

PLAYING WITH FIRE



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PLAYING WITH FIRE.

James Grant (1802-1886) was born at Edinburgh.
This novel deals with the war in the Sudan. The author
was received into the Roman Catholic Church by Cardinal
Manning in 1875.

PLAYING WITH FIRE

A STORY OF THE SOUDAN WAR

BY

JAMES GRANT

AUTHOR OF

'THE ROMANCE OF WAR,' 'DULCIE CARLYON,' 'ROYAL
HIGHLANDERS,' ETC.

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PLAYING WITH FIRE.

CHAPTER I.

MERLWOOD.

‘PON my word, cousin, I think I should actually fall in love with you, but that—that——’

‘What?’ asked the girl, with a curious smile.

‘One so seldom falls in love with one they have known for a life long.’

The girl sighed softly, and said, still smiling sweetly :

‘Looking upon her as almost a sister, you mean, Roland.’

‘Or almost as a brother, as the case may be.’

‘Then how about Paul and Virginia? They knew each other all their lives, and yet loved each other tenderly.’

‘Or desperately, rather, Hester ; but that was in an old story book greatly appreciated by our grandmothers.’

‘Instead of talking nonsense here, I really think you should go home, Roland,’ said the girl, with a tone of pain and pique at his nonchalant manner ; ‘home for a time, at least.’

‘To Earlishaugh?’

‘Yes.’

‘Are you tired of me already, Hester?’

‘Tired of you, Roland?—oh, no,’ replied the girl softly, while playing with the petals of a flower.

The speakers were Roland Lindsay, a young captain of the line, home on leave from Egypt, and his cousin, Hester Maule, a handsome girl in her eighteenth year ; and the

scene in which they figured was a shady, green and well-wooded grassy bank that sloped down to the Esk, in front of the pretty villa of Merlwood, where he swung lazily in a net hammock between two beautiful laburnum-trees, smoking a cigar, while she sat on the turf close by, with a fan of peacock feathers in her slim and pretty hand, dispersing the midges that were swarming under the trees in the hot sunshine of an August evening.

While the heedless fellow who swung there, enjoying his cigar and his hammock, and the charm of the whole situation, twitted her with her unconcern, Hester—we need not conceal the fact—loved him with a love that now formed part of her daily existence ; while he accorded her in return the half-careless affection of a brother, or as yet little more.

At his father's house of Earlshaugh, at his uncle's villa of Merlwood, and elsewhere, till he had joined his regiment, they had been brought up together, and together had shared all the pleasures and amusements of childhood. In the thick woods of Earlshaugh, and along the sylvan banks of the Esk, in the glorious summer and autumn days, it had been their delight to clamber into thick and leafy bowers—vast and mysterious retreats to them—where, with the birds around them, and the flowers, the ivy, and the ferns beneath their feet, they wove fairy caps of rushes and conned their tasks, often with cheek laid against cheek and ringlets intermingled ; and in their days of childhood Roland had often told her tales of what they would do and where they would go when they became man and wife, and little Hester wondered at the story he wove, as it seemed impossible that they could ever be happier than they were then. He always preferred her as a companion and playmate to his only sister Maude, greatly to the indignation of that young lady.

She had borne her part in many of Roland's boyish pastimes, even to spinning tops and playing marbles, until the days came when they cantered together on their sturdy little Shetlands through Melville Woods and by the braes of Woodhouselee, or where Earlshaugh looked down on the pastoral expanse near Leuchars and Balmullo, in the East Neuk of Fife.

When the time came that Roland had inexorably to go forth into the world and join his regiment, poor Hester Maule wept in secret as if her heart would have burst; while he—with all a boy's ardour for his red coat and the new and brilliant life before him—bade her farewell with provoking equanimity and wonderful philosophy; and now that he had come back, and she—in the dignity of her eighteen years—could no longer aid him in birdnesting (if he thought of such a thing), or holding a wicket for him, she had—during the few weeks he had been at home—felt her girl's heart go back to the sweet old days and the starting-point, which he seemed to have almost forgotten, or scarcely referred to.

And yet, when she came along the grassy bank, and tossed her garden hat aside on seating herself on the grass near him, there was something in her bearing then which haunted him in after-years—a shy, unconscious grace in all her movements, a flush on her soft cheek, a bright expression in her clear and innocent eyes, brightened apparently by the flickering shadows that fell between the leaves upon her uncovered head, and flushed her white summer dress with touches of bright colour; and looking at him archly, she began, as if almost to herself, to sing a song she had been wont to sing long ago—an old song to the older air of the 'Bonnie Briar Bush':

'The visions of the buried past
Come thronging, dearer far
Than joys the present hour can give,
Than present objects are——'

'Go on, Hester,' said Roland, as she paused.

'No,' said she with a little *moue*, 'you don't care for these old memories now.'

'When soldiering, Hester, we have to keep our minds so much in the present that, by Jove! a fellow has not much time for brooding over the past.'

Hester made no reply, but cast down her lashes, and proceeded to roll and unroll the ribbons of her hat round her slender fingers.

Roland Lindsay manipulated another cigar, lit it leisurely, and relapsed into silence too.

He was a remarkably good-looking young fellow, and perhaps one who knew himself to be so, having been somewhat spoiled by ladies already. Though not quite regular, his features were striking, and—like his bearing—impressed those who did not know him well with a high opinion of his strength of character, which was not great, we must admit, in some respects ; though his chin was well defined and even square, as shown by his being closely shaven all save a carefully trimmed dark moustache.

His grayish hazel eyes looked almost black at night, and were expressive and keen yet soft. In figure he was well set up—the drill-sergeant had done that ; and unmistakably he was a manly-looking fellow in his twenty-seventh year, dressed in a plain yet irreproachably-made tweed suit of light gray that well became his dark and dusky complexion, with spotlessly white cuffs and tie, and a tweed stalking-cap peaked before and behind. He had an air of well-bred *nonchalance*, of being perfectly at home ; and now you have him—Captain Roland Lindsay of Her Majesty's Infantry, with a face and neck burned red and blistered by the fierce sun of Egypt and the Soudan.

Merlwood, the house of Hester's father, which he was now favouring with a protracted visit, is situated on the north bank of the Esk, and was so named as being the favourite haunt of the blackbird, whose voice was heard amid its thickets in the earliest spring, as that of the thristle was heard not far off in the adjacent birks of Mavis-wood on the opposite side of that river, which, from its source in the hills of Peebles till it joins the sea at Musselburgh, displays sylvan beauties of which no other stream in Scotland can boast—the beauties of which Scott sang so skilfully in one of his best ballads :

' Sweet are the paths, O, passing sweet !
By Esk's fair streams that run
O'er airy steep, through copsewood deep,
Impervious to the sun.

' From that fair domè where suit is paid,
By blast of bugle free,
To Auchindinny's hazel shade,
And haunted Woodhouselee.

‘Who knows not Melville’s beechy grove
And Roslin’s rocky glen,
Dalkeith, which all the virtues love,
And classic Hawthornden?’

Embosomed amid the beautiful scenery here, the handsome modern villa of Merlwood, with its Swiss roof and plate-glass oriel windows half smothered amid wild roses, clematis, and jasmine, crowned a bank where the dreamy and ceaseless murmur of the Esk was ever heard; and in the cosy if not stately rooms of which old Sir Harry Maule, K.C.B., a retired Lieutenant-General, and the veteran of more than one Indian war, had stored up the mementoes of his stirring past—the tusky skulls, striped skins, and giant claws of more than one man-eating tiger, trophies of his breechloader; and those of other Indian conflicts at Lucknow, Jhansi, and elsewhere, in the shape of buffalo shields, tulwars, inlaid Afghan juzails, battle axes, and deadly khandjurs, with gorgeous trappings for horse and elephant.

And picturesque looked the home of the old soldier and his only daughter Hester, as seen in the August sunshine, at that season when autumn peeps stealthily through the openings made in thicket and hedge, when the sweet may-buds are dead and gone, the feathered grasses are cut down, but the ferns and the ivy yet cover all the rocks of the Esk, and flowering creepers connect the trees; the blue hare-bell still peeped out, and in waste places the ox-eye daisy and the light scarlet poppy were lingering still, for August is a month flushed with the last touches of summer, and though the latter was past and gone, those warm tints which make the Scottish woods so peculiarly lovely in autumn had not yet begun to mellow or temper the varied greenery of the bosky valley of rocks and timber through which the mountain Esk flows to the Firth of Forth.

To the eyes of Roland Lindsay, how still and green and cool it all seemed, after the arid sands, the breathless atmosphere, and the scorching heat of Southern Egypt!

‘By Jove, there is no place like home!’ thought he, and he tossed out of his hammock *Punch*, the *Graphic*, and Clery’s ‘Minor Tactics,’ with which he had been killing time, till his fair cousin joined him; and with his cigar alight,

his stalking cap tilted forward over his eyes, his hands behind his head, he swung to and fro in the full enjoyment of lazy indolence.

CHAPTER II.

HESTER MAULE.

THOUGH the life of Hester Maule at Merlwood was a somewhat secluded one, as she had no mother to act as chaperone, it was not one of inaction. Her mornings were generally spent in charitable work among poor people in the nearest village, visiting the old and sick, sometimes in scolding and teaching the young, assisting the minister in many ways with local charities, and often winding up the evening by a brisk game of lawn-tennis with his young folks at the manse, and now and then a ball or a carpet dance at some adjacent house, when late hours never prevented her from being down from her room in the morning, as gay as a mavis or merle, to pour out her father's coffee, cut and air his paper, or attend to his hookah, the use of which the old Anglo-Indian had not yet been able to relinquish.

Now the girl had become shy or dry in manner, piqued and silent certainly, to her cousin; for, in mortifying contrast to her silent thoughts, she was pondering over his off-hand speech with which the preceding chapter opens; thus even he found it somewhat difficult to carry on a one-sided conversation with the back of her averted head, however handsome, with its large coil of dark and glossy hair turned to him.

Roland liked and more than admired his graceful cousin, and now, perhaps suspecting that his nonchalant manner was scarcely 'the thing' and finding her silent, even frosty in manner, he said:

'Hester, will you listen to me now?'

'That depends upon what you have to say, Roland.'

'I never say anything wrong, so don't be cross, my dear little one.'

'He treats me as a child still!' she thought in anger, and said sharply:

‘Well?’

‘Shall we go along the river bank and see the trout rising?’

‘Why?’

‘Well—it is certainly better than doing nothing.’

‘But is useless,’ said she coldly.

‘Why? It is now my turn to ask.’

‘Because you know very well, or ought to know, that there are none to be seen after June, and that the mills have ruined angling hereabout.’

‘Let us look for ferns, then—there are forty different kinds, I believe, in Roslin Glen.’

‘Ferns—how can you be so childish, Roland!’ exclaimed the girl with growing pique, as she thought—‘If he has aught to say of more interest, surely he can say it here,’ and she kept her eyes averted, looking down the wooded glen through which the river brawled, with her heart full of affection and love, which her cousin was singularly slow to see; then furtively she looked at him once or twice, as he lounged on his back, smoking and gazing upward at the patches of blue sky seen through the interlaced branches of the overarching trees.

‘Gentleman’ was stamped on every feature and in every action of Lindsay, and there was an easy and quiet deliberation in all he did and said that indicated good breeding, and yet he had a bearing in his figure and aspect in his dark face that would have become Millais’ ‘Black Brunswicker.’

Hester Maule is difficult to describe; but if the reader will think of the prettiest girl she or he ever saw, they have a general idea of her attractions.

