meenie)
O wilt thou be my ain love?
(My sweet Meenie)?

and then it was with a kind of shiver that her glance ran over the rest of it; and her heart was beating so that she could not speak; and there was a mist before her eyes.

'Maggie,' she managed to say at length—and she hurriedly folded up the paper again and placed it on the table with the others—'I should not have read it—it was not meant for me—it was not meant that I should read it—come away, come away, Maggie.'

She took the younger girl out of the room, and herself shut the door, firmly, although her fingers were all trembling.

'Maggie,' she said, 'you must promise never to tell any one that you gave me that letter—that I saw it—–'

'But what is the matter, Meenie?' the smaller girl said in bewilderment, for she could see by the strange half-frightened look of Miss Douglas's face that something serious had happened.

'Well, it is nothing—it is nothing,' she forced herself to say. 'It will be all right. I shouldn't have read the letter—it was not meant for me to see—but if you say nothing about it, no harm will be done. That's all; that's all. And now I am going to see if the children are ready that are to go by the mail-car.'

'But I will go with you, Meenie.'

Then the girl seemed to recollect herself; and she glanced round at the interior of the cottage, and at the little girl, with an unusual kind of look.

'No, no, not this morning, Maggie,' she said. 'You have plenty to do. Good-bye—good-bye!' and she stooped and kissed her, and patted her on the shoulder, and left, seeming anxious to get away and be by herself.

Maggie remained there in considerable astonishment. What had happened? Why should she not go to help with the children? and why good-bye—when Meenie would be coming along the road in less than an hour, as soon as the mail-car had left? And all about the reading of something contained in that folded sheet of paper. However, the little girl wisely resolved that, whatever was in that letter, she would not seek to know it, nor would she speak of it to any one, since Meenie seemed so anxious on that point; and so she set about her domestic duties again—looking forward to the end of these and the resumption of

her knitting of her brother's jersey.

Well, the winter's day went by, and they had done good work on the hill. As the dusk of the afternoon began to creep over the heavens, they set out for the lower slopes on their way home; and very heavily weighted the lads were with the white creatures slung over their backs on sticks. But the dusk was not the worst part of this descent; the wind was now driving over heavy clouds from the north; and again and again they would be completely enveloped, and unable to see anywhere more than a yard from their feet. In these circumstances Ronald took the lead; the Doctor coming next, and following, indeed, more by sound than by sight; the lads bringing up in the wake in solitary file, with their heavy loads thumping on their backs. It was a ghostly kind of procession; though now and again the close veil around them would be rent in twain, and they would have a glimpse of something afar off—perhaps a spur of Ben Loyal, or the dark waters of Loch Meidie studded with its small islands. Long before they had reached Inver-Mudal black night had fallen; but now they were on easier ground; and at last the firm footing of the road echoed to their measured tramp, as the invisible company marched on and down to the warmth and welcome lights of the inn.

The Doctor, feeling himself something of a truant, went on direct to his cottage; but the others entered the inn; and as Ronald forthwith presented Mrs. Murray with half a dozen of the hares, the landlord was right willing to call for ale for the beaters, who had had a hard day's work. Nor was Ronald in a hurry to get home; for he heard that Maggie was awaiting him in the kitchen; and so he and Mr. Murray had a pipe and a chat together, as was their custom. Then he sent for his sister.

'Well, Maggie, lass,' said he, as they set out through the dark, 'did you see all the bairns safely off this morning?'

'No, Ronald,' she said, 'Meenie did not seem to want me; so I stayed at home.'

'And did you find Harry sufficient company for ye? But I suppose Miss Douglas came and stayed with ye for a while.'

'No, Ronald,' said the little girl, in a tone of some surprise; 'she has not been near the house the whole day, since the few minutes in the morning.'

'Oh,' said he, lightly, 'she may have been busy, now her father is come home. And ye maun try and get on wi' your lessons as well as ye can, lass, without bothering Miss Douglas too much; she canna always spend so much time with ye.'

The little girl was silent. She was thinking of that strange occurrence in the morning of which she was not to speak; and in a vague kind of way she could not but associate that with Meenie's absence all that day, and also with the unusual tone of her 'good-bye.' But yet, if there were any trouble, it would speedily pass

away. Ronald would put everything right. Nobody could withstand him—that was the first and last article of her creed. And so, when they got home, she proceeded cheerfully enough to stir up the peats, and to cook their joint supper in a manner really skilful for one of her years; and she laid the cloth; and put the candles on the table; and had the tea and everything ready. Then they sate down; and Ronald was in very good spirits, and talked to her, and tried to amuse her. But the little Maggie rather wistfully looked back to the brilliant evening before, when Meenie was with them; and perhaps wondered whether there would ever again be a supper-party as joyful and friendly and happy as they three had been when they were all by themselves in the big gaily-lit barn.

CHAPTER XII.

'WHEN SHADOWS FALL.'

The deershed adjoining the kennels was a gloomy place, with its bare walls, its lack of light, and its ominous-looking crossbeams, ropes, and pulley for hanging up the slain deer; and the morning was dark and lowering, with a bitter wind howling along the glen, and sometimes bringing with it a sharp smurr of sleet from the northern hills. But these things did not seem to affect Ronald's spirits much as he stood there, in his shirt-sleeves, and bare-headed, sorting out the hares that were lying on the floor, and determining to whom and to whom such and such a brace or couple of brace should be sent. Four of the plumpest he had already selected for Mrs. Douglas (in the vague hope that the useful present might make her a little more placable), and he was going on with his choosing and setting aside—sometimes lighting a pipe—sometimes singing carelessly—

'O we aft hae met at e'en, bonnie Peggie, O,
On the banks o' Cart sae green, bonnie Peggie, O,
Where the waters smoothly rin,
Far aneath the roarin' linn,
Far frae busy strife and din, bonnie Peggie, O'—

when the little Maggie came stealing in.

'Ronald,' she said, with an air of reproach, 'why are ye going about on such a morning without your jacket, and bare-headed, too?'

'Toots, toots, lassie, it's a fine morning,' said he indifferently.

'It was Meenie said I was not to let you do such foolish things,' the little lass ventured to say diffidently.

Of course this put a new aspect on the case, but he would not admit as much directly.

'Oh, well,' said he, 'if you bring me out my coat and bonnet I will put them on, for I'm going down to the Doctor's with two or three of the hares.'

And then she hesitated.

'Ronald,' said she, 'I will take them to Mrs. Douglas, if you like.'

'You?' said he.

'For I would give them to her with a nice message from you; and—and—if you take them, you will say nothing at all; and where is the compliment?'

He laughed.

'Ye're a wise little lass; but four big hares are heavy to carry—with the wind against ye; so run away and get me my coat and my Glengarry; and I will take them along myself, compliment or no compliment.'

However, as it turned out, Mrs. Douglas was not the first of the family he was fated to meet that morning. He had scarcely left the deershed when he perceived Meenie coming along the road; and this was an auspicious and kindly event; for somehow the day seemed to go by more smoothly and evenly and contentedly when he had chanced to meet Meenie in the morning, and have a few minutes' chat with her about affairs in general, and an assurance that all was going well with her. So he went forward to meet her with a light heart; and he thought she would be pleased that he was taking the hares to her mother; and perhaps, too, he considered that they might be a little more frank in their friendship after the exceeding good fellowship of the night of the children's party.

He went forward unsuspectingly.

'Good morning, Miss Douglas!' said he, slackening in his pace, for naturally they always stopped for a few seconds or minutes when they met thus.

But to his astonishment Miss Douglas did not seem inclined to stay. Her eyes were bent on the ground as she came along; she but timidly half lifted them as she reached him; and 'Good morning, Ronald!' she said, and would have passed on. And then it seemed as if, in her great embarrassment, she did not know what to do. She stopped; her face was suffused with red; and she said hurriedly—and yet with an effort to appear unconcerned—

'I suppose Maggie is at home?'

'Oh yes,' said he, and her manner was so changed that he also scarce knew what to say or to think.

And again she was going on, and again she lingered—with a sudden fear that she might be thought ungracious or unkind.

'The children all got away safely yesterday morning,' said she—but her eyes never met his; and there was still tell-tale colour in her cheeks.

'So I heard,' he answered.

'I am sure they must have enjoyed the evening,' she said, as if forcing herself to speak.

And then it suddenly occurred to him—for this encounter had been all too brief and bewildering for any proper understanding of it—that perhaps her mother had been reproving her for being too friendly with the people about the inn and with himself, and that he was only causing her embarrassment by detaining her, and so he said—

'Oh yes, I'm sure o' that. Well, good morning, Miss Douglas; I'm going along to give your mother these two or three hares.'

'Good morning,' said she—still without looking at him—and then she went.

And he, too, went on his way; but only for a brief space; presently he sate down on the low stone dyke by the roadside, and dropped the hares on the ground at his feet. What could it all mean? She seemed anxious to limit their acquaintanceship to the merest formalities; and yet to be in a manner sorry for having to do so. Had he unwittingly given her some cause of offence? He began to recall the minutest occurrences of the night of the children's party—wondering if something had then happened to account for so marked a change? But he could think of nothing. The supper-party of three was of her own suggestion; she could not be angry on that account. Perhaps he ought to have asked this person or that person over from the inn to join them, for the sake of propriety? Well, he did not know much about such matters; it seemed to him that they were very happy as they were; and that it was nobody else's business. But would she quarrel with him on that account? Or on account of his smoking in her presence? Again and again he wished that his pipe had been buried at the bottom of the loch; and indeed his smoking of it that evening had given him no enjoyment whatever, except in so far as it seemed to please her; but surely, in any case, that was a trifle? Meenie would not suddenly become cold and distant (in however reluctant a way) for a small matter like that? Nor could she be angry with him for taking her father away for a day on the hill; she was always glad when the Doctor got a day's shooting from anybody. No; the only possible conclusion he could come to was that Mrs. Douglas had more strongly than ever disapproved of Meenie's forming friendships among people not of her own station in life; and that some definite instructions had been given, which the girl was anxious to obey. And if that were so, ought he to make it any the more difficult for her? He would be as reserved and distant as she pleased. He knew that she was a very kindly and sensitive creature; and might dread giving pain; and herself suffer a good deal more than those from whom she was in a measure called upon to separate herself. That

was a reason why it should be made easy for her; and he would ask Maggie to get on with her lessons by herself, as much as she could; and when he met Miss Douglas on the road, his greeting of her would be of the briefest—and yet with as much kindness as she chose to accept in a word or a look. And if he might not present her with the polecat's skin that was now just about dressed?—well, perhaps the American gentleman's daughter would take it, and have it made into something, when she came up in March.

The pretty, little, doll-like woman, with the cold eyes and the haughty stare, was at the front-door of the cottage, scattering food to the fowls.

'I have brought ye two or three hares, Mrs. Douglas, if they're of any use to ye,' Ronald said modestly.

'Thank you,' said she, with lofty courtesy, 'thank you; I am much obliged. Will you step in and sit down for a few minutes?—I am sure a little spirits will do you no harm on such a cold morning.'

In ordinary circumstances he would have declined that invitation; for he had no great love of this domineering little woman, and much preferred the society of her big, good-natured husband; but he was curious about Meenie, and even inclined to be resentful, if it appeared that she had been dealt with too harshly. So he followed Mrs. Douglas into the dignified little parlour—which was more like a museum of cheap curiosities than a room meant for actual human use; and forthwith she set on the crimson-dyed table-cover a glass, a tumbler, a jug of water, and a violet-coloured bulbous glass bottle with an electro-plated stopper. Ronald was bidden to help himself; and also, out of her munificence, she put before him a little basket of sweet biscuits.

'I hear the Doctor is away again,' Ronald said—and a hundred times would he rather not have touched the violet bottle at all, knowing that her clear, cold, blue eyes were calmly regarding his every movement.

'Yes,' she said, 'to Tongue. There is a consultation there. I am sure he has had very little peace and quiet lately.'

'I am glad he had a holiday yesterday,' Ronald said, with an endeavour to be agreeable.

But she answered severely—

'It might have been better if he had spent the first day of his getting back with his own family. But that has always been his way; everything sacrificed to the whim of the moment—to his own likings and dislikings.'