A proud and stately yet most graceful-looking girl, Hester had a lissom figure a trifle over the middle height, hair of the richest and deepest brown, dark violet-coloured and velvety-like eyes with full lids, long lashes, and brows that were black; a dazzling complexion, a beautiful smile when pleased, and hands and feet that showed race and breeding beyond all doubt.

Roland was quite aware that Hester was no longer a child, but a girl almost out of her teens, and one that looked older

than her years. He had seen her at intervals, and seen how she had grown up and expanded into the handsome girl she had become—one of whom any kinsman might be proud ; and with all his seeming indifference and doubt of his true emotions, it was evident now that propinquity might do much ; and times there were when he began to feel for her some of that tender interest and admiration which generally form a sure prelude to love. Moreover, they were cousins, and ‘there is no denying that cousinship covers a multitude of things within its kindly mantle.’

Hester was the only daughter of his maternal uncle, the old General, whose services had won him a K.C.B.—an improvident and somewhat impoverished man, who for years had been a kind of invalid from ailments contracted after the great Indian Mutiny—chiefly from a bullet lodged in his body at Jhansi, when he fought under the famous Sir Hugh Rose—Lord Strathnairn in later years.

She was the one ‘ewe lamb’ of his flock, all of whom were lying by their mother’s side under the trees in the old kirkyard of Lasswade, within sound of the murmuring Esk ; and though the charm of Hester’s society had been one of the chief reasons that induced Roland Lindsay to linger at Merlwood, as he had done for nearly a month past, he was loth to adopt the idea now being involved therein. Such is the inconsistency of the male heart at times ; and he, perhaps, misconstrued, or attributed his emotion to compassion for her apparently lonely life and somewhat dubious future—for Sir Henry’s life was precarious ; and in this perilous and dubious state matters were now, while Roland’s leave of absence was running on.

Not that the latter was extremely limited. To the uninitiated we may mention that what is technically termed winter leave extends generally from the 15th October to the 14th of the following March, ‘when all officers are to be present with their respective regiments and depôts ;’ but Roland had extended or more ample leave accorded him than this, owing to the sufferings he had undergone from a wound and fever when with the army of occupation in Egypt, a portion of which his regiment formed—hence it was that August saw him at Merlwood.

And now we may briefly state how he was situated, and some of the 'features' on which his future 'hinged.'

During his absence with the army his father, the old fox-hunting Laird of Earlsbaugh, a widower, after the death of Roland's mother had rashly married her companion, a handsome but artful woman, who, at his death (caused by a fall in the hunting-field, after which she had nursed him assiduously), was left by him, through his will, all that he possessed in land, estate, and heritage, without control; but never doubting—poor silly man—that she would do full justice in the end to his only son and daughter, as a species of mother, monitress, and guardian—a risk the eventualities of which he had not quite foreseen, as we shall show in the time to come.

But so it was; his father, who, at one time, he thought, would hardly have rested in his grave if the acres of Earlsbaugh and the turrets of the old mansion had gone out of the family, in which they had been since Sir James Lindsay of Edzell and Glenesk fell by his royal master's side at Flodden, had been weak enough to do this monstrous piece of injustice, under the influence of an artful and designing woman!

It was an injury so galling, so miserable, and—to Roland Lindsay—so scarcely realizable, that he had been in no haste to return to his ancestral home.

And hence, perhaps, he had lingered at Merlwood, where his uncle, Sir Harry, who hated, defied, and utterly failed to understand anything of the 'outs and ins' of law or lawyers, including wills and bequests, etc., etc., fed his natural indignation by anathematizing the artful Jezebel of a step-mother; and declaring that he never did and never would believe in her; and adjusting himself as well as that cursed 'Jhansi bullet' would allow him, while lounging back in his long, low, and spacious Singapore chair, he would suck his hookah viciously, and roundly assert, as a crowning iniquity, that he was certain she had 'at least four annas to the rupee in her blood!'

CHAPTER III.

KASHGATE—A RETROSPECT.

IT was pretty clear, on the whole, to Hester, that her cousin, Roland Lindsay, thought but little of the past, and perhaps, as a general rule, cared for it even less. While she had been living on the memory of these dear days, especially since this—his last return home—he had allowed other events to obliterate it from his mind.

Let us take a little retrospect.

In contrast to the apparently languid and *blasé* smoker, swinging in his net hammock, enjoying the balmy evening breeze by the wooded Esk, and dallying with a girl of more than ordinary loveliness, let us imagine him in a dusty and blood-stained tunic, with a battered tropical helmet, a beard unshaven for many a day, haggard in visage, wild-eyed and full of soldierly enthusiasm, one of the leading actors in a scene like the following, at the fatal and most disastrous battle of Kashgate.

It was the evening of the 3rd November in an arid waste of the Soudan—sand, sand everywhere—not a well to yield a drop of brackish water, not a tree to give the slightest shade. The heat was awful, beyond all parallel and all European conception, well-nigh beyond endurance, and the doomed soldiers of General Hicks—known as Hicks Pasha—a veteran of the famous old Bombay Fusiliers who had served at Magdala, and to whose staff Roland Lindsay, then a subaltern, was attached, toiled on, over the dry and arid desert steppe that lies between El Duem and El Obeid, in search of the troops of the ubiquitous Mahdi—the gallant Hicks and his few British officers training their loosely and hastily constituted Egyptian army to operations in the field, even while advancing against one, said to be three hundred thousand strong—doubtless an Oriental exaggeration—but strong enough nevertheless, as the event proved, to sweep their miserable soldiers off the face of the earth, in that battle, the details of which will never be known till the Last Day, as only one or two escaped.

Like Colonel Farquhar of the Guards, Majors Warren, Martin and other British officers, Roland Lindsay, by his personal example, had done all that in him lay to cheer the weak-limbed and faint-hearted Egyptian soldiers, whose almost sablé visages were now gaunt and hollow, and whose white tunics and scarlet tarbooshes were tattered and worn by their long and toilsome march through the terrible country westward of the White Nile—a vast steppe covered with low thorny trees, purple mimosa, gum bushes, and spiky grass, till the sad, solemn, and desert waste was reached near Kashgate, where all—save one or two—were to find their graves!

Mounted on a splendid Arab, whose rider he had slain in the battle of the 29th of April, Roland Lindsay led one face of the hollow square in which the troops marched, and in which formation they fought for three days, with baggage, sick and wounded in the centre, Krupp and Nordenfeldt guns in the angles, against a dark and surging human sea of frantic Dervishes, wild Bedouins, and equally wild and savage Mohammedans and Mulattoes, shrieking, yelling, armed with ponderous swords and deadly spears that flashed like thousands of mirrors in the sunshine.

The Dervishes came on, the foremost and most fearless, sent by the Mahdi, Mahommed Achmet Shemseddin, who had declared that they must vanquish all, as they had the aid of Heaven, of the Prophet and his legions of unseen angels, as at the battle of Bedr, when he conquered the Koreish.

Wild and desperate was the prolonged fighting, the Egyptians knowing that no mercy would be accorded to them, and fearful was the slaughter, till the sand was soaked with blood—till the worn-out square was utterly broken, its living walls dashed to pieces, and hurled against each other under the feet of the victorious Mahdists.

In vain did young Lindsay, like other Britons who followed Hicks, endeavour to make some of their men front about, calling on them, sword and revolver in hand, as they flung themselves on the sand now in despair, face downwards, and perished miserably under sword and spear, or fled in abject and uncontrollable terror; but in the end he found himself

abandoned, and had to hack his way out of the press through a forest of weapons till he reached the side of General Hicks, who was making a last and desperate charge at the head of his staff alone !

Side by side, with a ringing and defiant cheer, these few Britons galloped against the living flood that was led by a sheikh in brilliant floating robes.

‘He is the Mahdi—he is the Mahdi!’ cried Lindsay, and such Hicks and all who followed him supposed that sheikh, but in mistake, to be.

He was splendidly mounted, and in addition to his Mahdi surcoat and floating robes wore a glittering Dharfour helmet, with a tippet of chain-mail and a long shirt of the same defensive material. Through this the sword of Hicks gave him a deadly cut in the arm, and his sword-hand dropped, but with the other he contrived to hurl a club, which unhorsed the General, who was then slain; but the mailed warrior, who looked like a Crusader of the twelfth century, was hewn down by Roland through helmet and head to the chin, and just as he fell above Hicks all the staff perished then on foot, their horses being speared or hamstrung—all gallant and resolute soldiers, Fraser, Farquhar, Brodie, Walker, and others—fighting back to back or in a desperate circle.

One moment Roland saw the last of them, erect in all the pride and strength of manhood, inspired by courage and despair—his cheeks flushed, his eyes flashing, while handling his sword with all the conscious pride of race and skill; and the next he lay stretched and bleeding on the heap beside him, with the pallor in his face of one who would never rise again.

In that *mêlée* no less than three Emirs of the False Prophet fell under the sword of Lindsay, who cut his way out and escaped alone; and spattered with blood from the slain, as well as from two sword-wounds in his own body, spurred rearward his horse, which had many a gash and stab, but carried him clear out of the field and onward till darkness fell, and he found himself alone—alone in the desert. There the whitening skeleton of more than one camel—the relic of a caravan—lay; and there the

huge Egyptian vultures ('Pharaoh's chickens,' as they are called), with their fierce beaks, great eyes, and ample wings, were floating overhead on their way to the field, for the unburied slain attract these flocks from a wonderful distance.

When his horse sank down, Lindsay remained beside it, helpless and weary, awaiting the blood-red dawn of the Nubian sun.

As he lay there under the stars that glittered out of the blue sky like points of steel, many a memory of the past, of vanished faces, once familiar and still loved; of his home at Earlsbaugh, with its wealth of wood and hill; and recollections which had been growing misty and indistinct came before him with many a scene and episode, like dissolving views that melted each other, as he seemed to himself to sink into sleep—the sleep that was born of fatigue, long over-tension of the nerves, and loss of blood.

For weeks he was returned as one of the slain who had perished at Kashgate; but Roland was hard to kill. He had reached Khartoum—how he scarcely knew—ere Gordon, the betrayed and abandoned by England, had perished there; and eventually regained the headquarters of his regiment, then with the army of occupation in Lower Egypt.

Of all this, and much more, with reference to her cousin had Hester Maule read in the public prints; but little or nothing of his adventures in the East could she glean from him, as he seemed very diffident and loth to speak of himself, unlike her father, Sir Harry, who was never weary of his reminiscences of the war in Central India, particularly the siege and capture of Jhansi under Lord Strathnairn, of gallant memory.

So the bearing of Roland Lindsay at the battle of Kashgate and elsewhere had proved that he was worthy of the old historic line from which he sprang; and that there was a latent fire, energy, and spirit of the highest kind under his calm, easy, and pleasant exterior.

CHAPTER IV.

PLAYING WITH FIRE.

AND now, a few days subsequently, while idling after dinner over coffee and a cigar, with his pretty cousin and Sir Harry, in the latter's study, a little room set apart by him for his own delectation, where he could always find his tobacco jars, the Army Lists, East Indian Registers, and so forth, ready at hand—a 'study' hung round with whips and spurs, fishing and shooting gear, a few old swords, and furnished with Singapore chairs, tiger skins, and a couple of teapots, or little tables, Roland Lindsay obtained a little more insight into family matters that had transpired during his absence while soldiering against the False Prophet in the East.

Sir Harry was a tall and handsome man, nearer his seventieth than his sixtieth year, with regular aquiline features, keen gray eyes, and closely shaven, all save a heavy moustache, which was, like his hair, silver white; and though somewhat feebler now by long Indian service and wounds, he looked every inch, an aristocratic old soldier and gently but decidedly he spoke to his nephew of troubles ahead, while Hester's white hands were busy among her Berlin wools, and she glanced ever and anon furtively, but with fond interest, at her young kinsman, who apparently was provokingly unconscious thereof.

The old fox-hunting laird, his father, though a free liver, had never been reckless or profligate; had never squandered or lost an acre of Earlishaugh; never drank or gambled to excess, nor been duped by his most boon companions; but on finding that he was getting too heavy for the saddle, and that the world, after all, was proving 'flat, stale, and unprofitable,' had latterly, for a couple of years before his death, buried himself in the somewhat dull and lonely if stately mansion of Earlishaugh, where he had for a second time, to the astonishment of all his friends, those of the Hunt particularly, betaken himself to matrimony, or been lured thereinto by his late wife's attractive and, as Sir Harry phrased it, 'most strategic' and enterprising companion,

who had—as all the folks in the East Neuk said—contrived to ‘wind him round her little finger,’ by discovering and sedulously attending to and anticipating all his querulous wants and wishes ; and thus, when he died, it was found that he had left her—as already stated—possessed of all he had in the world, to the manifest detriment and danger of his only son and daughter ; and, worse still, it would seem that the widow was now in the hands of one more artful than herself—said to be a relation—one Mr. Hawkey Sharpe, into whose care and keeping she apparently confided everything.

Roland’s yearly allowance since he joined the army had not been meddled with ; but deeming himself justly the entire heir of everything, it could scarcely be thought he would be content with that alone now.

‘A black look-out, uncle,’ said he grimly ; ‘so, prior to my return to Earlshaugh, to be forewarned is to be forearmed.’

‘Yes ; but in this instance, my boy,’ said Sir Harry, relinquishing for a moment the amber mouthpiece of his hookah, ‘you scarcely know against what or against whom.’

‘Nor can I, perhaps, until I see a lawyer on the subject.’

‘Oh, d——n lawyers ! Keep them out of it, if possible. The letters S.S.C. after a man’s name always make me shiver.’

‘And who is this Mr. Hawkey Sharpe, who seems to have installed himself at Earlshaugh?’ asked Roland, after a brief pause.

‘No one knows but your—your stepmother,’ replied Sir Harry, with a grimace, as he kicked a hassock from under his foot. ‘No one but she apparently ; he seems a sharp fellow, in whom she trusts implicitly in all regarding the estate.’

‘Where did he come from?’

‘God knows ; but he seems to be what our American cousins deem the acme of ‘cuteness.’

‘And that is——’

‘A Yankee Jew attorney of English parentage,’ replied Sir Harry, with a kind of smile, in which his nephew did not join.

‘Earlshaugh is a fine property, as we all know, uncle; but it was deuced hard for me, when I thought I had come into it, to find this stepmother—a person I can barely remember acting as my mother’s amanuensis, factotum, and toady—constituted a species of guardian to me—to me, a captain in my twenty-seventh year, and to be told that I must for the time content me with my old allowance, as the *pater* had been—she said—rather extravagant, and so forth. I can’t make it out.’

‘Neither can I, nor any other fellow,’ said the old General testily. ‘I only know that your father made a very idiotic will, leaving all to that woman.’

‘If he actually did so,’ said Roland.

‘No doubt about it—I heard it read.’

‘But you are a little deaf, dear uncle.’

‘D——n it, don’t say that, Roland—I am fit for service yet!’

‘Well, she has not interfered with my allowance as yet.’

‘Allowance!’ exclaimed Sir Harry, smiting the table with his hand; ‘why the devil should you be restricted to one at all?’

‘If—I am very ignorant in law, uncle—but if under this will she has the life-rent——’

‘More than that, I tell you.’

‘I can scarcely believe it; and she has not meddled with the allowance of dear little Maude.’

‘She may cut off your sister’s income and yours too at any moment, Roland!’

‘Well, I suppose if the worst comes to the worst,’ said the latter, with a kind of bitter laugh, while still hoping against hope, ‘I shall have to send in my papers and volunteer as a trooper for one of these Cape corps in Bechuanaland or the Transvaal.’

‘Oh, Roland, don’t think of such things,’ said Hester, as with tenderness in her eyes she looked up at him for a moment, and then resumed her work.

‘Have you seen this stepmother of mine lately?’ he asked.

‘No—but she has invited me to Earlshaugh next month, not knowing, perhaps, that you would spend the first month of your leave——’

‘With his old uncle,’ said Sir Harry, as his eyes kindled, and he patted Roland’s shoulder, adding, ‘a good lad—a good lad—my own sister’s son!’

Uncle and nephew had much in common between them, even ‘shop,’ as they phrased it; and the regard they had for each other was mutual and keen.

‘She writes to me seldom,’ said Hester, ‘for, of course, our tastes and ideas are somewhat apart; but, as papa says, when he sees her stiff note-paper, with the sham gentility of its gilt and crimson monogram, and strong fragrance of Ess-bouquet, he feels sure that, with all her manners, airs, and so forth, she cannot be a lady, though many a lady’s companion, as she was to your mother, unhappily is.’

Roland remained silent, sucking his cheroot viciously.

‘Yes,’ observed his uncle, ‘her very notes in their pomposity speak of self-assertion.’

‘In going—unwillingly as I shall—to Earlsbaugh, I don’t know how the deuce I may get on with such an incubus,’ said Roland thoughtfully; and now thoughts of the cold welcome that awaited him by the hearth that had been his father’s, and their forefathers’ for generations past, made him naturally think and feel more warmly and kindly of those with whom he was now, and more disposed to cling to the loving old kinsman who eyed him so affectionately, and the sweet, gentle cousin, every motion of whose white hands and handsome head was full of grace; and thus, more tenderly than ever was his wont, he looked upon her and addressed her, softly touching her hands, as he affected to sort, but rather disarranged, the wool in her work-basket; and, though the days were rather past now when he regarded with interest and admiration every pretty girl as the probable wife of his future, and he had not thought of Hester in that sense at all, she was not without a subtle interest for him that he could scarcely define.

‘Give me some music, Hester—by Jove! I am getting quite into the blues; there is a piano in the next room,’ said Roland, throwing aside his cigar and leading her away; ‘a song if you will, cousin,’ he added, opening the instrument and adjusting the stool, on which she seated herself.

‘What song, Roland?’

‘Any—well, the old, old one of which you sang a verse to me the other evening in the lawn.’

‘Do you really wish it?’ she asked, looking round at him with half-drooped lashes, and an earnest expression in her dark, starry eyes.

‘I do, indeed, Hester—for “Auld Langsyne.”’ So she at once gave her whole skill and power to the Jacobite air and the simple, old song which ran thus :

‘The visions of the buried past
Come thronging, dearer far
Than joys the present hour can give,
Than present objects are.
I love to dwell among their shades,
That open to my view ;
The dreams of perished men, and years,
And bygone glory, too.

‘For though such retrospect is sad,
It is a sadness sweet,
The forms of those whom we revere,
In memory to meet.
Since nothing in this changing world
Is constant but decay ;
And early flowers but bloom the first,
To pass the first away !’

As the little song closed, the girl’s voice, full as she was of her own thoughts, became exquisitely sweet, even sad.

‘Hester, thank you, dear,’ said Roland, laying a hand on her soft shoulder, with a sudden gush of unusual tenderness. ‘The early flowers that bloomed so sweetly with us have not yet passed away, surely, Hester ?’

‘I hope not, Roland,’ she replied, in a low voice.

‘And I, too, hope not,’ said he, stooping, and careless of the eyes of Sir Harry, who had been drumming time to the air on a teapoy, he pressed his lips to the straight white division between her close and rich dark hair.

As he did so he felt her thrill beneath the touch of his lips, and though his nonchalant air of indifference was gone just then he said nothing more, but he thought :

‘Is not this playing with fire ?’

CHAPTER V.

THE COUSINS.

SOME days passed on after the little episode at the piano, and the intercourse between the cousins, if tender and alluring, was still somewhat strange, undecided, and doubtful—save in the recesses of Hester's heart.

Rambling together, as in days past, among the familiar and beautiful sylvan scenery around Merlwood, times there certainly were, when eye met eye with an expression that told its own story, and each seemed to feel that their silence covered a deeper feeling than words could express, and that though the latter were not forthcoming as yet, their hearts and lives might soon be filled by a great joy, on the part of the untutored girl especially.

At others, Roland, though not quite past seven-and-twenty, had, of course, seen too much of the world and of life, in and out of garrison, to be a hot-headed and reckless lover, or to rush into a position which left him no safe or honourable line of retreat.

His passions were strong, but tempered by experience and quite under his control ; and he was inclined to be somewhat of a casuist.

'Was this brilliant and attractive companion,' he sometimes asked himself, 'the same little girl who had been his playmate in the past, who had so often faded out of his boyish existence amid other scenes and places? And now did she really care for him in *that* way after all?'

His manner was kind and affectionate to her, but playful, and while lacking pointed tenderness, there was—she thought—something forced about it at times.

When this suspicion occurred, her pride took the alarm. Could it be that she had insensibly allowed her heart to slip out of her own keeping into that of one from whom no genuine word of love had come to her? Then the fear of this would sting Hester to the soul, and make her at times—even after the *willades* and eloquent silences referred to—cold and reserved ; and old Sir Harry, who, for many reasons, monetary and otherwise, apart from a sincere and fatherly

regard for his only nephew, would have been rejoiced to have him as a son-in-law, would mutter to himself :

‘Do they know their own minds, these two young fools?’

He often thought sadly and seriously of Hester’s future, for he had been an improvident man ; his funds and his pensions passed away with himself ; thus it was with very unalloyed delight that he watched the pair together again as in the days of their childhood, and he wove many a castle in the air ; but they all assumed the form of a certain turreted mansion in the East Neuk of Fife. Then he would add to Hester’s annoyance by saying to her in a caressing and blundering way :

‘He will love you very dearly, as he ought to do, some day, my pet ; and if you don’t love him just now, you also will in time. Your poor mother would have liked it—Roland was ever her favourite.’

‘Please not to say these things, papa,’ implored Hester, though they were alone, and she caressed his old white head, for Sir Harry seldom or never spoke of her mother, whose death occurred some twelve years before, without an emotion which he could not conceal, for he was gentle and loving by nature.

‘Bother the fellow !’ said Sir Harry testily, ashamed that his voice had broken and his eyes grown full ; ‘he should know his own heart by this time.’

‘I would rather, papa, you did not say such things.’

‘Well—I can’t help thinking of them, and you have no one to confide in, Pet Hester, but me,’ he added, drawing her head down on his breast.

‘If it will make you any happier, dear papa,’ said Hester in a very low voice, ‘I will promise to do as you wish, if Roland asks me to love him, which he has not done yet. Anyway, it does not matter,’ she added, a little irrelevantly ; ‘I care for no one else.’

‘Not even for Malcolm of Dunnimarle?’ he asked laughingly.

‘No, papa—not even for Malcolm Skene.’

‘He admires you immensely, Hester, but then Roland seems to me just the sort of fellow to advise and protect—to be good to a girl—strong and brave, kind and tender.’

‘Oh, hush, papa,’ said Hester, ready to sink with confusion and annoyance; ‘here he comes,’ she added, as Roland came lounging through an open French window into the dining-room.

‘What about Skene of Dunnimarle, uncle—surely I heard his name?’ he asked, adding to Hester’s emotion of confusion, though he failed to notice it. ‘May I finish my cigar here, Hester?’