'He enjoys a day's sport as much as any man I ever saw,' said he—not knowing very well what to talk about.

'Yes, I daresay,' she answered shortly.

Then she pushed the biscuits nearer him; and returned to her attitude of observation, with her small, neat, white hands crossed on her lap, the rings on

the fingers being perhaps just a little displayed.

'Miss Douglas is looking very well at present.' he said, at a venture.

'Williamina is well enough—she generally is,' she said coldly. 'There is never much the matter with her health. She might attend to her studies a little more and do herself no harm. But she takes after her father.'

There was a little sigh of resignation.

'Some of us,' said he good-naturedly, 'were expecting her to come over on Monday night to see the dancing.'

But here he had struck solid rock. In a second—from her attitude and demeanour—he had guessed why it was that Meenie had not come over to the landlord's party: a matter about which he had not found courage to question Meenie herself.

'Williamina,' observed the little dame, with a magnificent dignity, 'has other things to think of—or ought to have, at her time of life, and in her position. I have had occasion frequently of late to remind her of what is demanded of her; she must conduct herself not as if she were for ever to be hidden away in a Highland village. It will be necessary for her to take her proper place in society, that she is entitled to from her birth and her relatives; and of course she must be prepared—of course she must be prepared. There are plenty who will be willing to receive her; it will be her own fault if she disappoints them—and us, too, her own parents. Williamina will never have to lead the life that I have had to lead, I hope; she belongs by birth to another sphere; and I hope she will make the most of her chances.'

'Miss Douglas would be made welcome anywhere, I am sure,' he ventured to say; but she regarded him with a superior look—as if it were not for him to pronounce an opinion on such a point.

'Soon,' she continued—and she was evidently bent on impressing him, 'she will be going to Glasgow to finish in music and German, and to get on with her Italian: you will see she has no time to lose in idle amusement. We would send her to Edinburgh or to London, but her sister being in Glasgow is a great inducement; and she will be well looked after. But, indeed, Williamina is not the kind of girl to go and marry a penniless student; she has too much common sense; and, besides, she has seen how it turns out. Once in a family is enough. No; we count on her making a good marriage, as the first step towards her taking the position to which she is entitled; and I am sure that Lady Stuart will take her in hand, and give her every chance. As for their taking her abroad with them—and Sir Alexander almost promised as much—what better could there be than that?—she would be able to show off her acquirements and accomplishments; she would be introduced to the distinguished people at the ministerial receptions and balls; she would have her chance, as I say. And with such a chance before her,

surely it would be nothing less than wicked of her to fling away her time in idle follies. I want her to remember what lies before her; a cottage like this is all very well for-me—I have made my bed and must lie on it; but for her—who may even be adopted by Lady Stuart—who knows? for stranger things have happened—it would be downright madness to sink into content with her present way of life.'

'And when do you think that M— that Miss Douglas will be going away to Glasgow?' he asked—but absently, as it were, for he was thinking of Inver-Mudal, and Clebrig, and Loch Loyal, and Strath-Terry, and of Meenie being away from them all.

'That depends entirely on herself,' was the reply. 'As soon as she is sufficiently forward all round for the finishing lessons, her sister is ready to receive her.'

'It will be lonely for you with your daughter away,' said he.

'Parents have to make sacrifices,' she said. 'Yes, and children too. And better they should make them while they are young than all through the years after. I hope Williamina's will be no wasted life.'

He did not know what further to say; he was dismayed, perplexed, downhearted, or something: if this was a lesson she had meant to read him, it had struck home. So he rose and took his leave; and she thanked him again for the hares; and he went out, and found Harry awaiting him on the doorstep. Moreover, as he went down to the little gate, he perceived that Meenie was coming back—she had been but to the inn with a message; and, obeying some curious kind of instinct, he turned to the left—pretending not to have seen her coming; and soon he was over the bridge, and wandering away up the lonely glen whose silence is broken only by the whispering rush of Mudal Water.

He wandered on and on through the desolate moorland, on this wild and blustering day, paying but little heed to the piercing wind or the driven sleet that smote his eyelids. And he was not so very sorrowful; his common sense had told him all this before; Rose Meenie, Love Meenie, was very well in secret fancies and rhymes and verses; but beyond that she was nothing to him. And what would Clebrig do, and Mudal Water, and all the wide, bleak country that had been brought up in the love of her, and was saturated with the charm of her presence, and seemed for ever listening in deathlike silence for the light music of her voice? There were plenty of verses running through his head on this wild day too; the hills and the clouds and the January sky were full of speech; and they were all of them to be bereft of her as well as he:—

Mudal, that comes from the lonely loch,
Down through the moorland russet and brown,
Know you the news that we have for you?—

Meenie's away to Glasgow town.

See Ben Clebrig, his giant front
Hidden and dark with a sudden frown;
What is the light of the valley to him,
Since Meenie's away to Glasgow town?

Empty the valley, empty the world,
The sun may arise and the sun go down;
But what to do with the lonely hours,
Since Meenie's away to Glasgow town?

Call her back, Clebrig! Mudal, call.
Ere all of the young spring time be flown;
Birds, trees, and blossoms—you that she loved—
O summon her back from Glasgow town!

'*Call her back, Clebrig! Mudal, call!*' he repeated to himself as he marched along the moorland road; for what would they do without some one to guard, and some one to watch for, and some one to listen for, in the first awakening of the dawn? Glasgow—the great and grimy city—that would be a strange sort of guardian, in the young Spring days that were coming, for this fair Sutherland flower. And yet might not some appeal be made even there—some summons of attention, as it were?

O Glasgow town, how little you know
That Meenie has wandered in
To the very heart of your darkened streets,
Through all the bustle and din.

A Sutherland blossom shining fair
Amid all your dismal haze,
Forfeiting the breath of the summer hills,
And the blue of the northern days.

From Dixon's fire-wreaths to Rollox stalk,
Blow, south wind, and clear the sky,
Till she think of Ben Clebrig's sunny slopes,
Where the basking red-deer lie.

Blow, south wind, and show her a glimpse of blue
Through the pall of dusky brown;
And see that you guard her and tend her well,
You, fortunate Glasgow town!

But then—but then—that strange, impossible time—during which there would be no Meenie visible anywhere along the mountain roads; and Mudal Water would go by unheeded; and there would be no careless, clear-singing girl's voice along Loch Naver's shores—that strange time would surely come to an end, and he could look forward and see how the ending of it would be:

The clouds lay heavy on Clebrig's crest,
For days and weeks together;
The shepherds along Strath-Terry's side
Cursed at the rainy weather;
They scarce could get a favouring day
For the burning of the heather.

When sudden the clouds were rent in twain
And the hill laughed out to the sun;
And the hinds stole up, with wondering eyes,
To the far slopes yellow and dun;
And the birds were singing in every bush
As at spring anew begun,

O Clebrig, what is it that makes you glad,
And whither is gone your frown?
Are you looking afar into the south,
The long, wide strath adown?
And see you that Meenie is coming back—
Love Meenie, from Glasgow town!

He laughed. Not yet was Love Meenie taken away from them all. And if in the unknown future the Stuarts of Glengask and Orosay were to carry her off and make a great lady of her, and take her to see strange places, and perhaps marry her to some noble person, at least in the meantime Ben Clebrig and Ben Loyal and the wide straths between knew that they still held in the mighty hollow of their hand this sweet flower of Sutherlandshire, and that the world and the skies

and the woods and lakes seemed fairer because of her presence. And as regarded himself, and his relations with her? Well, what must be must. Only he hoped—and there was surely no great vanity nor self-love nor jealousy in so modest a hope—that the change of her manner towards him was due to the counsels of her mother rather than to anything he had unwittingly said or done. Rose Meenie—Love Meenie—he had called her in verses; but always he had been most respectful to herself; and he could not believe that she thought him capable of doing anything to offend her.

CHAPTER XIII.

A NEW ARRIVAL.

Very early one Sunday morning, while as yet all the world seemed asleep, a young lady stole out from the little hotel at Lairg, and wandered down by herself to the silent and beautiful shores of Loch Shin. The middle of March it was now, and yet the scene around her was quite summer-like; and she was a stranger from very far climes indeed, who had ventured into the Highlands at this ordinarily untoward time of the year; so that there was wonder as well as joy in her heart as she regarded the fairyland before her, for it was certainly not what she had been taught to expect. There was not a ripple on the glassy surface of the lake; every feature of the sleeping and faintly sunlit world was reflected accurately on the perfect mirror: the browns and yellows of the lower moorland; the faint purple of the birch-woods; the aerial blues of the distant hills, with here and there a patch of snow; and the fleecy white masses of the motionless clouds. It was a kind of dream-world—soft-toned and placid and still, the only sharp bit of colour being the scarlet-painted lines of a boat that floated double on that sea of glass. There was not a sound anywhere but the twittering of small birds; nor any movement but the slow rising into the air of a tiny column of blue smoke from a distant cottage; summer seemed to be here already, as the first light airs of the morning—fresh and clear and sweet—came stealing along the silver surface of the water, and only troubling the magic picture here and there in long trembling swathes.

The young lady was of middle height, but looked taller than that by reason of her slight and graceful form; she was pale, almost sallow, of face, with fine features and a pretty smile; her hair was of a lustrous black; and so, too, were

her eyes—which were large and soft and attractive. Very foreign she looked as she stood by the shores of this Highland loch; her figure and complexion and beautiful opaque soft dark eyes perhaps suggesting more than anything else the Spanish type of the Southern American woman; but there was nothing foreign about her attire; she had taken care about that; and if her jet-black hair and pale cheek had prompted her to choose unusual tones of colour, at all events the articles of her costume were all correct—the warm and serviceable ulster of some roughish yellow and gray material, the buff-coloured, gauntleted gloves, and the orange-hued Tam o' Shanter which she wore quite as one to the manner born. For the rest, one could easily see that she was of a cheerful temperament; pleased with herself; not over shy, perhaps; and very straightforward in her look.

However, the best description of this young lady was the invention of an ingenious youth dwelling on the southern shores of Lake Michigan.—'Carry Hodson,' he observed on one occasion, 'is just a real good fellow, that's what she is.' It was a happy phrase, and it soon became popular among the young gentlemen who wore English hats and vied with each other in driving phantom vehicles behind long-stepping horses. 'Carry Hodson?—she's just the best fellow going,' they would assure you. And how better can one describe her? There was a kind of frank *camaraderie* about her; and she liked amusement, and was easily amused; and she laboured under no desire at all of showing herself 'bright'—which chiefly reveals itself in impertinence; but, above all, there was in her composition not a trace of alarm over her relations, however frank and friendly, with the other sex; she could talk to any man—old or young, married or single—positively without wondering when he was about to begin to make love to her. For one thing, she was quite capable of looking after herself; for another, the very charm of her manner—the delightful openness and straightforwardness of it—seemed to drive flirtation and sham sentiment forthwith out of court. And if, when those young gentlemen in Chicago called Miss Carry Hodson 'a real good fellow,' they could not help remembering at the same time that she was an exceedingly pretty girl, perhaps they appreciated so highly the privilege of being on good-comrade terms with her that they were content to remain there rather than risk everything by seeking for more. However, that need not be discussed further here. People did say, indeed, that Mr. John C. Huysen, the editor of the *Chicago Citizen*, was more than likely to carry off the pretty heiress; if there was any truth in the rumour, at all events Miss Carry Hodson remained just as frank and free and agreeable with everybody—especially with young men who could propose expeditions and amusements.

Now there was only one subject capable of entirely upsetting this young lady's equanimity; and it is almost a pity to have to introduce it here; for the confession must be made that, on this one subject, she was in the habit of using very

reprehensible language. Where, indeed, she had picked up so much steamboat and backwoods slang—unless through the reading of *Texas Siftings*—it is impossible to say; but her father, who was about the sole recipient of these outbursts, could object with but little show of authority, for he was himself exceedingly fond, not exactly of slang, but of those odd phrases, sometimes half-humorous, that the Americans invent from day to day to vary the monotony of ordinary speech. These phrases are like getting off the car and running alongside a little bit; you reach your journey's end—the meaning of the sentence—all the same. However, the chief bugbear and grievance of Miss Carry Hodson's life was the Boston girl as displayed to us in fiction; and so violent became her detestation of that remarkable young person that it was very nearly interfering with her coming to Europe.