‘Oh, please do—I rather like it,’ she replied hastily.

‘I have asked Skene for the shooting next month at Earlshaugh—to knock over a few birds.’

‘That will be pleasant for Hester; he is rather an admirer of hers,’ said Sir Harry.

‘I don’t know that he is,’ said Hester; ‘and if you talk that way, I shall not go to Earlshaugh this summer at all, papa.’

‘After your promise to me that you will do so?’ asked Roland.

‘Yes, even after my promise to you,’ she replied, as she left the room.

‘I’ll tell you a strange story of Malcolm’s father when we were together in Central India,’ said Sir Harry, to change the subject. ‘It happened at Jhansi—you never heard it, I suppose?’

‘Not that I know of,’ replied Roland, who was already weary of the Indian reminiscences that Sir Harry contrived to drag into conversation whenever he could.

‘Well, it *was* a strange affair—very much out of the common, and happened in this way. Duncan Skene was Captain of our Grenadiers—ah, we *had* Grenadiers then, before the muddlers of later years came!—and a handsomer fellow than Duncan never wore a pair of epaulettes. A year before we stormed Jhansi from the Pandies, we were in quarters there, and all was as quiet at Allahabad as it is here in the valley of the Esk. We did not occupy the city or the Star Fort, but we had lines outside the former then, and one night Duncan, when pretty well primed, it was thought, after leaving the mess bungalow, betook him towards his own, which stood in rather a remote part of the cantonment. All seemed dark and quiet, and the *ghurries* at the posts had

announced the hour of two in the morning, when Duncan came unexpectedly upon a large and well-lighted tent, within which he saw six or seven fellows of ours—old faces that he knew, but had not seen for some time—all carousing and drinking round the table; he entered, and was at once made welcome by them all.

‘Now, Duncan must have been pretty well primed indeed not to have been sobered and chilled by what he saw; he could scarcely believe his eyes or his own identity, and thought that for the past year he must have been in a dream; for there he was met with outstretched hands and hearty greetings by many of ours who he thought were gone to their last homes. There was Jack Atherly, second to none in the hunting-field, whom he had seen knocked over by a match-lock ball in a rascally hill fight; and there, too, was Charley Thorold, once our pattern sub and pattern dancing man, who he thought had fallen the same day at the head of the Light Company; there, too, were Maxwell and Seton, our best strokes at billiards, whom he had seen—or thought he had seen—die of jungle fever in Nepaul; and Hawthorn and Bob Stuart, for whom he had backed many a bill, and who had been assassinated by Dacoits; but now seeming all well and jolly, hale and hearty, though a trifle pale, after all they had undergone. It was a marvellous—a bewildering meeting; but he felt no emotion either of fear or surprise—as it is said that in dreams we seldom feel the latter, though some of his hosts in figure did at times look a little vaporous and indistinct.

‘He was forced to sit down and drink with them, which he did, while old regimental jokes were uttered and stories told till the tent seemed to whirl round on its pole, the pegs all in pursuit of each other; and then Duncan thought he must be off, as he was detailed for guard at dawn. But ere he quitted them, they all made him promise that he was to rejoin them at the same place that day twelvemonth, a long invitation, at which he laughed heartily, but to which he acceded, promising faithfully to do so; then he reeled away, and remembered no more till he was found fast asleep under the hedge of his compound by the patrol about morning gunfire.

‘Duncan’s dream, or late entertainment, recurred vividly to him in all its details ; he could point to the exact spot where the tent had stood, but not a trace of it was to be found in any way, and no more was thought about the matter by the few in whom he confided till that time twelvemonth, when we found ourselves before Jhansi, with the army sent under Lord Strathnairn to avenge the awful slaughter and butchery there of the officers of the 12th Native Infantry by the mutineers, from whom we took the place by storm ; and in the conflict, at the very hour of the morning in which Duncan Skene had had that weird meeting and given that terrible promise, and on the very spot where the supposed tent stood, he was killed by a cannon shot ; and just about the same time I received the infernal bullet which is lodged in me still.

‘That is a story beyond the common, Roland, for Skene of ours was a fellow above all superstition, and wild though his dream—if a dream it was—he was wont to relate it in a jocular way to more than one—myself among the number.’

Was it the case that the mention of young Skene as a new admirer—perhaps more than an admirer—of Hester had acted as a species of fillip to Roland ? It almost seemed so, for after that there was more tenderness if possible in his manner to her, and he did not fail to remark that he saw music and books lying about, presented to Hester by the gentleman in question ; and her father muttered to himself with growing satisfaction, for he loved Roland well :

‘Now they are all day together, just as they used to be ; and see, he is actually carrying her watering pan for the rosebuds. Well, Roland, that is better fun, I suppose, than carrying the lines of Tel-el-Kebir !’ And the old gentleman laughed at his own conceit till he felt his Jhansi bullet cause an aching where it lodged. This companionship filled the heart of the girl with supreme happiness, and more than once she recalled the words of a writer who says of such times : ‘I think there are days when one’s whole past life seems stirred within one, and there come to the surface unlooked-for visions and pictures, with gleams from the depths below. Are they of memory or of hope ? Or is it

possible that those two words mean one thing only, and *are* one at last when our lives are rounded and complete?’

One evening, after being absent in the city, Roland suddenly, when he and Hester were alone, opened a handsome morocco case wherein reposed, in their dark-blue satin bed, a necklace of brilliant cairngorms set in gold with a beautiful pendant composed of a single Oriental amethyst encircled by the purest of pearls.

‘A little gift for you, Hester,’ said he; ‘I am soon going to Earlshaugh, and I hope to see you wear these there,’ added he, clasping the necklace round her slender throat.

‘Oh, Roland!’ exclaimed Hester in a breathless voice, while her colour changed, ‘can I accept such a gift?’

‘From me—your cousin—Hester?’ he asked softly but reproachfully, and paused. Beyond the gift he gave no distinct sign as yet, and it flashed on Hester’s mind that with the jewels there was no ring. Could that be an omission? Scarcely.

Then, seized by a sudden impulse, he abruptly, yet softly and caressingly, drew her towards him and kissed her more than once. He had often saluted her before at meeting and parting, but always in a cousinly way; but this seemed very different now.

Breathless, dazed apparently, the trembling girl pushed him from her, and he gazed at her with some surprise as she said:

‘Why did you do that, Roland? It is cruel—unkind of you,’ she added, with trembling fingers essaying, but in vain, to unclasp the necklet.

‘Cruel and unkind—between us, Hester?’

‘Yes,’ she said, blushing deeply, and then growing very pale.

‘I forgot myself for a moment, dearest Hester, in my fondness of you.’

She was trembling very much now, and as he took her hands caressingly within his own, her eyes grew full of tears.

‘Hester, you know—you know well,’ he began, with a voice that indicated deep emotion.

‘Know what, Roland?’ said she, trying to withdraw her hands.

‘That I love you,’ he was about to say, and would no doubt have said, but that Sir Harry most inopportunately came limping heavily in, so Roland was compelled to pause. The few words that might have changed all the story we have to tell were left unuttered, and next moment Hester was gone.

‘He does love me!’ she thought in the solitude of her own room; ‘love me as I love him, and wish to be loved!’

Long she pondered over the episode and gazed on his gift ere she retired to rest that night. She hoped in time to bind him to her more closely, for she thought he was a man who would love once in a lifetime with all the strength of a great and noble nature.

Sweetly and brightly the girl smiled at her own reflection in the mirror as with deft fingers she coiled up her rich brown hair for the night; while slowly but surely she felt herself, with a new and joyous thrill, to be turning her back upon the past, yet a happy and an innocent past it had been, and that she was standing on the threshold of a new and brighter world of dreams.

At last she slept.

Roland Lindsay had been on the point of declaring his love, but something—was it Fatality?—withheld him; then the interruption came, and the golden moment passed!

Would it ever come again?

But a change was at hand, which neither he nor Hester could foresee.

CHAPTER VI.

ANNOT DRUMMOND.

NEXT morning when Hester, in the most becoming of matutinal costumes, pale rose colour, which so suited her dark hair and complexion, was presiding over the breakfast table, and Sir Harry was about to dip into his newspapers, selecting a letter from a few that lay beside her plate, she said:

‘Papa, I have a little surprise for you—a letter from Annot Drummond, my cousin; she comes here to-night *en*

route to Earlshaugh, invited by Maud, your sister,' she added to Roland; 'by this time she will be leaving London at Euston.'

"London, that maelstrom of mud and mannikins," as it has perhaps been unjustly stigmatized by George Gilfillan,' said Sir Harry, laughing, 'and she is to be here to-night—that is sudden.'

'But Annot was always a creature of impulse, papa!'

'So some think,' said her father; 'but to me her impulses always seemed to come by fits and starts. However, I shall be delighted to see the dear child.'

'The "dear child" is now nearly eighteen, papa.'

'Heavens—how time runs on!—eighteen—yes.'

'And she and I are to go to Earlshaugh together in October—that is if you can spare me, papa,' added Hester, colouring, and keeping the silver urn between herself and Roland.

'Excellent; I shall make up a little party for the covert shooting, to entertain Skene of Dunnimarle, Jack Elliot of ours, and one or two more, if I can,' said the latter. 'I have been so long away from Earlshaugh; but doubtless dear little Maud and the—the stepmother—'

Sir Harry's brow clouded at the name, and Roland paused.

'You did not see Annot when in London?' said Hester.

'No—I had no time—she lived in a part of South Belgravia, rather out of my wanderings,' replied Roland.

'She is a very attractive girl, gentlemen think.'

'Ah,' was the brief response of Roland, intent more on his breakfast than the attractions of Annot Drummond, who was the only child of Sir Harry's favourite sister, a widow, whose slender circumstances compelled her to reside in a small and dull old-fashioned house of the last century in that locality which lies on the borderland of fashionable London, where the narrow windows, the doorways with huge knockers, quaint half-circular fanlights, and link extinguishers in the railings, tell of the days when George III. was King.

'She complains, Roland, that you did not call on her, in passing through London. Poor Annot,' said Hester.

'Our, or rather your, little Cockney cousin, who no doubt

loves her love with an A, because he is 'andsome,' laughed Roland.

'How can you mock Annot?' said Hester; 'she is a very accomplished girl—and lovely too—at least all men say so.'

'And you, cousin Hester?'

'I quite agree with them.' Hester was a sincere admirer of beauty, and—perhaps owing to her own great attractions—was alike noble and frank in admitting those of others. 'Her photo is in the album on that side table.'

Roland was not interested enough in the matter even to examine it.

'You will be sure to admire her,' added Hester with an arch and even loving smile as she thought of last night and the jewel that had been clasped about her neck.

'Admire her—perhaps; but nothing more, I am sure,' replied Roland, while Hester's colour deepened, and her smile brightened, though her long lashes drooped. He gave her covertly one of his fond glances, which to the girl's loving eyes seemed to spread a glory over his dark face, and a close hand-clasp followed, unseen by Sir Harry, who was already absorbed in the news from Egypt; but coyly and shyly—she could scarcely have told why—all that day she gave him no opportunity of recurring to the episode of the preceding evening, or resuming the thread of that sweet story which her father had so unwittingly interrupted.

Since that minute of time, and its intended and most probable *finale*, what had been Roland Lindsay's secret thoughts? They were many; but through all and above all had been a home such as he could make even of gloomy and embattled Earlshaugh, if brightened by Hester's sweet face, her alluring eyes and smile; with its echoes wakened by her happy ringing voice, free from every note of care as those of the merles in the wood around her father's house.