'But, pappa, dear,' she would say, regarding the book before her with some amazement, 'will the people in Europe think I am like *that*?'

'They won't think anything about you,' he would say roughly.

'What a shame—what a shame—to say American girls are like *that*!' she would continue vehemently. 'The self-conscious little beasts—with their chatter about tone, and touch, and culture! And the men—my gracious, pappa, do the people in England think that our young fellows talk like *that*? "Analyse me; formulate me!" he cries to the girl; "can't you imagine my environment by the aid of your own intuitions?"—I'd analyse him if he came to me; I'd analyse him fast enough: Nine different sorts of a born fool; and the rest imitation English prig. I'd formulate him if he came to me with his pretentious idiotcy; I'd show him the kind of chipmunk I am.'

'You are improving, Miss Carry,' her father would say resignedly. 'You are certainly acquiring force in your language; and sooner or later you will be coming out with some of it when you least expect it; and then whether it's you or the other people that will get fits I don't know. You'll make them jump.'

'No, no, pappa, dear,' she would answer good-naturedly; for her vehemence was never of long duration. 'I have my company manners when it is necessary. Don't I know what I am? Oh yes, I do. I'm a real high-toned North Side society lady; and can behave as sich—when there's anybody present. But when it's only you and me, pappa, I like to wave the banner a little—that's all.'

This phrase of hers, about waving the banner, had come to mean so many different things that her father could not follow half of them, and so it was handy in winding up a discussion; and he could only remark, with regard to her going to Europe, and her dread lest she should be suspected of resembling one of the imaginary beings for whom she had conceived so strong a detestation, that really people in Europe were as busy as people elsewhere, and might not show too absorbing an interest in declaring what she was like; that perhaps their knowledge

of the Boston young lady of fiction was limited, and the matter not one of deep concern; and that the best thing she could do was to remember that she was an American girl, and that she had as good a right to dress in her own way and speak in her own way and conduct herself in her own way as any French, or German, or English, or Italian person she might meet. All of which Miss Carry received with much submission—except about dress: she hoped to be able to study that subject, with a little attention, in Paris.

Well, she was standing there looking abroad on the fairy-like picture of lake and wood and mountain—and rather annoyed, too, that, now she was actually in the midst of scenes that she had prepared herself for by reading, she could recollect none of the reading at all, but was wholly and simply interested in the obvious beauty of the place itself—when she became conscious of a slow and stealthy footstep behind her, and, instantly turning, she discovered that a great dun-coloured dog, no doubt belonging to the hotel, had come down to make her acquaintance. He said as much by a brief and heavy gambol, a slow wagging of his mighty tail, and the upturned glance of his small, flat, leonine eyes.

'Well,' she said, 'who are you? Would you like to go for a walk?'

Whether he understood her or no he distinctly led the way—taking the path leading along the shores of the loch towards Inver-shin; and as there did not seem to be any sign yet of anybody moving about the hotel, she thought she might just as well take advantage of this volunteered escort. Not that the mastiff was over communicative in his friendliness; he would occasionally turn round to see if she was following; and if she called to him and spoke to him, he would merely make another heavy effort at a gambol and go on again with his slow-moving pace. Now and again a shepherd's collie would come charging down on him from the hillside, or two or three small terriers, keeping sentry at the door of a cottage, would suddenly break the stillness of the Sunday morning by the most ferocious barking at his approach; but he took no heed of one or the other.

'Do you know that you are an amiable dog—but not amusing?' she said to him, when he had to wait for her to let him get through a swinging stile. 'I've got a dog at home not a quarter as big as you, and he can talk twice as much. I suppose your thoughts are important, though. What do they call you? Dr. Johnson?'

He looked at her with the clear, lionlike eyes, but only for a second; seemed to think it futile trying to understand her; and then went on again with his heavy, shambling waddle. And she liked the freshness of the morning, and the novelty of being all alone by herself in the Scottish Highlands, and of going forward as a kind of pioneer and discoverer; and so she walked on in much delight, listening to the birds, looking at the sheep, and thinking nothing at all of breakfast, and the long day's drive before her father and herself.

And then a sudden conviction was flashed on her mind that something was wrong. There was a man coming rushing along the road after her—with neither coat nor cap on—and as he drew near she could hear him say—

'Ah, you rascal! you rascal! Bolted again?'

He seemed to pay no attention to her; he ran past her and made straight for the mastiff; and in a couple of minutes had a muzzle securely fastened on the beast, and was leading him back with an iron chain.

'Surely that is not a ferocious dog?' said she, as they came up—and perhaps she was curious to know whether she had run any chance of being eaten.

'The master had to pay five pounds last year for his worrying sheep—the rascal,' said the man; and the great dog wagged his tail as if in approval.

'Why, he seems a most gentle creature,' she said, walking on with the man.

'Ay, and so he is, miss—most times. But he's barely three years old, and already he's killed two collies and a terrier, and worried three sheep.'

'Killed other dogs? Oh, Dr. Johnson!' she exclaimed.

'He's sweirt[#] to begin, miss; but when he does begin he *maun* kill—there's no stopping him. The rascal! he likes fine to get slippin' away wi' one of the gentlefolks, if he's let off the chain for a few minutes—it's a God's mercy he has done no harm this morning—it was the ostler let him off the chain—and he'd have lost his place if there had been ony mair worrying.'

[#] *Sweirt*, reluctant.

'No, no, no, he would not,' she said confidently. 'I took the dog away. If any mischief had been done, I would have paid—why, of course.'

'*Why, of cois*' was what she really said; but all the man knew was that this American young lady spoke with a very pleasant voice; and seemed good-natured; and was well-meaning, too, for she would not have had the ostler suffer. Anyway, the mastiff, with as much dignity as was compatible with a muzzle and an iron chain, was conducted back to his kennel; and Miss Hodson went into the hotel, and expressed her profound sorrow that she had kept breakfast waiting; but explained to her father that it was not every morning she had the chance of exploring the Highlands all by herself—or rather accompanied by a huge creature apparently of amiable nature, but with really dark possibilities attached.

In due course of time the waggonette and horses were brought round to the door of the little hotel; their baggage was put in; and presently they had set forth on their drive through the still, sunlit, solitary country. But this was a far more pleasant journey than his first venturing into these wilds. He had been warning his daughter of the bleak and savage solitude she would have to encounter; but now it appeared quite cheerful—in a subdued kind of way, as if a sort of Sunday silence hung over the landscape. The pale blue waters of Loch Shin, the beech-woods, the russet slopes of heather, the snow-touched azure hills

along the horizon—all these looked pretty and were peacefully shining on this fair morning; and even after they had got away from the last trace of human habitation, and were monotonously driving through mile after mile of the wide, boggy, hopeless peatland, the winter colours were really brighter than those of summer, and the desolation far from overpowering. If they met with no human beings, there were other living objects to attract the eye. A golden plover—standing on a hillock not half a dozen yards off, would be calling to his mate; a wild duck would go whirring by; a red-plumed grouse-cock would cease dusting himself in the road, and would be off into the heather as they came along, standing and looking at them as they passed. And so on and on they went, mile after mile, along the fair shining Strath-Terry; the morning air blowing freshly about them; the sunlight lying placidly on those wide stretches of russet and golden bogland; and now and again a flash of dark blue showing where some mountain-tarn lay silent amid the moors.

'And you thought I should be disappointed, pappa dear?' said Miss Carry, 'or frightened by the loneliness? Why, it's just too beautiful for anything! And so this is where the Clan Mackay lived in former days?'

'Is it?' said her father. 'I wonder what they lived on. I don't think we'd give much for that land in Illinois. Give for it? You couldn't get a white man to trade for that sort of land; we'd have to ask Wisconsin to take it and hide it away somewhere.'

'What are those things for?' she asked, indicating certain tall poles that stood at intervals along the roadside.

'Why, don't you know? These are poles to tell them where the road is in snow time.'

'Then it is not always May in these happy latitudes?' she observed shrewdly.

He laughed.

'I heard some dreadful stories when I was here in January—but I don't believe much in weather stories. Anyhow, we've got to take what comes now; and so far there is not much to howl about.'

And at last they came in sight of the ruffled blue waters of Loch Naver; and the long yellow promontories running out into the lake; and the scant birch-woods fringing here and there the rocky shore; with the little hamlet of Inver-Mudal nestling down there in the hollow; and far away in the north the mountain-masses of Ben Hope and Ben Loyal struck white with snow. And she was very curious to see the kind of people who lived in these remote solitudes; and the pretty sloe-black eyes were all alert as the waggonette rattled along towards the two or three scattered houses; and perhaps, as they drove up to the inn, she was wondering whether Ronald the gamekeeper, of whom she had heard so much,

would be anywhere visible. But there was scarcely any one there. The Sabbath quiet lay over the little hamlet. Mr. Murray appeared, however,—in his Sunday costume, of course,—and an ostler; and presently Miss Carry and her father were in the sitting-room that had been prepared for them—a great mass of peats cheerfully blazing in the capacious fireplace, and the white-covered table furnished with a substantial luncheon.

'And what do you think of your future maid?' her father asked, when the pretty Nelly had left the room.

'Well, I think she has the softest voice I ever heard a woman speak with,' was the immediate answer. 'And such a pretty way of talking—and looking at you—very gentle and friendly. But she won't do for my maid, pappa; she's too tall; I should want to put a string round her neck and lead her about like a giraffe.'

However, she was pleased with the appearance and manner of the girl, and that was something; for, oddly enough, Mr. Hodson seemed to imagine that he had discovered this remote hamlet, and was responsible for it, and anxious that his daughter should think well of it, and of the people she might meet in it. He called her attention to the scent of the peat; to the neatness with which the joints on the table had been decorated with little paper frills; to the snugness and quiet of the sitting-room; to the spacious character of the views from the windows—one taking in Clebrig and the loch, the other reaching away up to Ben Loyal. All these things he had provided for her, as it were; and it must be said that she was a most excellent travelling-companion, always content, easily interested, never out of humour. So, when he proposed, after luncheon, that they should go along and call on Ronald Strang, she readily consented; no doubt a keeper's dwelling in these wilds would be something curious—perhaps of a wigwam character, and of course filled with all kinds of trophies of his hunting.

Well, they went along to the cottage, and Mr. Hodson knocked lightly on the door. There was no answer. He rapped a little more loudly; then they heard some one within; and presently the door was thrown open, and Ronald stood before them—a book in one hand, a pipe in the other, no jacket covering his shirt-sleeves, and the absence of any necktie showing a little more than was necessary of the firm set of his sun-tanned throat. He had been caught unawares—as his startled eyes proclaimed; in fact, he had been reading *Paradise Regained*, and manfully resisting the temptation to slip on to the gracious melody of *L'Allegro*, and *Il Penseroso*, and *Lycidas*; and when he heard the tapping he fancied it was merely one of the lads come for a chat or the last newspaper, and had made no preparations for the reception of visitors.

'How are you, Ronald?' said Mr. Hodson. 'I have brought my daughter to see you.'

'Will ye step in, sir?' said Ronald hastily, and with a terrible consciousness

of his untidy appearance. 'Ay, in there—will ye sit down for a few minutes—and will ye excuse me—I thought you werena coming till to-morrow—–'

'Well, I thought they might object to driving me on a Sunday. I can't make it out. Perhaps what I have read about Scotland is not true. Or perhaps they have altered of late years. Anyhow they made no objection, and here I am.'

In the midst of these brief sentences—each pronounced with a little rising inflexion at the end—Ronald managed to slip away and get himself made a little more presentable. When he returned the apparent excuse for his absence was that he brought in some glasses and water and a bottle of whisky; and then he went to a little mahogany sideboard and brought out a tin case of biscuits.

'You need not trouble about these things for us; we have just had lunch,' Mr. Hodson said.

'Perhaps the young lady—–?' said Ronald timidly, and even nervously, for there was no plate handy, and he did not know how to offer her the biscuits.

'Oh no, I thank you,' she said, with a pretty and gracious smile; and he happened to meet her eyes just at that time; and instantly became aware that they were curiously scrutinising and observant, despite their apparent softness and lustrous blackness.

Now Miss Carry Hodson had an abundance of shrewd feminine perception, and it was easy for her to see that this handsome and stalwart young fellow had been grievously disturbed, and was even now unnerved, through his having been caught in disarray on the occasion of a young lady visiting him; and accordingly, to allow him to recover, she deliberately effaced herself; saying not a word, nor even listening, while her father and he proceeded to talk about the salmon-fishing, and about the distressingly fine weather that threatened to interfere with that pursuit. She sate silent, allowing those observant eyes of hers to roam freely round the room, and indeed wondering how a man of his occupations could so have contrived to rob his home of all distinctive character and to render it so clearly common-place. There was nothing wild or savage about it; not the skin of any beast, nor the plumage of any bird; everything was of a bourgeois neatness and respectability—the ornaments on the mantel-shelf conspicuously so; and what was strangest of all—though this will scarcely be believed—the two roebucks' heads that adorned the wall, in a country where roe abound, were earthenware casts, and very bad casts too, obviously hailing from Germany. She observed, however, that there were a good many books about—some of them even piled in obscure corners; and to judge by the sober character of their cloth binding she guessed them to be of a rather superior class. The pictures on the walls were some cheap reprints of Landseer; a portrait of the Duke of Sutherland, in Highland garb; a view of Dunrobin Castle; and a photograph of Mr. Millais' 'Order of Release.'

After a while she began to know (without looking) that the young man had assumed sufficient courage to glance at her from time to time; and she allowed him to do that; for she considered that the people in Regent Street had fitted her out in Highland fashion in a sufficiently accurate way. But it soon appeared that he was talking about her; and what was this wild proposal?

'It seems a pity,' he was saying, 'if the fish are taking, not to have two boats at the work. And there's that big rod o' yours, sir—you could use that for the trolling; and let the young lady have one o' your grilse rods. Then there's mine—she can have that and welcome——'

'Yes, but the gillies——'

'Oh, I'll take a turn myself; I'm no so busy the now. And I can get one o' the lads to lend a hand.'

'Do you hear this, Carry?' her father said.

'What, pappa?'

'Ronald wants you to start off salmon-fishing to-morrow, in a boat all to yourself—

'Alone?'

'Why, no! He says he will go with you, and one of the lads; and you will have all the best advice and experience—I don't think it's fair, myself—but it's very good-natured anyhow——'

'And do you think there's a chance of my catching a salmon?' she said eagerly, and she turned her eloquent black eyes, all lit up with pleasure, full upon him.

'Oh yes, indeed,' said he, looking down, 'and many and many a one, I am sure, if we could only get a little wet weather.'

'My!' she exclaimed. 'If I caught a salmon, I'd have it stuffed right away——'

'With sage and onions, I suppose,' her father said severely.

'And we begin to-morrow? Why, it's just too delightful—I was looking forward to days and days indoors, with nothing but books. And I shall really have a chance?——'

'I think you might as well thank Ronald for his offer,' her father said. 'I should never have thought of it.'

Well, she hesitated; for it is a difficult thing to make a formal little speech when it is asked for by a third person; but the young keeper quickly laughed away her embarrassment.

'No, no, sir; we'll wait for that till we see how our luck turns out. And we'll have the Duke's boat, mind, that Duncan says is the lucky one; you'll have to look sharp, sir, or we'll have the biggest show on the grass at the end of the day.'

Mr. Hodson now rose to take his leave, for he wanted his daughter to walk

down to the shores of the loch where they were next day to begin their labours. And thus it was that Miss Carry—who had looked forward at the most to sitting in the boat with her father and looking on—found herself pledged to a course of salmon-fishing, under the immediate guidance and instruction of the young keeper; and she had noticed that he had already talked of the occupants of the Duke's boat as 'we'—assuming that he and she were in a sort of partnership, and pitted against the others. Well, it would be amusing, she thought. She also considered that he was very good-looking; and that it would be pleasanter to have a companion of that kind than a surly old boatman. She imagined they might easily become excellent friends—at least, she was willing enough; and he seemed civil and good-humoured and modest; and altogether the arrangement promised to work very well.

CHAPTER XIV.

'ABOUT ILLINOIS.'

There was a good deal of bustle in the inn next morning; Ronald busy with the fishing-tackle for the second boat; luncheon being got ready for six; and the gillies fighting as to which party should have the landing-net and which the clip. In the midst of all this Miss Carry—looking very smart in her Highland costume, Tam o' Shanter and all—came placidly in to breakfast, and as she sate down she said—

'Pappa dear, I met such a pretty girl.'

'Have you been out?' he asked.

'Only as far as the bridge. I met her as I was coming back. And she looked so pretty and shy that I spoke to her; I think she was a little frightened at first; but anyway I got to know who she is—the Doctor's daughter. Oh, you should hear her speak—the accent is so pretty and gentle. Well, it's all settled, pappa; I'm just in love with the Highland people, from this out.'

'There's safety in numbers,' observed her father grimly; and then he proceeded to explore the contents of the covers.

When they were ready to go down to the loch they found that the men had already set out—all but Ronald, who had remained behind to see if there was nothing further he could carry for the young lady. So these three started together; and of course all the talk was about the far too fine weather, and the chances of

getting a fish or two in spite of it, and the betting on the rival boats. Miss Carry listened in silence; so far she had heard or seen nothing very remarkable about the handsome young keeper who had so impressed her father. He spoke frankly and freely enough, it is true (when he was not speaking to her), and he was recounting with some quiet sarcasm certain superstitious beliefs and practices of the people about there; but, apart from the keen look of his eyes, and the manly ring of his voice, and the easy swing of the well-built figure, there was nothing, as she considered, very noticeable about him. She thought his keeper's costume rather picturesque, and weather-worn into harmonious colour; and wondered how men in towns had come to wear the unsightly garments of these present days. And so at last they arrived at the loch; and found that the gillies had got the rods fixed and everything ready; and presently the black boat, with Mr. Hodson and his two gillies, was shoved off, and Ronald, before asking the young lady to step into the green boat—the Duke's boat—was showing her what she should do if a salmon should attach itself to either of the lines.

'I don't feel like catching a salmon somehow,' she remarked. 'I don't think it can be true. Anyway you'll see I shan't scream.'

She stepped into the boat and took her seat; the rods were placed for her; the coble was shoved farther into the water, and then Ronald and the young lad got in and took to the oars. Miss Carry was bidden to pay out one of the lines slowly as they moved away from the bank; and in due course she had both lines out and the two rods fixed at the proper angle, and the reels free. She obeyed all his instructions without haste or confusion. She was a promising pupil. And he wondered what nerve she would show when the crisis came.

Now it may be explained for the benefit of those inexperienced in such things that these fishing cobles have a cross bench placed about midway between the stern and the thwart occupied by the stroke oar; and the usual custom is for the fisherman to sit on this bench facing the stern, so that he can see both rods and be ready for the first shaking of the top. But Miss Carry did not understand this at all. In entering the coble she naturally took her place right astern, facing the rowers. It never entered her head to be guilty of the discourtesy of turning her back on them; besides, Ronald was directing her with his eyes as much as with his speech, and she must be able to see him; moreover he did not tell her she was sitting the wrong way; and then again was not the first signal to be the shrieking of the reel?—and both reels were now under her observation, so that she could snatch at either rod in a second. The consequence of all this was that she and Ronald sate face to face—not more than a yard and a half between them—their eyes exactly on a level—and when they spoke to each other, it was very distinctly *unter vier Augen*, for the boy at the bow was mostly hidden.

'Pappa dear,' she said to her father that evening, 'he is a very nervous man.'

'Who?'

'Ronald.'

'Nonsense. He is hard as nails. He don't know what nerves mean.'

'He is a very nervous man,' she insisted (and had she not been studying him for a whole day?). 'His eyes throb when you meet them suddenly. Or rather he seems to know they are very powerful and penetrating—and he does not like to stare at you—so you can see there is a tremor of the lid sometimes as he looks up—as if he would partly veil his eyes. It's very curious. He's shy—like a wild animal almost. And that pretty girl I met this morning has something of that look too.'

'Perhaps they're not used to having the cold gaze of science turned on them,' her father remarked drily.

'Is that me?'

'You may take it that way.'

'Then you're quite wrong. It isn't science at all. It is an active and benevolent sympathy; I am going to make friends with every one of them. Ronald says her name is Miss Douglas—and I mean to call.'

'Very well, then,' said her father, who left this young lady pretty much the mistress of her own actions.

However, to return to the fishing: the morning did not promise well, the weather being too bright and clear, though there was a very fair breeze—of a curious sultry character for the middle of March—blowing up from the south and making a good ripple on the loch. Again and again the two boats crossed each other; and the invariable cry was—

'Nothing yet?'

And the answer—

'Not a touch.'

By this time Miss Carry had got to know a good deal about the young keeper whose eyes were so directly on a level with hers. He had been to Aberdeen, and to Glasgow, and to Edinburgh; but never out of Scotland?—no. Had he no wish to see London and Paris? Had he no wish to see America?—why, if he came over, her father would arrange to have him put in the way of seeing everything. And perhaps he might be tempted to stay?—there were such opportunities for young men, especially in the west. As for her, she was most communicative about herself; and apparently she had been everywhere and seen everything—except Stratford-on-Avon: that was to be the climax; that was to be the last thing they should visit in Europe—and then on to Liverpool and home. She had been a great deal longer in Europe than her father, she said. Her mother was an invalid and could not travel; her brother George (Joidge, she called him) was at school; so she and a schoolfellow of hers had set out for Europe, accompanied

by a maid and a courier, and had 'seen most everything' from St. Petersburg to Wady Halfa. And all this and more she told him with the black soft eyes regarding him openly; and the pale, foreign, tea-rose tinted face full of a friendly interest; and the pretty, white, delicate small fingers idly intertwisting the buff-coloured gloves that she had taken off at his request. Inver-Mudal, Clebrig, Ben Loyal, the straths and woods around looked to him small and confined on this quiet morning. She seemed to have brought with her a wider atmosphere, a larger air. And for a young girl like this to know so much—to have seen so much—and to talk so simply and naturally of going here, there, or anywhere, as if distance were nothing, and time nothing, and money nothing; all this puzzled him not a little. She must have courage, then, and daring, and endurance, despite the pale face and the slender figure, and the small, white, blue-veined hands? Why, she spoke of running over to Paris, in about a fortnight's time, to be present at the wedding of a friend, just as any one about here would speak of driving on to Tongue and returning by the mail-cart next day.

Suddenly there was a quick, half-suppressed exclamation.

'There he is!—there he is!'

And all in a second, as it seemed, Ronald had flung his oar back to the lad behind, seized one of the rods and raised it and put it in her hands, and himself got hold of the other, and was rapidly reeling in the line. What was happening she could hardly tell—she was so bewildered. The rod that she painfully held upright was being violently shaken—now and again there was a loud, long whirr of the reel—and Ronald was by her shoulder, she knew, but not speaking a word—and she was wildly endeavouring to recall all that he had told her. Then there was a sudden slackening of the line—what was this?

'All right,' said he, very quietly. 'Reel in now—as quick as ye can, please.'

Well, she was reeling in as hard as her small and delicate wrist was able to do—and in truth she was too bewildered to feel excited; and above all other earthly things was she anxious that she shouldn't show herself a fool, or scream, or let the thing go—when all at once the handle of the reel seemed to be whipped from her grasp; there was a long whirring shriek of the line; she could hear somewhere a mighty splash (though she dared not look at anything but what was in her hands), and at the same moment she fancied Ronald said, with a quiet laugh—

'We've beat them this time—a clean fish!'

'Do you think we'll get him?' she said breathlessly.

'We'll hold on to him as long as he holds on to us,' Ronald said; and she heard him add to himself, 'I would rather than five shillings we got the first fish!'

'But this thing is so heavy!' she pleaded.

'Never mind—that's right—that's right—keep a good strain on him—we'll soon bring him to his senses.'