But withal came emotions of doubt and anger, as he thought of his father's will, his own supposed false position thereby, and how the future would develop itself.

Though old, and being so, he might be disposed to take gloomy views of these doubts, that cheery veteran Sir Harry saw little or nothing of them, and had but one thought while

he limped along the river's bank, enjoying his cheroot under the shady and overarching trees that cast their shadows on the brawling Esk, that his nephew Roland was the one man in all the world with whom he could fearlessly trust the happiness of his daughter; and lovingly and fondly, with most pardonable selfishness, the old man pondered over this; and thus it was that the hopeful thoughts referred to in the preceding chapter were ever recurring to him and wreathing his wrinkled face with smiles, especially after he had seen the beautiful necklet, which Hester had duly shown him, clasped round her snowy throat. He loved to see them together, and to hear them singing together at the piano or in the garden, as if their hearts were like those of the merle and mavis, so blithe, content, and happy they seemed, as when they were boy and girl in the pleasant past time, when she wore short frocks and little aprons, the pockets of which were always full of Roland's boyish presents—sometimes the plunder of neighbours' fruit trees. While to Roland the revived memory or vision of a bright little girl with a tangled mass of curls, who was often petulant, and then would confess her tiny faults as she sobbed on his shoulder, till absolved by a kiss, was ever before him; and now they could linger, while 'dropping at times into that utterly restful silence which only those can enjoy who understand each other well; and perhaps, indeed, only those who love each other dearly.'

But this day was an active one with Hester. She chose rooms for her coming cousin, relinquishing for a time those slippers of dark blue embroidery on buff leather with which she was busy for Roland. Vases of fresh flowers, selected and sorted with loving hands, were placed in all available points to decorate the sleeping and dressing rooms of Annot Drummond; draped back, the laced curtains of the windows displayed the lovely valley of the Esk, up which the river, as it flowed eastward, softly murmured; Kevock-bank and the wooded Kirkbrae on the north; the slope of Polton on the south; Lasswade, with its quaint bridge, in the middle distance, and Eldin woods beyond—a sweet and sylvan view on which Hester was never weary of gazing.

Thus with her passed most of the day; how it was spent

she scarcely knew ; then evening came, and she and Sir Harry drove into town to meet their expected visitor ; and Roland never knew how much he missed her till he was left to his own thoughts—to the inevitable cheroot, and after despatching his letters to Malcolm Skene, to Jack Elliot ‘ of ours,’ and others, to vary his time between lounging in the hammock between the shady trees and tossing pebbles into the Esk.

At last, after the shadows had deepened in the glen and dusk had completely closed in, the sound of carriage wheels, with the opening and banging to of doors, announced the arrival of Annot Drummond, accompanied by her uncle and cousin ; and Roland assisted them to alight. For a moment the tightly gloved and childlike hand of Miss Drummond rested in his, and her eyes, the precise colour of which he could not determine, but which seemed light and sparkling, met his own with an expression of confidence and inquiry. He had simply a vague idea of sunny eyes and waving golden hair. The rest was undiscoverable.

‘ Roland, I suppose,’ she exclaimed, laughing, adding, ‘ I beg your pardon, Captain Lindsay—but I have heard so much of you from dearest Hester.’

‘ Roland he is, my dear girl, and now welcome to Merlwood—welcome for your mother’s sake and your own !’ exclaimed Sir Harry, as he turned to give some orders about the luggage, and Annot, accompanied by Hester, who towered above her by a head, tripped indoors, with a nod and a smile to the old housekeeper and other servants, all of whom she knew. She seemed, indeed, a bright, fairy and airy-like little creature, in the most becoming of travelling costumes and most piquant of hats.

‘ She seems quite a child yet, by Jove !’ said Sir Harry, looking after the *petite* creature, as she hurried to her room to change her dress, and imbibe the inevitable cup of tea brought by the motherly old housekeeper.

‘ What do you think of our Annot ?’ asked Hester, returning for a moment.

‘ That she has a wonderfully fair skin,’ replied Roland slowly.

‘ All the Drummond women have that—it runs in the clan. But her eyes—are they not beautiful ?’

'I cannot say.'

'Did you not see them?'

'No, Hester.'

'Why?'

'She scarcely looked at me.'

'They are the loveliest hazel!' exclaimed Hester.

'Hazel—rather green, I think; but you know, I prefer eyes of violet blue or gray to all others, Hester.'

She laughed, as she knew her own were the eyes referred to; but now the gong—a trophy of Sir Harry's from Jhansi—sounded, and Annot came hurrying downstairs, and clasped one of Hester's arms within her own so caressingly, with her white fingers interlaced.

To Roland now, at second sight, she looked wonderfully *petite* and gentle, pure and fair—'fair as a snow-flake and nearly just as fragile,' Sir Harry once said, and she clung lovingly and confidingly to Hester, but it seemed as if, of necessity, Annot must always be clinging to someone or something.

CHAPTER VII.

'IS SHE NOT PASSING FAIR?'

WHEN she took her seat at table to partake of a meal which was something between a late dinner and an early supper, Roland saw how exquisitely fair Annot Drummond was, as with a pretty air of childishness she clung to Hester—an air that became her *petite* figure and *mignon* face, but not her years, as she was some months older than her cousin, who with her dark hair and eyes he thought looked almost brown beside this flaxen fairy, that seemed to realize the comment of old Cambden, who says—'The women of the family of Drummond, for charming beauty and complexion, are beyond all others, and in so much that they have been most delighted in by kings.'

She had, however, greenish hazel eyes—greenish they were decidedly, yet lovely and sparkling, shaded by brown lashes and eyebrows, with golden hair, wonderful in quantity

and tint, that rippled and shone. Her complexion was pure and pale, while her pouting lips seemed absolute scarlet, rather than coral; and her eyes spoke as freely as her tongue, lighting and brightening with her subject, whatever it was.

Annot's was indeed a tiny face; at times a laughing, a loving and petulant face, and puzzling in so far that one knew not when it was prettiest, or what expression became it most; yet Hester—a very close observer—thought there was something cunning and watchful in it at times now.

Seeing that Roland was closely observing the new arrival, she said:

'Would you ever imagine, cousin Roland, that Annot and I are just about an age? she looks like fifteen, and I was eighteen my last birthday.'

'Eighteen,' thought Roland Lindsay, toying with a few grapes; 'can it be?—that golden-haired dolly—old enough to be the heroine of a novel or a tragedy—old enough to be a wife and the mistress of a household? By Jove, it seems incredible.'

And as she prattled away of London, the Park and the Row, what plays were 'on' at the different theatres, of new dresses, sights and scenes, and so forth; of her journey down, a long and weary one of some hundred miles, and the attention she received from various gentlemen passengers, the bright chatterer, all smiles, animation, and full of little tricks of manner, seemed indeed a contrast to the taller, graver, dark-haired, and dark-eyed Hester, whose violet-blue eye looked quite black by gaslight.

Though a niece of Sir Harry's, Annot Drummond was no cousin to Roland Lindsay, yet she seemed quite inclined, ere long, to adopt the *rôle* of being one; for he was quite handsome enough and interesting enough in aspect and bearing to attract a girl like her, who instinctively filled up her time with every chance-medley man she met, and knew fully how to appreciate one whose prospects and positions were so undoubtedly good; thus she repeatedly turned with her irresistible smiles and *espièglerie* to him, as if he were her sole, or certainly her chief, audience.

Meanwhile old Sir Henry sat silently smoking his in-

evitable hookah, eyeing her with loving looks, and tracing—or rather trying to trace—a likeness between her and his favourite sister; and Hester, who had of course seen her cousin often before, sat somewhat silent, for then each girl was, perhaps unconsciously, trying to know, to learn, and to grasp the nature of the other.

‘Hester,’ said Annot in a well-managed aside, ‘I saw your friend Skene of Dunnimarle in London, and he talked of you to me, and of no one but you, which I thought scarcely fair.’

‘Why?’

‘One girl doesn’t care to hear another’s praises only for an hour without end, I suppose.’

Hester looked annoyed, but Roland seemed to hear the remark as if he heard it not, which was not the case, as Hester’s name had been more than once mentioned in conjunction with that of the young fellow in question.

‘I remember when Skene of ours at Sealkote——’ Sir Harry was beginning, when Hester contrived to cut the Indian reminiscence short.

Next morning Annot was in the garden betimes, natheless the fatigue of her long railway journey; she seemed bright as a summer butterfly, inhaling the fresh odour of the flowers, under the shady trees, amid the rhododendrons of every brilliant tint, the roses and sub-tropical plants that opened their rich petals to the August sunshine, and more than all did she seem to enjoy the fresh, soft breeze that came up the steep winding glen or ravine through which the Esk ran gurgling; and ever and anon she glanced at her companion Roland, indulging in that playful *gâit   de c  ur*, which so often ends in disaster, for she was a finished flirt to the tips of her dainty fingers; and he was thinking, between the whiffs of his permitted cigar: What caused his present emotion—this sudden attraction towards a girl whom he had never seen before, and whose existence had been barely known to him? And now she was culling a dainty ‘button-hole’ for him, and making him select a bouquet for the breast of her morning dress, a most becoming robe of light blue cashmere with ribbons and lace of white.

Could it be that mysterious influence of which he had

heard often, and yet of which he knew so little—a current of affinity so subtle and penetrating, that none under its spell could resist it? He was not casuist enough to determine; but looked about for his cousin Hester and muttered:

‘Don’t play the fool, Roland, my boy!’

Usually very diffident and reticent in talking about himself and his affairs, even the gentle and winning Hester had failed, as she said, to ‘draw him out;’ but now, Annot—the irrepressible Annot—led him on to do so by manifesting, or affecting to manifest, a keen interest in them, and thus lured him into flattering confidences to her alone about his garrison life in England and the Mediterranean, or as much as he cared to tell of it; his campaigns in Egypt; his escape from the slaughter of Kashgate; his risks and wounds; his medals and clasps; his regiment, comrades, and so forth, in all of which she seemed suddenly to develop the deepest interest, though perhaps an evil-minded person might have hinted that she had a deeper and truer interest in Earlshaugh and its surroundings, of which he had no conception as yet.

Hester quickly saw through these little manœuvres, and at first she laughed at them, thinking they were all the girl’s way; that Roland was the only young man at Merlwood; and so, by habit and nature, she must talk to him, laugh with him, make *æillades* and dress for him; and in dressing she was an adept, choosing always soft and clinging materials of colours suited to her pure complexion and fair beauty, and well she knew by experience already that ‘love feeds on suggestions—almost illusions,’ as a French writer says; ‘for the greatest charm about a woman’s dress is less what it displays than what it only hints at;’ and Annot had all that skill or taste in costume which is a great speciality of London girls.

During the whole day after this arrival, and even the following one, Hester was unpleasantly conscious that because Annot Drummond absorbed Roland so entirely, he had scarcely an opportunity of addressing herself alone, and still less of referring—beyond a glance and a hand pressure or so forth—to that evening, on the last minutes of which so much had seemed to hinge.

A little music usually closed each evening, and Annot

performed, from Chopin and others, various 'fireworks' on the piano, as Roland was wont to term them; while at Hester's little songs, such as that one to the air of the 'Briar Bush,' she openly laughed, declaring they were quite 'too, too!'

Her voice was not so trained as Annot's, and was not remarkable for strength or compass, but it was clear and sweet, fresh and true, and she sang with unaffected expression, being well desirous of pleasing her cousin Roland—her lover as she perhaps deemed him now.