Again there was a sudden slackening of the line; and this time she actually saw the animal as it sprang into the air—a white gleaming curved thing—but instantly her attention was on the reel.

'That's it—you're doing fine,' he said, with an intentional quietude of tone, so that she might not get over-nervous and make a mistake.

Then he made her stand up, and fortunately the coble was rocking but little; and he moved her left hand a little higher up the rod, so that she should have better leverage; and she did all that she was bid mutely and meekly, though her arm was already beginning to feel the heavy strain. She vowed to herself that so long as she could draw a breath she would not give in.

The other boat was passing—but of course at a respectful distance.

'Hold on to him, Carry!' her father called.

She paid no heed. She dared not even look in his direction. The fish seemed to be following up the coble now, and it was all that the slender wrist could do to get in the line so as to keep the prescribed curve on the rod. And then she had to give way again; for the salmon went steadily and slowly down—boring and sulking—and they pulled the boat away a bit, lest he should suddenly come to the surface and be after some dangerous cantrip. She took advantage of this period of quiet to pass the rod from her left hand to her right; and that relieved her arm a little; and she even ventured to say—

'How long is he going on like this?'

'We'll give him his own time, Miss,' Ronald said.

'Don't call me Miss,' she said, with a little vexation.

'I—I beg your pardon—what then?'

'Oh, anything you like. Mind you catch me if I fall into the water.'

The truth was she was a little bit excited, and desperately anxious that her strength should hold out; and even permitting herself an occasional gleam of hope and joy and triumph. Her first salmon? Here would be tidings for the girls at home! If only the beast would do something—or show signs of yielding—anything rather than she should have to give in, and weakly resign the rod to Ronald! As for him, he stood almost touching her shoulder.

'No, no,' said he, 'there's no fear o' your falling into the water. We've got to get this gentleman out first.'

And then her feeble efforts at talking (meant to show that she was not excited, but having exactly the contrary effect) all went by the board. Something was happening—she knew not what—something wild, terrifying, violent, desperate—and apparently quite near—and all the line was slack now—and the handle of the reel stuck in her frantic efforts to turn it with an impossible quickness—and her heart was choking with fright. For why would this beast spring, and splash, and churn the water, while the line seemed to go all wrong

and everything become mixed? But her trembling fingers got the reel to work at last; and she wound as quickly as she could; and by this time the salmon had disappeared again, and was bearing an even, dead strain on the rod, but not so heavily as before.

'My gracious!' she said—she was quite breathless.

'It's all right,' he said quietly; but he had been pretty breathless too, and for several seconds in blank despair.

The fish began to show signs of yielding—that last fierce thrashing of the water had weakened him. She got in more and more line—Ronald's instructions being of the briefest and quietest—and presently they could see a faint gleam in the water as the big fish sailed this way or that. But still, she knew not what he might not do. That terrible time had been altogether unexpected. And yet she knew—and her left arm was gratefully conscious—that the strain was not so heavy now; the line was quite short; and she became aware that she was exercising more and more power over her captive and could force him to stop his brief and ineffectual rushes.

Once or twice he had come quite near the boat—sailing in on his side, as it were—and then sheering off again at the sight of them; but these efforts to get away were growing more and more feeble; and at last Ronald called—

'We'll try him this time—give him the butt well—that's right—lift his head—now——' and then there was a quick stroke of the clip, and the great monster was in the boat, and she sank down on to the bench, her arms limp and trembling, but her hand still grasping the rod. And she felt a little inclined to laugh and to cry; and she wondered where her father was; and she looked on in a dazed way as they killed the fish, and got the phantom-minnow out of its mouth, and proceeded to the weighing of the prize.

'Eleven pounds and a half—well done the Duke's boat!' Ronald cried. 'Is it your first salmon, Miss Hodson?'

'Why, certainly.'

'You'll have to drink its health, or there'll be no more luck for you this season,' said he, and he reached back for a pocket-flask.

'But where is my father?' she said—she was anxious he should hear the news.

'Oh,' said he coolly, 'they've been into a fish for the last ten minutes; I wouldna tell ye, in case it might distract ye.'

'Have they got one?' she cried.

'They've got something—and I dinna think it's a kelt from the way they're working.'

She clapped her hands in delight. Yes, and that involuntary little action revealed to her what she had not known before—that one of her fingers was

pretty badly cut, and bleeding.

'What's this?' she said, but she did not heed much—now that the great beautiful gleaming fish lay in the bottom of the boat.

Ronald cared a great deal more. He threw aside the flask. A cut?—it was his own stupidity was the cause of it; he ought to have known that her delicate fingers could not withstand the whirring out of the line; he should have allowed her to keep on her gloves. And nothing would do but that she must carefully bathe the wound in the fresh water of the loch; and he produced a piece of plaster; and then he cut a strip off her handkerchief, and bound up the finger so.

'What do I care?' she said—pointing to the salmon.

And then he begged her to drink a little whisky and water—for luck's sake—though he had been rather scornful about these customs in the morning; and she complied—smiling towards him as the Netherby bride may have looked at Young Lochinvar; but yet he would not drink in her presence; he put the flask aside; and presently they were at their work again, both lines out, and the southerly breeze still keeping up.

They passed the other boat.

'What weight?' was the cry.

'Eleven and a half. Have you got one?'

'Yes.'

'How much?'

'Just over seven.'

'Duncan will be a savage man,' said Ronald, with a laugh. 'It's all the bad luck of his boat, he'll be saying; though it's good enough luck for the two first fish to be clean fish and no kelt.'

However, the Duke's boat fell away from its auspicious beginning that morning. When lunch time arrived, and both cobles landed at a part of the shore agreed upon, where there was a large rock for shelter, and a good ledge for a seat, Miss Carry had but the one fish to be taken out and placed on the grass, while her father had two—respectively seven and thirteen pounds. And very picturesque, indeed, it was to see those white gleaming creatures lying there; and the two boats drawn up on the shore, with the long rods out at the stern; and the gillies forming a group at some distance off under the shelter of the stone dyke; and the wide waters of the lake all a breezy blue in the cup of the encircling sunlit hills. Ronald got out the luncheon, for he had seen to the packing of it—and he knew more about table-napkins and things of that sort than those men; and then, when he had made everything right, and brought ashore a cushion for Miss Carry to sit upon, and so forth, he went away.

'Ronald,' Mr. Hodson called to him, 'ain't you going to have some lunch?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Come along, then; there's plenty of room right here.'

'Thank ye, sir; I know where they've put my little parcel,' said he—and he went and sate down with the gillies; and soon there was enough talking and laughing amongst them—faintly heard across the wind.

'Well?' said her father, when they were left alone.

'Oh, it's just too delightful for anything.'

This was her summing up of the whole situation. And then she added—

'Pappa, may I send my salmon to Lily Selden?'

'I wouldn't call it kindness,' said he. 'Looks more like boasting. And what's the good, since she is staying at a hotel?'

'Oh, she will be as glad as I am even to see it. But can't they cook it at a hotel anyway? I want to be even with Lily about that balloon. I don't see much myself in going up in a balloon. I would just like to have Lily here now—think she wouldn't fall down and worship those beautiful creatures?'

'Well, you may send her yours, if you like,' her father said. 'But you needn't dawdle so over your luncheon. These days are short; and I want to see what we can do on our first trial.'

'I'm ready now, if it comes to that,' said she placidly; and she put a couple of sweet biscuits in her pocket, to guard against emergency.

And soon they were afloat again. But what was this that was coming over the brief winter afternoon? The sultry south wind did not die away, nor yet did any manifest clouds appear in the heavens, but a strange gloom began to fill the skies, obscuring the sun, and gradually becoming darker and darker. It was very strange; for, while the skies overhead were thus unnaturally black, and the lapping water around the boats similarly livid, the low-lying hills at the horizon were singularly keen and intense in colour. The air was hot and close, though the breeze still came blowing up Strath-Terry. There was a feeling as if thunder were imminent, though there were no clouds anywhere gathering along the purple mountain-tops.

This unusual darkness seemed to affect the fishing. Round after round they made—touching nothing but one or two kelts; and this Ronald declared to be a bad sign, for that when the kelts began to take, there was small chance of a clean fish. However, Miss Carry did not care. She had caught her first salmon—that was enough. Nay, it was sufficient to make her very cheerful and communicative; and she told him a good deal about her various friends in the Garden City—but more especially, as it seemed to the respectful listener, of the young men who, from a humble beginning, had been largely successful in business; and she asked him many questions about himself, and was curious about his relations with Lord Ailine. Of course, she went on the assumption that the future of the world lay in America, and that the future of America lay in the bountiful lap of Chicago:

and she half intimated that she could not understand how any one could waste his time anywhere else. Her father had been born in a log-cabin; but if he—that is, Ronald—could see the immense blocks devoted to 'Hodson's reaper' 'on Clinton and Canal Streets' he would understand what individual enterprise could achieve out west. The 'manifest destiny' of Chicago loomed large in this young lady's mind; the eastern cities were 'not in it,' so to speak; and Ronald heard with reverence of the trade with Montana, and Idaho, and Wyoming, and Colorado, and Utah, and Nevada. It is true that she was recalled from this imparting of information by a twenty-five minutes' deadly struggle with a creature that turned out after all to be a veritable clean salmon: and with this triumph ended the day's sport; for the afternoon was rapidly wearing to dusk. The gloom of the evening, by the way, was not decreased by a vast mass of smoke that came slowly rolling along between the black sky and the black lake; though this portentous thing—that looked as if the whole world were on fire—meant nothing further than the burning of the heather down Strath-Terry way. When both cobles were drawn up on the beach, it was found that Mr. Hodson had also added one clean salmon to his score; so that the five fish, put in a row on the grass, made a very goodly display, and were a sufficiently auspicious beginning.

'Carry,' said her father, as they walked home together in the gathering darkness, 'do you know what you are expected to do? You have caught your first salmon: that means a sovereign to the men in the boat.'

'I will give a sovereign to the young fellow,' said she, 'and willingly; but I can't offer money to Ronald.'

'Why not? it is the custom here.'

'Oh, I declare I couldn't do it. My gracious, no! I would sooner—I would sooner—no, no, pappa dear, I could not offer him money.'

'Well, we must do something. You see, we are taking up all his time. I suppose we'll have to send for another gillie—if you care to go on with that boat—'

'I should think I did!' she said. 'But why should you send for another gillie so long as Ronald says he is not busy? I dare say he can tell us when he is; I don't believe he's half so shy as he looks. And he's much better fun than one of these Highlanders; he wants his own way; and, with all his shyness, he has a pretty good notion of himself and his own opinions. He don't say you are a fool if you differ from him; but he makes you feel like it. And then, besides,' she added lightly, 'we can make it up to him some way or other. Why, I have been giving him a great deal of good advice this afternoon.'

'You? About what?'

'About Illinois,' she said.

CHAPTER XV.
WILD TIMES.

What that mysterious gloom had meant on the previous evening was revealed to them the next morning by a roaring wind that came swooping down from the Clebrig slopes, shaking the house, and howling through the bent and leafless trees. The blue surface of the lake was driven white with curling tips of foam; great bursts of sunlight sped across the plains and suddenly lit up the northern hills; now and again Ben Hope or Ben Hee or Ben Loyal would disappear altogether behind a vague mass of gray, and then as quickly break forth again into view, the peaks and shoulders all aglow and the snow-patches glittering clear and sharp. The gillies hung about the inn door, disconsolate. Nelly made no speed with the luncheon-baskets. And probably Mr. Hodson and his daughter would have relapsed into letter-writing, reading, and other feeble methods of passing a rough day in the Highlands, had not Ronald come along and changed the whole aspect of affairs. For if the wind was too strong, he pointed out, to admit of their working the phantom-minnow properly, they might at least try the fly. There were occasional lulls in the gale. It was something to do. Would Miss Hodson venture? Miss Hodson replied by swinging her waterproof on her arm; and they all set out.