Annot's song, after Hester had given a little *chanson* from Béranger—'*Du, du liegst mir im Herzen,*' accompanied—though sung indifferently—with several *willades* at Roland, gave her an opportunity to make, what Hester termed, some of her 'wild speeches.'

'A sweet love song, Annot,' said the latter.

'A love song it is—but twaddle, you know,' replied Annot, turning quickly the leaves of her music.

'Twaddle—how?'

'About marrying for love only and not money, Hester. That is an old-fashioned prejudice which is fast dying out, mamma tells me. Thank Heaven I am poor!' she added, with a pretty shrug of her shoulders.

'Why?' asked Hester.

'Because, when poor, one knows one is loved for self alone.'

The reply was made in a soft voice to Hester, yet her upward glance was shot at Roland Lindsay, and she began a piece of music that was certainly somewhat confused, while he—sorely puzzled—was kept on duty turning over the leaves.

'Annot, I thought you were a finished performer!' said Hester with some surprise and pique.

'I was taught like other girls at Madame Raffineur's finishing school in Belgium; and I *can* get through a piece, as it is called, without many stoppages, though I often forget upon what key I am playing, and use the pedals too at haphazard, yet they are beyond my skill; but I find that whatever I play——'

'Even a noise?' suggested Hester.

'Yes, even a noise, while it lasts, puts down all conversation, and when it is over everyone graciously says, "Thanks—so much!" "Do I sing?" is next asked, but I mean to practise so sedulously when I return to London.'

'A bright little twaddler!' thought Hester, with a slight curl of her handsome upper lip.

'You talked of the Row—you ride, I suppose?' said Roland to change the subject.

'I have no horse,' replied Annot.

'No horse! At Earlshaugh I shall get you an excellent mount.'

'Oh, thanks so much, cousin Roland!' replied Annot, and while running her slender fingers rapidly to and fro upon the keys she gave him one of her glances which were never given without 'point.'

'You seem pleased with her, Roland?' said Hester as they drew a little way apart.

'Well, I think she is wonderfully fair.'

'Nothing more?'

'Well, fair enough, and all such little golden-haired women since the days of Lucrezia Borgia, I suppose, make no end of mischief.'

'Roland!' said Hester, her eyes dilating.

Her cousin laughed, but knew not, perhaps, how truly and prophetically he spoke.

'Did you like my song?' asked Hester, after a little pause.

'What song?'

'Can you ask me? The little *chanson* of Béranger, that you admire so much.'

'Oh, yes—pardon me.'

'You were thinking of her when you should have been listening to *me*,' said Hester with an unmistakable flash in her dark eyes, and he felt the rebuke.

'Well—I was thinking, perhaps—but not as you suppose, or say, Hester,' replied Roland, with a little laugh; but a time came when Annot Drummond and her presence proved to be no laughing matter.

Days passed on now; whether it was that Annot was perpetually in the way, or that no proper opportunity occurred—which in the circle of a country house seemed

barely probable—Roland did not seek for the ‘lost chord,’ or seem prepared to resume the thread of the sweet old story that had been dropped so abruptly, and poor Hester felt in her secret heart perplexed and piqued on a most tender point, and would have been more than human had she been otherwise.

On an afternoon the quartette were seated under a spreading beech, the girls idling over their tea, Roland and his uncle smoking, when Annot suddenly proposed a walk to the ruins of Roslin Castle, through the woods. Roland at once rose and offered himself as escort; but Hester, who had already begun to feel herself a little *de trop*—a bitter and mortifying conviction—professed to have something to attend to, and quietly declined the stroll, on which, with something of an aching heart, she saw the two set forth together.

Archæology was not much in the way of Miss Annot Drummond, she knew; but she also knew that if any ice remained between these two (which was very improbable) it would be surely thawed before that stroll ended, while in assisting her over stiles and through hedges Roland’s hand touched that of Annot, or when her skirt brushed him, as they wandered through freshly mown meadows and under shady trees, by the steep, narrow, and rocky paths that lead to the shattered stronghold of the Sinclairs—the glances and touches and hand-clasps, enforced by the surmounting of slippery banks and apparently perilous ditches, where the beautiful ferns grow thick and green; and then the rambling among the ruins that crown the lofty rock and overlook such lovely and seductive scenery.

Of what might have passed Hester could only, yet readily, guess; her heart was full of aching thoughts—full well-nigh to bursting at times—when the pair returned, silent apparently, very happy too, and inclined to converse more with their eyes than their lips; and singular to say, that of the sylvan scenery of that wonderful glen, and of the ruined abode of the whilom Dukes of Oldenburg and Princes of Orkney, Annot Drummond seemed to have seen or noted—nothing; and a sense of this, with what it implied, added to the secret mortification of Hester.

Thus, despite herself, that evening at dinner the latter failed to act a part, and scarcely spoke, but seemed to play with her knife and fork rather than eat; and fortunately no one observed her, save perhaps her father. She was painfully listless, yet nervously observant.

Had Roland Lindsay's thoughts not been elsewhere he must have seen how already the change in her looks was intensified by the brilliance, the sparkling eyes, and the soft, gay laughter of Annot, and how, when she did speak, she nervously twisted her rings round and round her slender fingers, seeming restless and *distracte*.

A charming girl was certainly no novelty to Roland; nor did he now regard one—as in his boyhood—as a strange and mystic being to worship. He knew girls pretty well, he thought, also their ways and pretty tricks, their fascinations and little artifices; yet those of Annot—and she was a mass of them—assuredly did bewilder him and attract his fancy, though he only admitted to Hester that she was as 'fashionably appointed and well-got-up a girl as could be found within a three-mile radius of Park Lane.'

She was indeed full of sweet and winning—if cultivated—ways. The inflexions of her voice were very sympathetic, and the ever-varying expression of her bright hazel eyes—albeit they were 'dashed' with green—added to her fascination and influence; whilst she had a childish and pleading way of putting her lovely white hands together when she asked for anything that—as old Sir Henry said—'would melt the heart of a cannon-ball.'

Then, with regard to Roland, she was always asking his advice about some petty trifle or book (though she was not a reader), and deferred to his opinion so sweetly that she gave him a higher idea of his own intellect than he had ever possessed before; for she had all the subtle finesse of flattery and flirtation, without seeming to possess or exert either; and thus poor Hester was—to use a sporting phrase—'quite out of the running.'

One night the latter had a new insight into her cousin's character, though Annot now never spoke, nor could be got to speak, if possible, of Roland Lindsay.

Prior to retiring to her bed, Annot had let down and was

coiling up her wonderful wealth of golden hair, which reached almost to her knees; and she and Hester Maule, with whom she was still on perfectly amicable and apparently loving terms, were exchanging their gossiping confidences, as young girls often do at such a time; and on this occasion Hester thought—for a space—she might be wrong in supposing that Annot had any serious views upon Roland Lindsay, as she saw her drop, and then hastily snatch up, a photograph on which she had been gazing with a smile.

‘Who is this, Annot?’ asked Hester.

‘Only old Bob.’

‘Who?’

‘Bob Hoyle,’ replied Annot, laughing.

‘Old; why, he seems quite a boy, In uniform, too.’

‘He is not a boy, though I call him “old.”’

‘His age?’

‘Is four-and-twenty; but I have known him so long, you know, Hester.’

‘Since when?’

‘Since he used to come and see his sister at Madame Raffineur’s school in Belgium. He is awfully in love with me.’

‘Is?’ queried Hester, a little relieved of her suspicions.

‘Well—was—when younger.’

‘And now?’

‘He loves me still, I have no doubt.’

‘Do you mean to marry him?’

‘He has never asked me.’

‘Well, if he did—or does ask you?’

‘I don’t know about that,’ said Annot, as with deft little fingers she finished and pinned her golden coil.

‘Why so?’

‘Oh, cousin Hester, how inquisitive you are! I like him immensely. He says openly that he can’t stand the London girls; that they are all very well to flirt with, dance, drive, and talk with; but he wants a wife who in her own sweet person will combine all the charms of fashionable and domestic life, like me. But then he is so poor; has little more than his pay. I can’t fancy being poorer than I am

—love in a cottage is all bosh, you know ; but I have promised him——'

'What?'

'To think about it ; but I won't be bound by promises, Hester. When I marry I want to be rich. I must have a carriage, beautiful horses, diamonds and dresses, for I have no *dot* of my own. Marry for love, indeed ! No, no, Bob, dear. Who in these days does anything so absurd as that ? It is as much out of fashion as chivalry, duels, and periwigs.'

'Oh, Annot—so young and so mercenary !' exclaimed Hester.

'Not mercenary, only practical, cousin. Another dear fellow did so love me last winter, Hester !' said the girl, with a dreamy smile.

'And now?'

'We are less than nothing to each other, Hester—after all —after all.'

'How—why?'

'He was a second son—Mamma's *bête noire* ; besides, a married lady took him off my hands.'

'A married lady?' exclaimed Hester.

'Yes—oh, my simple cousin ! The mischief done in London nowadays by married flirts would amaze you, Hester ; but good-night, I am so sleepy, dear.'

And kissing the latter with great *empressement* on each cheek, Annot departed to repose with one of her silvery laughs, leaving the impression that if 'she was passing fair' she was also passing heartless.

CHAPTER VIII.

'IT WAS NO DREAM.'

To Roland Lindsay there was some new and undefinable attraction towards Annot Drummond, against which, to do him justice, he strove in vain, and his eyes actually fell under the calm glance of his cousin Hester. 'Call it what one may,' says a writer, 'that such a power does exist, and most seriously influences our lives, is an undoubted fact. We may

deride and deny it as we will ; but who can honestly doubt that the sudden and mutual attraction felt by two persons who are in essential matters absolutely ignorant of each other, does occur in the lives of most of us, and it is not to be fought against or laughed away in any manner.'

Whether the attraction was quite *mutual* in this instance remains to be seen. As yet the intercourse between Roland and Miss Drummond *seemed*, with a little more *empressement* of manner, merely the well-bred companionship of two persons connected through mutual relations and residence in the same pleasant country house ; but the change in Roland's manner to herself—veil it as he might—was subtly felt by Hester, and became apparent even to her father, the otherwise obtuse old Indian campaigner.

'He was ever attentive, full of fun, lightness, and merriment ; but, oh, there is no mistaking that there is a change now—a change since *she* came. What can it be—what has come over him ?' thought Hester.

'It is all very odd,' growled Sir Harry ; 'I can't make out the situation now. Roland does not seem a flirting fellow, whatever the girl may be, and she is plain when compared with my Hester ; yet he looks like a shorn Samson in the fairy hands of this little golden-haired Delilah, and seems never happy except when with her. It appears to me that people nowadays always fall in love when, where, and with whom they ought not. Ah, he is one of the "Lightsome Lindsays ;" yet I never saw anyone so changed,' added Sir Harry, who had latterly found him wax weary of his Indian reminiscences.

Meanwhile Annot, who firmly believed in the dictum of Thackeray, 'that any woman who has not positively a hump can marry any man she pleases,' quietly pursued her own course ; and day by day it was Hester's lot to see this courtship evidently in progress—herself at times ignored and reduced to 'playing gooseberry,' as Annot thought (if, indeed, she ever thought at all)—reduced again to her own inner life once more ; and knowing that nothing of it could interest them now, so much did they seem bound in each other, she pursued her old avocations among the poor and parish people more than ever.

The love—the budding love—he certainly once loved *her*—was less than a shadow now!

She ceased to accompany them in their walks and long rambles in the woody glen by Mavisbank and Eldin groves, and knowing the time when Roland was certainly 'due' at Earlsbaugh, she counted every hour till he should leave Merlwood.

'What a couple of wanderers you have become!' said Sir Harry, a little pointedly.

'Roland is so sympathetic,' simpered Annot; 'he appreciates fully all my yearnings after the beautiful, of which we can see nothing in the brick wilderness of London; and certainly your scenery on the Esk is surpassingly lovely, uncle!' though in reality she cared not a jot about it, and had somewhat the Cockney's idea of a landscape, 'that too much wood and too much water always spoiled it.'

One evening matters had evidently reached a culminating point with this pair.

Returning at a somewhat late hour for her, when the gloaming was deepening into darkness, from visiting a poor widow, to whom she had taken some comforts, Hester, on reaching Merlwood, paused in a garden path to look around her, pleased and soothed by the calmness and stillness of the dewy August evening, when not a sound was heard but the ceaseless murmur of the unseen Esk far down below. Suddenly, amid the shrubbery, she heard familiar voices, to which she listened dreamily, mechanically, at first; then, startled by their tenor, she was compelled to shrink between the great shrubs, and—however obnoxious and repugnant to her—was compelled to overhear; and till indignation came, as she listened, there was a passionate, pleading expression in Hester's eyes, which was unseen in the dark; as was the quivering of the lip that came from the torture of the soul.

Roland was speaking in accents low and eager, and in others that were broken and tremulous Annot was responding.

'You have made me so happy, dearest Roland, by the first whisper that you—you loved me,' sighed the girl.

'I seem scarcely to recollect what happened to me before I met you here, Annot,' said he.

‘How so?’ she asked coyly.

‘It seems as if I had only existed then.’

‘And now, Roland?’

‘I live, my darling! for

“In many mental forms I vainly sought
The shadow of the idol of my thought,”

till now. In three days more—only three—my little Annot—my golden-haired darling, I shall have to leave you for Earlshaugh; and, till you join me there, what will life be without you?’

He drew her close to him, and poor Hester shivered; but flight was impossible.

‘And what will life at Merlwood be to me?’ replied, or rather asked, Annot, in that caressing and cooing tone which she well knew was one of her chief attractions.

‘But Earlshaugh in time will be your home, Annot—yours, to make what alterations you choose on the quaint old place. You shall reign there—the fairest and dearest bride that ever came within its walls.’

‘Do not talk thus, Roland!’

‘Why?’

‘It makes me feel as if I were selling myself.’

‘Annot!’ he expostulated; and she answered with that low, cooing laugh of hers which was such a wonderful performance.

‘Now, tell me,’ said she; ‘were you ever in love before?’

‘Why that question, Annot?’

‘I have no motive—only curiosity, Roland—yet I could not bear to think that you had ever loved anyone else as you do me.’

‘I never did! All men have, or have had fancies,’ said he evasively.

‘I don’t mean a fancy—a real love!’

‘Annot?’

‘Did you ever ask a girl to marry you?’

‘Never—never! My darling—my pet—my little fairy—you alone have crept into my heart and made it all your own! With all their real length, how short have seemed

the August days since you came hither, Annot!—how brief and swift the hours we spend together! But—but—you must say nothing of all this, our hopes and our future, to Hester.’

‘No—oh no; I love you too fondly to have a confidant in the world.’

‘I must seal your lips, dearest Annot,’ interrupted Roland. Then came a pause and many caresses and many endearing names, as they slipped softly away towards the lighted windows of the villa, and left the agonized and startled listener free—for startled she was, and, curiously enough, for all she had seen and suspected, she was scarcely prepared for such a scene as this; and every caress she saw had seemed to sink like a hot poniard into her heart, as she stole away to her room, and strove to think, as one might in a dream.

Vague and numb was the first impression the episode made upon her, till feverish jealousy and mortification made her clasp and wring her hot, dry hands, and gnaw her nether lip, while burning tears rolled down her cheeks, with the assurance that all was over now!

‘After all—he meant nothing—nothing after all!’ she muttered; ‘why did you make me love you so, Roland!’

The man she had loved—who fully, as far as manner and almost words went, had answered her love for him, had meant nothing, but *pour passer le temps*. He had been, he thought perhaps, only kind, friendly, cousinly, while she—great Heavens!—had been on the point of laying her affectionate heart at his feet.

Oh, what humiliation was hers!

In explanation of the lateness of their return, they had been a long walk, the loiterers said, away below Roslin Chapel; but said nothing of what the walk had somewhat suddenly evolved.

When the gloaming was considerably advanced, and, though a ruddy sunset lingered in the north-west, there was no moon in the sky, where the evening star shone brilliantly, they had wandered down the river-side—its current flowing like molten silver when seen between and under the dark, overshadowing, and weird-like trees—to where, on the

summit of its high and grassy knoll, the beautiful chapel of Roslin towered up between them and the sky-line—the solemn scene, as Scott has preserved it, of one of the most thrilling and poetical of all family presages of death and war; a legend deduced from the tomb-fires of the Norsemen, and, doubtless, transplanted from our stormy Northern Isles to the sylvan valley of the Esk by that old Prince of Orkney, whose bride, Rosabelle, perished, and when the chapel seemed filled with flame.

‘O’er Roslin all that dreary night,
A wondrous blaze was seen to gleam :
’Twas broader than the watchfire’s light,
And redder than the bright moonbeam.’

Even as Roland was quoting these lines to Annot Drummond a wonderful but natural effect took place.

‘Look, Roland,’ cried she with a thrill of real terror; ‘look, the chapel is on fire!’

‘Oh, impossible,’ said he, still intent on gazing on her sweet face.

‘But look—look—it *is*!’

Whether she thought so or not Annot was evidently startled and discomposed, while Roland certainly was not without momentary astonishment. A row of red lights appeared through the branches of the dark trees high above where he and Annot stood. It was the last light of the orange and blood-red set sun gleaming though the double row of chapel windows—the rich red light that is peculiar to Scottish sunsets, and the phenomenon it produced had a powerful effect upon the vision and minds of the beholders—even on the volatile and unimaginative Annot, who, before the light faded out, was not slow to understand and to utilize the situation in her own way.

She clung to Roland in an access of terror apparently, and that it was more than partly simulated certainly he never thought. While seeming to be terrified by the ghostly sight, she hid her face in his neck; and then Roland felt it was all over with him!

‘My darling—my darling, do not be so alarmed—it is only a transient sunset effect,’ said he, kissing her cheek.

‘Don’t, Roland, don’t—oh, you must not do that,’ she murmured.

But Roland did *that*, again and again—pressing his lips to her eyes, her rippling hair—covering her face with kisses, while he half lifted, half led her homeward, up the steep and winding path to Merlwood, which they reached, as said, at a somewhat later period than usual.

‘Well,’ thought Hester, as she bathed her face and eyes to remove all traces of her late emotion, ‘in three days I shall, for a time at least, see and hear no more of this. And yet—my heart will speak—I have loved *him*—all my life—ever since he was a boy ; and she has known him, as it were, but yesterday !’

She put a hand to her forehead and pushed back the rings and rows of heavy brown hair, as if their weight oppressed her.

‘Thank Heaven !’ she thought, ‘I can make my life a useful and a busy one, even here. Thank Heaven for the refuge of another love, with work and duty—love and duty to papa, and work for my poor people and their little ones ! But why, oh why,’ she added, while interlacing her fingers behind her neck, and looking round her wildly, ‘did he love her after *all*?—why turn from me to her—that little golden-haired doll, with her winning ways and heartless nature ; and how comes it that her languorous green eyes have power to awake such a passion as filled every accent of Roland’s voice in the gloaming there ? She came when she was not wanted ; and both are cruel, heartless, treacherous !’

But, to do Annot justice, she knew nothing then of the tender relations that had begun to exist between Hester and her cousin, though we do not suppose that the knowledge would have much influenced that enterprising young lady in her plans and views, her wishes and purpose.

Hester felt that she had been ready enough—too ready, she now feared—to show him all her own heart, till that other girl came, and she thought till now that it had frozen up under Annot’s presence and too evident influence on him.

That evening she did not appear at dinner, but sent excuses downstairs, and refused to receive even a visit from Annot. That would have been indeed too much to have

undergone ; but anon the mental storm passed away ; the ruddy dawn stole into Hester's bedroom, and she rested her weary head against the open window to inhale the fresh morning breeze that came up the woody valley of the Esk, and over parterres of dewy flowers that were sweet enough to grace the bank whereon the Queen of Elfin slept.

That day she saw on Annot's mystic finger—the fourth of the left hand—a ring she had not observed before, and knew who was the donor, and what the gift meant, but the knowledge could not give her a keener pang. She thought of Roland's gift, and of the emotions that had filled her heart when he had clasped it round her neck. She could not return that gift to Roland without some reason ; and she apparently had none ; but yet its retention was most repugnant to her, and never would she wear it. He had given it to her as his cousin—nothing more, now it would seem. Did he mean it so, *then* ?

The dainty slippers, with blue embroidery on buff leather, which had formed a portion of her daily and loving work, were relinquished now and cast aside, too probably to be never finished.

Hester Maule felt all the shame and sorrow of loving one in secret, whose heart and preference were given to another. What evil turn of Destiny had wrought this for her ? Why had she so mistaken—if she *had* indeed done so—his mere playful, cousinly regard for aught else than its true value ?

Yet—yet there had been times—especially on that night when he gave her the jewels—that a gleam of tenderness, of yearning, of love had lit up his dark eyes—an expression that had gone straight to her heart and made every nerve thrill. Why had she not guessed then—why not foreseen what was to happen ? But the *future* is always oddly woven up with the *present*, we are told ; and ‘ how strange are the small threads that first begin to spin the great woofs of our life story—unnoted, unheeded at the time—they stand out clearly and plainly to our mental vision afterwards, and we ask ourselves with bitter anguish, “ Why did we not guess—why did we not foresee it ? ” Better, perhaps, that the power

of prevision is denied us, since we can neither alter nor avert the doom that awaits us along the path of life.'

We do not mean to palliate or defend the indecision—change of love and regard—on the part of Roland Lindsay; but Hester had been from his earliest years so much of a younger sister to him, that, though loving, winning, and gentle, this golden-haired girl, with all her *espièglerie*, her bold little speeches, and pretty touches and tricks of manner, came as a new experience to him; and for the present certainly, to all appearance, had enslaved and bewildered him, dazzling his fancy to say the least of it.

Despite all her efforts, Hester, if she completely controlled her manner, could not conceal her pain; thus her eyes seemed dull, even sunken, and harsh lines marred the usual sweetness of her lips. If Roland noted these signs, he strove to ignore them. Annot had artfully instilled some petty jealous suspicions of young Skene of Dunnimarle in Roland's mind, and he sought mentally to make these a kind of apology to himself, while seeming indifferent to what the girl might suffer, even when her presence (despite the arrangement for secrecy she had overheard) scarcely at times interfered with the *sotto voce* babble of their lover-like but inane conversation.

To Hester it seemed as if she was in a bad dream, but

'It was no dream, and she was desolate.'

CHAPTER IX.

THE OLD LOVE AND THE NEW.

So Roland Lindsay was engaged to Annot Drummond. Hester could have no doubt about that when she saw the ring upon her mystic finger; and she supposed rightly that till he could ascertain definitely 'how the land lay' at Earlsbaugh nothing further was arranged, and at last, to her supreme satisfaction—an emotion she once never thought to feel, so far as Roland was concerned—the day of his departure for Fifeshire came.