Well, it was a wild experiment. At first, indeed, when they got down to the shores of the loch, the case was quite hopeless; no boat—much less a shallow flat-bottomed coble—could have lived in such a sea; and they merely loitered about, holding themselves firm against the force of the wind, and regarding as best they might the savage beauty of the scene around them—the whirling blue and white of the loch, the disappearing and reappearing hills, the long promontories suddenly become of a vivid and startling yellow, and then as suddenly again steeped in gloom. But Miss Carry was anxious to be aboard.

'We should only be driven across to the shore yonder,' Ronald said; 'or maybe capsized.'

'Oh, but that would be delightful,' she remarked instantly. 'I never had my life saved. It would read very well in the papers.'

'Yes, but it might end the other way,' her father interposed. 'And then I

don't see where the fun would come in—though you would get your newspaper paragraph all the same.'

Ronald had been watching the clouds and the direction of the squalls on the loch; there was some appearance of a lull.

'We'll chance it now,' he said to the lad; and forthwith they shoved the boat into the water, and arranged the various things.

Miss Carry was laughing. She knew it was an adventure. Her father remonstrated; but she would not be hindered. She took her seat in the coble, and got hold of the rod; then they shoved off and jumped in; and presently she was paying out the line, to which was attached a 'silver doctor' about as long as her forefinger. Casting, of course, was beyond her skill, even had the wind been less violent; there was nothing for it but to trail the fly through these rushing and tumbling and hissing waves.

And at first everything seemed to go well enough—except that the coble rolled in the trough of the waves so that every minute she expected to be pitched overboard. They were drifting down the wind; with the two oars held hard in the water to retard the pace; and the dancing movement of the coble was rather enjoyable; and there was a kind of fierceness of sunlight and wind and hurrying water that fired her brain. These poor people lingering on the shore—what were they afraid of? Why, was there ever anything so delightful as this—the cry of the wind and the rush of the water; and everything around in glancing lights and vivid colours; for the lake was not all of that intense and driven blue, it became a beautiful roseate purple where the sunlight struck through the shallows on the long banks of ruddy sand. She would have waved her cap to those poor forlorn ones left behind, but that she felt both hands must be left free in case of emergency.

But alas! that temporary lull in which they had started was soon over. A sharper squall than any before came darkening and tearing across the loch; then another and another; until a downright gale was blowing, and apparently increasing every moment in violence. Whither were they drifting? They dared not run the coble ashore; all along those rocks a heavy sea was breaking white; they would have been upset and the boat stove in in a couple of minutes.

'This'll never do, Johnnie, lad,' she heard Ronald call out. 'We'll have to fight her back, and get ashore at the top.'

'Very well; we can try.'

And then the next moment all the situation of affairs seemed changed. There was no longer that too easy and rapid surging along of the coble, but apparently an effort to drive her through an impassable wall of water; while smash after smash on the bows came the successive waves, springing into the air, and coming down on the backs of the men with a rattling volley of spray. Nay, Miss

Carry, too, got her Highland baptism—for all her crouching and shrinking and ducking; and her laughing face was running wet; and her eyes—which she would not shut, for they were fascinated with the miniature rainbows that appeared from time to time in the whirling spray—were half-blinded. But she did not seem to care. There was a fierce excitement and enjoyment in the struggle—for she could see how hard the men were pulling. And which was getting the better of the fight—this firm and patient endeavour, or the fell power of wind and hurrying seas?

And then something happened that made her heart stand still: there was a shriek heard above all the noise of the waves—and instinctively she caught up the rod and found the line whirling out underneath her closed fingers. What was it Ronald had exclaimed? 'Oh, thunder!' or some such thing; but the next moment he had called to her in a warning voice—

'Sit still—sit still—don't move—never mind the fish—let him go—he'll break away with the fly and welcome.'

But it seemed to him cowardly advice too; and she one behind her father in the score. He sent a glance forward in a kind of desperation: no, there was no sign of the squall moderating, and they were a long way from the head of the loch. Moreover, the salmon, that was either a strong beast or particularly lively, had already taken out a large length of line, in the opposite direction.

'Do you think,' said he hurriedly, 'you could jump ashore and take the rod with you, if I put you in at the point down there?'

'Yes, yes!' she said, eagerly enough.

'You will get wet.'

'I don't care a cent about that—I will do whatever you say——'

He spoke a few words to the lad at the bow; and suddenly shifted his oar thither.

'As hard as ye can, my lad.'

And then he seized the rod from her, and began reeling in the line with an extraordinary rapidity, for now they were drifting down the loch again.

'Do ye see the point down there, this side the bay?'

'Yes.'

'There may be a little shelter there; and we're going to try to put ye ashore. Hold on to the rod, whatever ye do; and get a footing as fast as ye can.'

'And then?' she said. 'What then? What am I to do?'—for she was rather bewildered—the water still blinding her eyes, the wind choking her breath.

'Hold on to the rod—and get in what line ye can.'

All this wild, rapid, breathless thing seemed to take place at once. He gave her the rod; seized hold of his oar again, and shifted it; then they seemed to be turning the bow of the boat towards a certain small promontory where some

birch trees and scattered stones faced the rushing water. What was happening—or going to happen—she knew not; only that she was to hold on to the rod; and then there was a sudden grating of the bow on stones—a smash of spray over the stern—the coble wheeled round—Ronald had leapt into the water—and, before she knew where she was, he had seized her by the waist and swung her ashore—and though she fell, or rather slipped and quietly sat down on some rocks, she still clung to the rod, and she hardly had had her feet wet! This was what she knew of her own position; as for Ronald and the lad, they paid no further heed to her, for they were seeking to get the coble safe from the heavy surge; and then again she had her own affairs to attend to; for the salmon, though it was blissfully sulking after the first long rushes, might suddenly make up its mind for cantrips.

Then Ronald was by her side again—rather breathless.

'You've still got hold of him?—that's right—but give him his own time—let him alone—I don't want him in here among the stones in rough water like this.'

And then he said, rather shamefacedly—

'I beg your pardon for gripping ye as I had to do—I—I thought we should have been over—and you would have got sorely wet.'

'Oh, that's all right,' she said—seeking in vain amid the whirling waste of waters for any sign or glimpse of the salmon. 'But you—you must be very wet—why did you jump into the water?'

'Oh, that's nothing—there, let him go!—give him his own way!—now, reel in a bit—quicker—quicker—that'll do, now.'

As soon as she had got the proper strain on the fish again, she held out her right hand.

'Pull off my glove, please,' she said—but still with her eyes intent on the whirling waves.

Well, he unbuttoned the long gauntlet—though the leather was all saturated with water; but when he tried the fingers, he could not get them to yield at all; so he had to pull down the gauntlet over the hand, and haul off the glove by main force—then he put it in his pocket, for there was no time to waste on ceremony.

There was a sudden steady pull on the rod; and away went the reel.

'Let him go—let him go—ah, a good fish, and a clean fish too! I hope he'll tire himself out there, before we bring him in among the stones.'

Moreover, the gale was abating somewhat, though the big waves still kept chasing each other in and springing high on the rocks. She became more eager about getting the fish. Hitherto, she had been rather excited and bewildered, and intent only on doing what she was bid; now the prospect of really landing the salmon had become joyful.

'But how shall we ever get him to come in here?' she said.

'He's bound to come, if the tackle holds; and I'm thinking he's well hooked,

or he'd been off ere now, with all this scurrying water.'

She shifted the rod to her right hand; her left arm was beginning to feel the continued strain.

'Has the other boat been out?' she asked.

'No, no,' said he, and then he laughed. 'It would be a fine thing if we could take back a good fish. I know well what they were thinking when we let the boat drift down the second time—they were thinking we had got the line aground, and were in trouble. And now they canna see us—it's little they're thinking that we're playing a fish.'

'We' and 'us' he said quite naturally; and she, also, had got into the way of calling him Ronald—as every one did.

Well, that was a long and a stiff fight with the salmon; for whenever it found that it was being towed into the shallows, away it went again, with rush on rush, so that Miss Carry had her work cut out for her, and had every muscle of her arms and back aching.

'Twenty pounds, you'll see,' she heard the lad Johnnie say to his companion; and Ronald answered him—

'I would rather than ten shillings it was.'

Twenty pounds! She knew that this was rather a rarity on this loch—ten or eleven pounds being about the average; and if only she could capture this animal—in the teeth of a gale too—and go back to the others in triumph, and also with another tale to tell to Lily Selden! She put more and more strain on; she had both hands firm on the butt; her teeth were set hard. Twenty pounds! Or if the hook should give way? Or the line be cut on a stone? Or the fish break it with a spring and lash of its tail? Fortunately she knew but little of the many and heart-rending accidents that happen in salmon-fishing, so that her fears were fewer than her hopes; and at last her heart beat quickly when she saw Ronald take the clip in his hand.

But he was very cautious; and bade her take time; and spoke in an equable voice—just as if she were not growing desperate, and wondering how long her arms would hold out! Again and again, by dint of tight reeling up and putting on a deadly strain, she caught a glimpse of the salmon; and each of these times she thought she could guide it sailingly towards the spot where Ronald was crouching down by the rocks; and then again it would turn and head away and disappear—taking the line very slowly now, but still taking it. She took advantage of one of these pauses in the fight to step farther back some two or three yards; this was at Ronald's direction; and she obeyed without understanding. But soon she knew the reason; for at last the salmon seemed to come floating in without even an effort at refusal; and as she was called on to give him the butt firmly, she found she could almost drag him right up and under Ronald's arm. And then there was

a loud 'hurrah!' from the lad John as the big silver fish gleamed in the air; and the next second it was lying there on the withered grass and bracken. Miss Carry, indeed, was so excited that she came near to breaking the top of the rod; she forgot that the struggle was over; and still held on tightly.

'Lower the top, Miss,' the lad John said, 'or ye can put the rod down altogether.'

Indeed he took it from her to lay it down safely, and right glad was she; for she was pretty well exhausted by this time, and fain to take a seat on one of the rocks while they proceeded to weigh the salmon with a pocket-scale.

'Seventeen pounds—and a beauty: as pretty a fish as ever I saw come out of the loch.'

'Well, we've managed it, Ronald,' said she, laughing, 'but I don't know how. There he is—sure; but how we got him out of that hurricane I can't tell.'

'There was twice I thought ye had lost him,' said he gravely. 'The line got desperately slack after ye jumped ashore——'

'Jumped ashore?' she said. 'Seems to me I was flung ashore, like a sack of old clothes.'

'But ye were not hurt?' said he, glancing quickly at her.

'No, no; not a bit—nor even wet; and if I had been, *that* is enough for anything.'

'Johnnie, lad, get some rushes, and put the fish in the box. We'll have a surprise for them when we get back, I'm thinking.'

'And can we get back?' she said.

'We'll try, anyway—oh yes—it's no so bad now.'

But still it was a stiff pull; and they did not think it worth while to put out the line again. Miss Carry devoted her whole attention to sheltering herself from the spray; and was fairly successful. When, at length, they reached the top of the loch and landed, they were treated to a little mild sarcasm from those who had prudently remained on shore; but they said nothing; the time was not yet come.

Then came the question as to whether all of them could pull down the opposite side of the loch to the big rock; for there they would have shelter for lunch; while here in the open every gust that swooped down from the Clebrig slopes caught them in mid career. Nay, just then the wind seemed to moderate; so they made all haste into the cobles; and in due time the whole party were landed at the rock, which, with its broad ledges for seats, and its overhanging ferns, formed a very agreeable and sheltered resort. Of course, there was but the one thing wanting. A fishing party at lunch on the shores of a Highland loch is a very picturesque thing; but it is incomplete without some beautiful silver-gleaming object in the foreground. There always is a bit of grass looking as if it were just meant for that display; and when the little plateau is empty, the picture

lacks its chief point of interest.

'Well, you caught something if it wasn't a salmon,' her father said, glancing at her dripping hat and hair.

'Yes, we did,' she answered innocently.

'You must be wet through in spite of your waterproof. Sometimes I could not see the boat at all for the showers of spray. Did you get much shelter where you stopped?'

'Not much—a little.'

'It was a pretty mad trick, your going out at all. Of course Ronald only went to please you; he must have known you hadn't a ghost of a chance in a gale like that.'

'Pappa dear,' said she, 'there's nothing mean about me. There's many a girl I know would play it on her pa; but I'm not one of that kind. When I have three kings and a pair—

'Stop it, Carry,' said he angrily, 'I'm tired of your Texas talk. What do you mean?'

'I only want to show my hand,' she said sweetly; and she called aloud—'Johnnie!'

The young lad jumped up from the group that were cowering under the shelter of the stone dyke.

'Bring the fish out of the boat, please.'

He went down to the coble, and got the salmon out of the well; and then, before bringing it and placing it on the grass before the young lady, he held it up in triumph for the gillies to see: the sarcasm was all the other way now.

'You see, pappa dear, you would have bet your boots against it, wouldn't you?' she remarked.

'But where did you get it?' he said, in amazement. 'I was watching your boat all the time. I did not see you playing a fish.'

'Because we got ashore as fast as we could, and had the fight out there. But please, pappa, don't ask me anything more than that. I don't know what happened. The wind was choking me, and I was half-blind, and the stones were slippery and moving, and—and everything was in a kind of uproar. Perhaps you don't think I did catch the salmon. If my arms could speak, they could tell you a different tale just at this minute; and I shall have a back to-morrow morning, I know that. Seventeen pounds, Ronald says; and as prettily shaped a fish as he has ever seen taken out of the lake.'

'He is a handsome fish,' her father admitted; and then he looked up impatiently at the wind-driven sky. 'There is no doubt there are plenty of fish in the lake, if the weather would only give us a chance. But it's either a dead calm or else a raging gale. Why, just look at that!'

For at this moment a heavier gust than ever struck down on the water—and widened rapidly out—and tore the tops of the waves into spray—until a whirling gray cloud seemed to be flying over to the other shores. The noise and tumult of the squall were indescribable; and then, in five or six minutes or so, the loch began to reappear again, black and sullen, from under that mist of foam; and the wind subsided—only to keep moaning and howling as if meditating further springs. There was not much use in hurrying lunch. The gillies had comfortably lit their pipes. Two of the younger lads were trying their strength and skill at 'putting the stone;' the others merely lay and looked on; an occasional glance at the loch told them they need not stir.

It was not jealousy of his daughter having caught a fish that made Mr. Hodson impatient; it was the waste of time. He could not find refuge in correspondence; he had no book with him; while gazing at scenery is a feeble substitute for salmon-fishing, if the latter be your aim. And then again the loch was very tantalising—awaking delusive hopes every few minutes. Sometimes it would become almost quiet—save for certain little black puffs of wind that fell vertically and widened and widened out; and they would be on the point of summoning the men to the cobles when, with a low growl and then a louder roar, the gale would be rushing down again, and the storm witches' white hair streaming across the suddenly darkened waters.

'"Ben Clebrig—the Hill of the Playing Trout,"' said he peevishly. 'I don't believe a word of it. Why, the Celtic races were famous for giving characteristic names to places—describing the things accurately. "The Hill of the Playing Trout!" Now, if they had called it "The Hill of the Infernal Whirlwinds," or "The Hill of Blasts and Hurricanes," or something of that kind, it would have been nearer the mark. And this very day last year, according to the list that Ronald has, they got nine salmon.'

'Perhaps we may get the other eight yet, pappa,' said she lightly.

And indeed, shortly after this, the day seemed to be getting a little quieter; and her father decided upon a start. The men came along to the coble. Ronald said to her—

'We will let them get well ahead of us; it's their turn now.' And so he and she and the lad John remained on the shore, looking after the departing boat, and in all sincerity wishing them good luck.

Presently she said, 'What's that?'—for something had struck her sharply on the cheek. It was a heavy drop of rain, that a swirl of wind had sent round the side of the rock; and now she became aware that everywhere beyond their shelter there was a loud pattering, becoming every moment heavier and heavier, while the wind rose and rose into an ominous high screeching. And then all round there was a hissing and a roar and from under the rock she looked forth on the most

extraordinary phantasmagoria—for now the sheets of rain as they fell and broke on the water were caught by the angry mountain blasts and torn into spindrift, so that the whole lake seemed to be a mass of white smoke. And her father?—well, she could see something like the ghost of a boat and two or three phantom figures; but whether they were trying to fight their way, or letting everything go before the tempest, or what, she could not make out—for the whirling white rain-smoke made a mere spectral vision of them. Ronald came to her.

'That's bad luck,' said he composedly.

'What?' she asked, quickly. 'They are not in danger?'

'Oh no,' said he. 'But they've got both minnows aground, as far as I can make out.'

'But what about that? why don't they throw the rods and everything overboard, and get into safety?'

'Oh, they'll try to save the minnows, I'm thinking.'

And they did succeed in doing so—after a long and strenuous struggle; and then Mr. Hodson was glad to have them row him back to the shelter of the rock. Apparently his success with regard to the minnows had put him into quite a good humour.

'Carry,' said he, 'I'm not an obstinate man—I know when I've got enough. I will allow that this battle is too much for me. I'm going home. I'm going to walk.'

'Then I will go with you, pappa,' she said promptly.

'You may stay if you choose,' said he. 'You may stay and take my share as well as your own. But I'm going to see what newspapers the mail brought this morning; and there may be letters.'

'And I have plenty to do also,' said she. 'I mean to call on that pretty Miss Douglas I told you of—the Doctor's daughter. And do you think she would come along and dine with us?—or must I ask her mother as well?'

'I don't know what the society rules are here,' he answered. 'I suspect you will have to find out.'

'And Ronald—do you think he would come in and spend the evening with us? I can't find out anything about him—it's all phantom-minnows and things when he is in the boat.'

'Well, I should like that too,' said he: for he could not forsake the theories which he had so frequently propounded to her.

And so they set forth for the inn, leaving the men to get the boats back when they could; and after a long and brave battling with rain and wind they achieved shelter at last. And then Miss Carry had to decide what costume would be most appropriate for an afternoon call in the Highlands—on a day filled with pulsating hurricanes. Her bodice of blue with its regimental gold braid she might

fairly adopt—for it could be covered over and protected; but her James I. hat with its gray and saffron plumes she had to discard—she had no wish to see it suddenly whirling away in the direction of Ben Loyal.

CHAPTER XVI.
DREAMS AND VISIONS.

Miss Hodson was in no kind of anxiety or embarrassment about this visit; she had quite sufficient reliance on her own tact; and when, going along to the Doctor's cottage, she found Meenie alone in that little room of hers, she explained the whole situation very prettily and simply and naturally. Two girls thrown together in this remote and solitary place, with scarcely any one else to talk with; why should they not know each other? That was the sum and substance of her appeal; with a little touch here and there about her being a stranger, and not sure of the ways and customs of this country that she found herself in. And then Meenie, who was perhaps a trifle overawed at first by this resplendent visitor, was almost inclined to smile at the notion that any apology was necessary, and said in her gentle and quiet way—

'Oh, but it is very kind of you. And if you had lived in one or two Scotch parishes, you would know that the minister's family and the doctor's family are supposed to know every one.'

She did not add 'and be at every one's disposal'—for that might have seemed a little rude. However, the introduction was over and done with; and Miss Carry set herself to work to make herself agreeable—which she could do very easily when she liked. As yet she kept the invitation to dinner in the background; talked of all kinds of things—the salmon-fishing, the children's soirée she had heard of; Ronald; Ronald's brother the minister; and her wonder that Ronald should be content with his present position; and always those bright dark eyes seemed to be scanning everything in the room with a pleased curiosity, and then again and again returning to Meenie's face, and her dress, and her way of wearing her hair, with a frank scrutiny which made the country mouse not a little shy in the presence of this ornate town mouse. For Miss Carry, with her upper wrappings discarded, was not only very prettily attired, but also she had about her all kinds of nick-nacks and bits of finery that seemed to have come from many lands, and to add to her foreign look. Of course, a woman's glance—even the glance of a

shy Highland girl—takes note of these things; and they seemed but part of the unusual character and appearance of this stranger, who seemed so delicate and fragile, and yet was full of an eager vivacity and talkativeness, and whose soft, large, black eyes, if they seemed to wander quickly and restlessly from one object to another, were clearly so full of kindness and a wish to make friends. And very friendly indeed she was; and she had nothing but praise for the Highlands, and Highland scenery, and Highland manners, and even the Highland accent.

'I suppose I have an accent myself; but of course I don't know it,' she rattled on. 'Even at home they say our western accent is pretty bad. Well, I suppose I have got it; but anyway I am not ashamed of it, and I am not in a hurry to change it. I have heard of American girls in Europe who were most afraid to speak lest they should be found out—-found out! Why, I don't see that English girls try to hide their accent, or want to copy any one else; and I don't see why American girls should be ashamed of having an American accent. Your accent, now; I have been trying to make out what it is, but I can't. It is very pretty; and not the least like the English way of talking; but I can't just make out where the difference is.'

For this young lady had a desperately direct way of addressing any one. She seemed to perceive no atmosphere of conventionality between person and person; it was brain to brain, direct; and no pausing to judge of the effect of sentences.

'I know my mother says that I speak in the Highland way,' Meenie said, with a smile.

'There now, I declare,' said Miss Hodson, 'that did not sound like an English person speaking, and yet I could not tell you where the difference was. I really think it is more manner than accent. The boatmen and the girls at the inn—they all speak as if they were anxious to please you.'

'Then it cannot be a very disagreeable accent,' said Meenie, laughing in her quiet way.

'No, no; I like it. I like it very much. Ronald now, has nothing of that; he is positive and dogmatic—I would say gruff in his way of talking, if he was not so obliging. But he is very obliging and good-natured; there is just nothing he won't do for us—and we are perfect strangers to him.'

And so she prattled on, apparently quite satisfied that now they were good friends; while Meenie had almost forgotten her shyness in the interest with which she listened to this remarkable young lady who had been all over the world and yet took her travelling so much as a matter of course. Then Miss Hodson said—

'You know my father and I soon exhaust our remarks on the events of the day when we sit down to dinner; and we were wondering whether you would take pity on our solitude and come along and dine with us this evening. Will you? I wish you would—it would be just too kind of you.'

Meenie hesitated.

'I would like very well,' said she, 'but—but my mother and the lad have driven away to Tongue to fetch my father home—and it may be late before they are back—–'

'The greater reason why you should come—why, to think of your sitting here alone! I will come along for you myself. And if you are afraid of having too much of the star-spangled banner, we'll get somebody else in who is not an American; I mean to ask Ronald if he will come in and spend the evening with us—or come in to dinner as well, if he has time—–'

Now the moment she uttered these words she perceived the mistake she had made. Meenie all at once looked troubled, conscious, apprehensive—there was a touch of extra colour in her face: perhaps she was annoyed that she was betraying this embarrassment.

'I think some other night, if you please,' the girl said, in a low voice, and with her eyes cast down, 'some other night, when mamma is at home—I would like to ask her first.'

'Class distinctions,' said Miss Carry to herself, as she regarded this embarrassment with her observant eyes. 'Fancy class distinctions in a little community like this—in mid-winter too! Of course the Doctor's daughter must not sit down to dinner with Lord Ailine's head keeper.'

But she could not offer to leave Ronald out—that would but have added to the girl's confusion, whatever was the cause of it. She merely said lightly—

'Very well, then, some other evening you will take pity on us—and I hope before I go to Paris. And then I want you to let me come in now and again and have a cup of tea with you; and I get all the illustrated periodicals sent me from home—with the fashion-plates, you know.'

She rose.

'What a nice room—it is all your own, I suppose?'

'Oh yes; that is why it is so untidy.'

'But I like to see a room look as if it was being used. Well, now, what are these?' she said, going to the mantel-shelf, where a row of bottles stood.

'These are medicines.'

'Why, you don't look sick,' the other said, turning suddenly.

'Oh no. These are a few simple things that my father leaves with me when he goes from home—they are for children mostly—and the people have as much faith in me as in anybody,' Meenie said, with a shy laugh. 'Papa says I can't do any harm with them, in any case; and the people are pleased.'

'Hush, hush, dear, you must not tell me any secrets of that kind,' said Miss Carry gravely; and then she proceeded to get on her winter wraps.

Meenie went downstairs with her, and at the door would see that she was

all properly protected and buttoned up about the throat.

'For it is very brave of you to come into Sutherlandshire in the winter,' said she; 'we hardly expect to see any one until the summer is near at hand.'

'Then you will let me come and have some tea with you at times, will you not?'

'Oh yes—if you will be so kind.'

They said good-bye and shook hands; and then Miss Carry thought that Meenie looked so pretty and so shy, and had so much appealing gentleness and friendliness in the clear, transparent, timid blue-gray eyes, that she kissed her, and said 'Good-bye, dear,' again, and went out into the dusk and driving wind of the afternoon, entirely well pleased with her visit.

But it seemed as though she were about to be disappointed in both directions; for when she called in at Ronald's cottage he was not there; and when she returned to the inn, he was not to be found, nor could any one say whither he had gone. She and her father dined by themselves. She did not say why Meenie had declined to come along and join them; but she had formed her own opinion on that point; and the more she thought of it, the more absurd it seemed to her that this small handful of people living all by themselves in the solitude of the mountains should think it necessary to observe social distinctions. Was not Ronald, she asked herself, fit to associate with any one? But then she remembered that the Highlanders were said to be very proud of their descent; and she had heard something about Glengask and Orosay; and she resolved that in the future she would be more circumspect in the matter of invitations.

About half-past eight or so the pretty Nelly appeared with the message that Ronald was in the inn, and had heard that he was being asked for.

'What will I tell him ye want, sir?' she said, naturally assuming that Ronald was to be ordered to do something.

'Give him my compliments,' said Mr. Hodson, 'and say we should be obliged if he would come in and smoke a pipe and have a chat with us, if he has nothing better to do.'

But Nelly either thought this was too much politeness to be thrown away on the handsome keeper, or else she had some small private quarrel with him; for all she said to him, and that brusquely, was—

'Ronald, you're wanted in the parlour.'

Accordingly, when he came along the passage, and tapped at the door and opened it, he stood there uncertain, cap in hand. And Mr. Hodson had to repeat the invitation—explaining that they had wanted him to have some dinner with them, but that he could not be found; and then Ronald, with less of embarrassment than might have been expected—for he knew these two people better now—shut the door, and laid down his cap, and modestly advanced to the chair

that Mr. Hodson had drawn in towards one side of the big fireplace. Miss Carry was seated apart on a sofa, apparently engaged in some sort of knitting work; but her big black eyes could easily be raised when there was need, and she could join in the conversation when she chose.

At first that was mostly about the adjacent shooting, which Mr. Hodson thought of taking for a season merely by way of experiment; and the question was how long he would in that case have to be away from his native country. This naturally took them to America, and eventually and alas! to politics—which to Miss Carry was but as the eating of chopped straw. However, Mr. Hodson (if you could keep the existence of lords out of his reach) was no very violent polemic; and moreover, whenever the Bird of Freedom began to clap its wings too loudly, was there not on the sofa there a not inattentive young lady to interfere with a little gentle sarcasm? Sometimes, indeed, her interpositions were both uncalled for and unfair; and sometimes they were not quite clearly intelligible. When, for example, they were talking of the colossal statue of Liberty enlightening the World which the French Republic proposed to present to the American Republic to be set up in New York Bay, she pretended not to know in which direction—east or west—the giant figure was to extend her light and liberty-giving arm; and her objection to her father's definition of the caucus system as a despotism tempered by bolting, was a still darker saying of which Ronald could make nothing whatever. But what of that? Whatever else was veiled to him, this was clear—that her interference was on his behalf, so that he should not be overpressed in argument or handicapped for lack of information; and he was very grateful to her, naturally; and far from anxious to say anything against a country that had sent him so fair and so generous an ally.

But, after all, was not this laudation of the institutions of the United States meant only as a kindness—as an inducement to him to go thither, and better his position? There was the field where the race was to the swiftest, where the best man got to the front, and took the prize which he had fairly won. There no accident of birth, no traditional usage, was a hindrance. The very largeness of the area gave to the individual largeness of view.

'Yes,' said Miss Carry (but they took no heed of her impertinence) 'in our country a bar-tender mixes drinks with his mind fixed on Niagara.'

Nay, the very effort to arouse dissatisfaction in the bosom of this man who seemed all too well contented with his circumstances was in itself meant as a kindness. Why should he be content? Why should he not get on? It was all very well to have health and strength and high spirits, and to sing tenor songs, and be a favourite with the farm-lasses; but that could not last for ever. He was throwing away his life. His chances were going by him. Why, at his age, what had so-and-so done, and what had so-and-so not done? And how had they started? What

did they owe to fortune—what, rather, to their own resolution and brain?

'Ronald, my good fellow,' said his Mentor, in the most kindly way, 'if I could only get you to breathe the atmosphere of Chicago for a fortnight, I am pretty sure you wouldn't come back to stalk deer and train dogs for Lord Ailine or any other lordship.'

Miss Carry said nothing; but she pictured to herself Ronald passing down Madison Street—no longer, of course, in his weather-tanned stalking costume, but attired as the other young gentlemen to be found there; and going into Burke's Hotel for an oyster luncheon; and coming out again chewing a toothpick; and strolling on to the Grand Pacific to look at the latest telegrams. And she smiled (though, indeed, she herself had not been behindhand in urging him to get out of his present estate and better his fortunes), for there was something curiously incongruous in that picture; and she was quite convinced that in Wabash Avenue he would not look nearly as handsome nor so much at his ease as now he did.

'I am afraid,' said he, with a laugh, 'if ye put me down in a place like that, I should be sorely at a loss to tell what to turn my hand to. It's rather late in the day for me to begin and learn a new trade.'

'Nonsense, man,' the other said. 'You have the knowledge already, if you only knew how to apply it.'

'The knowledge?' Ronald repeated, with some surprise. Most of his book-reading had been in the field of English poetry; and he did not see how he could carry that to market.

Mr. Hodson took out his note-book; and began to look over the leaves.

'And you don't need to go as far as Chicago, if you would rather not,' said he.

'If you do,' said Miss Carry flippantly, 'mind you don't eat any of our pork. Pappa dear, do you know why a wise man doesn't eat pork in Illinois? Don't you know? It is because there is a trichinosis worth two of that.'

Ronald laughed; but her father was too busy to attend to such idiotcy.

'Even if you would rather remain in the old country,' he continued, 'and enjoy an out-of-door life, why should you not make use of what you already know? I have heard you talk about the draining of soil, and planting of trees, and so on: well, look here now. I have been inquiring into that matter; and I find that the Highland and Agricultural Society of Scotland grants certificates for proficiency in the theory and practice of forestry. Why shouldn't you try to gain one of those certificates; and then apply for the post of land-steward? I'll bet you could manage an estate as well as most of them who are at it—especially one of those Highland sporting estates. And then you would become a person of importance; and not be at any lordship's beck and call; you would have an opportunity of beginning to make a fortune, if not of making one at once; and if

you wanted to marry, there would be a substantial future for you to look to.'

'And then you would come over and see us at Chicago,' said Miss Carry. 'We live on North Park Avenue; and you would not feel lonely for want of a lake to look at—we've a pretty big one there.'

'But the first step—about the certificate?' said Ronald doubtfully—though, indeed, the interest that these two kindly people showed in him was very delightful, and he was abundantly grateful, and perhaps also a trifle bewildered by these ambitious and seductive dreams.

'Well, I should judge that would be easy enough,' continued Mr. Hodson, again referring to his note-book in that methodical, slow-mannered way of his. 'You would have to go to Edinburgh or Glasgow, and attend some classes, I should imagine, for they want you to know something of surveying and geology and chemistry and botany. Some of these you could read up here—for you have plenty of leisure, and the subjects are just at your hand. I don't see any difficulty about that. I suppose you have saved something now, that you could maintain yourself when you were at the classes?'

'I could manage for a while,' was the modest answer.

'I have myself several times thought of buying an estate in the Highlands,' Mr. Hodson continued, 'if I found that I have not forgotten altogether how to handle a gun; and if I did so, I would give you the management right off. But it would not do for you to risk such a chance; what you want is to qualify yourself, so that you can take your stand on your own capacity, and demand the market value for it.'

Well, it was a flattering proposal; and this calm, shrewd-headed man seemed to consider it easily practicable—and as the kind of thing that a young man in his country would naturally make for and achieve; while the young lady on the sofa had now thrown aside the pretence of knitting, and was regarding him with eloquent eyes, and talking as if it were all settled and attained, and Ronald already become an enterprising and prosperous manager, whom they should come to see when they visited Scotland, and who was certainly to be their guest when he crossed the Atlantic. No wonder his head was turned. Everything seemed so easy—why, both she and her father appeared to be surrounded, when at home, with men who had begun with nothing and made fortunes. And then he would not be torn away altogether from the hills. He might still have a glimpse of the dun deer from time to time; there would still be the dewy mornings by lake and strath and mountain-tarn, with the stumbling on a bit of white heather, and the picking it and wearing it for luck. And if he had to bid farewell to Clebrig and Ben Loyal and Ben Hope and Bonnie Strath-Naver—well, there were other districts far more beautiful than that, as well he knew, where he would still hear the curlew whistle, and the grouse-cock crow in the evening, and the great stags bellow their

challenge through the mists of the dawn. And as for a visit to Chicago?—and a view of great cities, and harbours, and the wide activities of the world?—surely all that was a wonderful dream, if only it might come true!

'I'm sure I beg your pardon,' said he, rising, 'for letting ye talk all this time about my small affairs. I think you'll have a quieter day to-morrow; the wind has backed to the east; and that is a very good wind for this loch. And I've brought the minnows that I took to mend; the kelts are awful beasts for destroying the minnows.'

He put the metal box on the mantelpiece. They would have had him stay longer—and Miss Carry, indeed, called reproaches down on her head that she had not asked him to smoke nor offered him any kind of hospitality—but he begged to be excused. And so he went out and got home through the cold dark night—to his snug little room and the peat-fire, and his pipe and papers and meditations.

A wonderful dream, truly—and all to be achieved by the reading up of a few subjects of some of which he already knew more than a smattering. And why should he not try? It seemed the way of the world—at least, of the world of which he had been learning so much from these strangers—to strive and push forward and secure, if possible, means and independence. Why should he remain at Inver-Mudal? The old careless happiness had fled from it. Meenie had passed him twice now—each time merely giving him a formal greeting, and yet, somehow, as he imagined, with a timid trouble in her eyes, as if she was sorry to do that. Her superintendence of Maggie's lessons was more restricted now; and never by any chance did she come near the cottage when he was within or about. The old friendliness was gone; the old happy companionship—however restricted and respectful on his side; the old, frank appeal for his aid and counsel when any of her own small schemes had to be undertaken. And was she in trouble on his account?—and had the majesty of Glengask and Orosay been invoked? Well, that possibility need harrow no human soul. If his acquaintanceship—or companionship, in a measure—with Meenie was considered undesirable, there was an easy way out of the difficulty. Acquaintanceship or companionship, whichever it might be, it would end—it had ended.

And then again, he said to himself, as he sate at the little table and turned over those leaves that contained many a gay morning song and many a midnight musing—but all about Meenie, and the birds and flowers and hills and streams that knew her—soon she would be away from Inver-Mudal, and what would the place be like then? Perhaps when the young corn was springing she would take her departure; and what would the world be like when she had left? He could see her seated in the little carriage; her face not quite so bright and cheerful as usually it was; her eyes—that were sometimes as blue as a speedwell in June, and sometimes gray like the luminous clear gray of the morning sky—perhaps

clouded a little; and the sensitive lips trembling? The children would be there, to bid her good-bye. And then away through the lonely glens she would go, by hill and river and wood, till they came in sight of the western ocean, and Loch Inver, and the great steamer to carry her to the south. Meenie would be away—and Inver-Mudal, *then*?

Small birds in the corn
Are cowering and quailing:
O my lost love,
Whence are you sailing?

Fierce the gale blows
Adown the bleak river;
The valley is empty
For ever and ever.

Out on the seas,
The night-winds are wailing:
O my lost love,
Whence are you sailing?

END OF VOL. I.

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