‘I must turn up at Earlsbaugh now,’ said he, when the last evening came. ‘I have asked Jack Elliot, Skene, and one or two other fellows, over for the covert shooting; and also, I suppose, I shall have to give my attention to Mr. Hawkey Sharpe in the matters of subsoil and drainage, mangold wurzel, and all that sort of thing.’

‘I don’t think he will trouble you much on these matters,’ said Sir Harry dryly.

‘Why, uncle?’

‘You will find that he deems them his own peculiar province and *interest* too,’ replied Sir Harry, with a lowering expression of eye; and that his once jolly old uncle’s manner was now somewhat cool to him Roland was unpleasantly sensible: and when the evening drew on, and, knowing that he would depart betimes in the morning, he had to bid Hester farewell, something of regret—even remorse—came across his mind. He suspected too surely all she had been led to hope of him in the past—the love he could not give her now, at least; and he strove to affect a light bearing to her, and appear his old *insouciant* self, while thinking over Annot’s instilled suspicions.

‘Skene!’ he muttered; ‘was my regard for Hester a passing infatuation, or an old revived fancy? Was it likely to have proved a lasting attachment if Annot had not come? And in Hester would I have but received the worn-out remnant of an attachment for another? Do not look so strange—so white, cousin,’ said he in a low voice, as he touched her hand.

‘White am I?’ asked Hester with inexpressible annoyance; ‘if so, it is caused by anxiety for papa—he is not strong, Roland.’

‘Of course,’ glad to affect or adopt any idea; ‘but always trust to me——’

‘To *you*!’

‘Yes; we have ever been friends, and shall be so always, I hope, for I never forget that I am your cousin, though the privileges of such might turn a wiser head than mine,’ he added, unwisely, awkwardly, and with a little laugh.

A gleam came into Hester’s eyes, which always looked

nearly as black as night, and there was an angry curl on her red lip for a moment.

Bewildered—besotted, in fact—though Roland had become, by the wiles, graces, and beauty of the brilliant Annot, it was impossible for him not to feel, we say, some compunction, and keenly too, for his treatment of the soft and gentle Hester. He could not and dared not in any fashion approach so delicate a subject with her—explanation or exculpation was not to be thought of; yet he felt reproach subtly in her manner; he could read it in her eyes, strive to conceal her emotions as she might; and confusion made him blunder again.

‘Hester, we part but for a few days,’ said he in a low voice, and with more *empressement* of manner than he had adopted for some time past; ‘we have ever been excellent friends, have we not, my dear girl? and now we shall be more so than ever.’

Hester remained silent. ‘Why now, more than ever?’ thought she, while his half-apologetic tone irritated and cut her to the heart, and she knew that a much more tender leave-taking with Annot was over and had taken place unseen; and now, indulging in dreamy thoughts of her own, that young lady was idling over the keys of the piano.

‘Will you miss me when I am gone?’ he asked, with a little nervous smile.

‘No doubt you will be missed—by papa especially.’

‘Well, I hope so.’

‘Why?’

‘It is nice to feel one’s self important to others,’ said he, with another awkward attempt at a jest; adding, ‘May I?’ as he lighted a cigar.

She grew paler still; for a moment he looked sorrowfully into her white-lidded and velvety dark blue eyes, and attempted to touch her hand, but she shrank back.

‘I should like,’ he began, ‘to stay a little longer, of course, but I must go; the covert shooting is at hand, and Earlsbaugh must wait me.’

‘It is more than some do there, papa thinks.’

‘The more reason for me to go, cousin,’ said he, with darkening face.

‘Go—and the sooner the better,’ thought Hester bitterly; ‘there is now no middle course for me—for us; we must be everything or nothing to each other—and nothing it is!’

‘Good-night, Hester dear,’ said he, still lingering. ‘Adieu, Annot. I shall be off to-morrow by gunfire, as we say in barracks, when all are asleep in Merlwood.’

‘Good-night.’

And so they parted, but not finally.

Early though the hour next day, Hester was too active by habit, too much of a housewife, and too kind of heart to permit him to depart without being down betimes to give him a cup of coffee and to see him ere he went, despite his laboured apologies. How fresh and bright Hester seemed in her white morning dress, with all its frills—fresh from her bath, and both clear-skinned and fair, as only a dark-haired and dark-eyed girl usually looks at such a time, requiring none of that powdering and other odious process now known as ‘making up.’ Annot’s low curtains remained closely drawn, and there was no sign of that young lady, for the sun was barely over the woods of Hawthornden.

Hester tendered her soft cheek for Roland’s farewell salute, and carried it bravely off—better even than he did, as with a wave of the hand he was driven away.

He was gone—*gone*, and had ceased to be hers. Lingeringly the girl looked around her. To Hester every flower and shrub in the garden seemed to have a voice and say so. Every inanimate object told her so again and again. Fragments of his cigar lay about the gravel walks; there yet swung his hammock between the trees; and there was almost no task she could attempt now that was not associated with him, and, worse than all, with Annot Drummond.

Long did Hester sit on a garden sofa, as the former could see from her window, while brushing out her marvellous hair—sit with cold and locked hands and pathetic eyes, motionless and miserable, as she listened like one in a dream to the singing of the birds, the humming of the bees around her, and the pleasant murmur of her native Esk.

The fair and beautiful girl saw this and knew the cause thereof; yet in her great love and passion, if not in her artful design, she was pitiless!

She was too well trained, she thought, by her mother to be otherwise. Taught from her cradle to look upon wealth, and all that wealth could obtain, as the chief object of life, she had from the days of her short frocks and plaited hair, heard only of 'excellent matches,' of 'moneyed marriages,' and 'eligible men,' and so her mind was framed in another world from Hester's.

Men, thought the latter, cared little for a love that was easily won, she had read. Perhaps Roland valued hers lightly thus. Well, she would assert herself—might even go to Earlsbaugh, meet him beneath his own roof, and in his own home show herself that she was heart-whole, could she but act the part her innate pride suggested.

At first she avoided Annot, whom she heard hourly idling over the piano; she felt, amid all her crushing and mortifying thoughts, that she would be happier if busy, and so she bustled about the house affecting to be dreadfully so; tied up, let down, snipped, and twined rose-bushes in the garden, and strove to look happy and cheerful, with a sick and sinking heart—even attempting to sing, but her voice failed her.

On the other hand, the frivolous, emotional, and perhaps somewhat sensuous nature of Annot required change, society, and above all some exciting incident to keep her even in tolerable humour and mental health; and now that she had no companion at Merlwood but Hester and her old uncle, with his inevitable hookah and Indian small talk, she became unmistakably *triste* and fidgety, impatient and absent—only awake and radiant when the postman was expected. She felt utterly bored by Merlwood now, and could not conceal her impatience to fulfil her visit to Earlsbaugh.

'I quite look forward to that event,' said she.

'No doubt,' assented Hester.

'It will be so delightful—a country house full of people, and mamma not there to watch and scold me in private.'

'For what?'

'Ah, you should see or hear her after she has caught me idling much with a detrimental, or daring to leave my hand in his for a moment.'

'Annot?'

'I fear that I am a natural born flirt, Hester.'

The latter made no reply, as she thought, a little disdainfully, that these would-be artless speeches were merely meant to 'cast dust in her eyes,' and with regard to her own visit to Fifeshire, she was seldom twice in the same mood of mind.

'Invited to Earlsbaugh—to meet, see, and associate hourly with him, and with *her*, too, there!' Hester would think. 'Better feign illness and stay at home—at sequestered Merlwood; but that would only be putting off the evil day. As her kinsman, she must meet him some time and face it boldly—meet him as little more than a friend, after all that had passed between them, and he had left—unsaid!'

'I cannot make you and Roly—I mean Roland—out!' said Annot on one occasion.

'How?' asked Hester. 'I do not understand you.'

'I always thought myself quick in discovering cases of spoon——'

'Don't be slangy, Annot.'

'Slang or not, you know the phrase and all it expresses!'

'Well?'

'When I first came here I made up my mind that Roland was entirely yours, though I could not be sure whether you returned his regard; but after being with you both for nearly a month, I find myself quite at a loss.'

'Do you?' said Hester icily.

'Yes—you parted last night without the least sign of regret or emotion, and all that sort of thing.'

'How dare she attempt to quiz me thus?' thought Hester, feeling almost that she could strike the smiling little speaker; 'how dare she?—but she knows not all I know—all I was compelled to overhear!'

So, as days passed on, beyond dark shadows under her eyes, the result of broken nights, there was little bodily sign of what Hester endured mentally.

'Why, Hester, you have really and truly received a letter at last from Earlsbaugh!' exclaimed Annot one morning, to Hester's annoyance and pique, as the former quickly recognised the coat of arms and post-mark; and that Annot, who received missives from the same source daily, should jest over the event, made Hester, with all her innate gentleness of heart, almost hate the speaker.

It was from Roland at last, thanking her and Sir Harry for their great kindness to him, and hoping to see her and Annot Drummond together at Earlsbaugh at the time proposed.

Nothing more !

‘Go to Earlsbaugh—no—no !’ was again Hester’s first thought, with a kind of shudder ; ‘to be with *them* morning, noon, and evening—the feeling would madden me—yet how am I to excuse myself?’

‘You never go from home now, papa,’ she took an opportunity of saying as she wound her soft arms round Sir Harry’s time-silvered head and drew it down upon her breast ; ‘and seldom though I do so, I wish to escape this visit to Earlsbaugh—I am most loth to leave you.’

‘For a few weeks—a few miles’ distance !’

‘But who will take my place when I am gone? Who will make your breakfast so early, cut the papers, and brighten up the fire for you——’

‘The housekeeper, of course.’

‘Deck the room with flowers ; walk with you along the woody paths by the river? Who will read, play, and sing to you at night? I do not wish to go at all, papa—let Annot go alone.’

‘Nonsense, girl ! I shall miss you, of course, but it is only for a time,’ said her father, who knew and felt well that it was in the nature of Hester to think and anticipate his every wish, and do all that in its truest and holiest sense made Merlwood a *home* for him.

‘You are not worrying yourself about anything, dear?’ said the old gentleman, who had his own thoughts on the matter, as he put an arm caressingly round her, and eyed her anxiously.

‘Of course not, papa,’ replied Hester with assumed briskness ; ‘about what should I worry?’

‘Little troubles look big at times,’ said he, laying his head back in his easy-chair.

Her trouble was not a little one, however, and while pursuing his own thoughts her father made her pale cheek grow paler still.

‘Annot seems to have taken a great fancy to Roland ;

but the fancies of town-bred girls are often mere moonshine.'

'Not the fancies of such girls as Annot, with a home-like Earlshaugh in prospective,' said Hester, with a forced laugh, as she recalled Annot's several confidences.

'Ah !' muttered the old gentleman dubiously, while tugging his wiry white moustache ; 'still, it may be a fancy that will pass,' he continued, still pursuing his own thoughts ; 'and things always come right in the end.'

'On the stage and in novels, papa,' replied Hester, laughing outright.

'But they *do* wind up rightly, dear, even in real life sometimes.'

'You know, papa, it is always said that no man ever marries his first love.'

'It may be so, Hester—it may be so ; but one thing you may be sure of, if he is a true man.'

'And that is——'

'He never can forget her.'

Sir Harry's eyes kindled, and his voice grew soft as he said this ; for his thoughts were wandering away to the wife of his youth—she who now lay in the old kirkyard above the Esk—and of whom Hester seemed then a living reproduction, or the old man thought so ; and when he spoke thus in the love and chivalry of his heart, he revived in Hester a moth-like desire to go to Earlshaugh after all, such is the idiosyncrasy of human nature ; and as some one has it, 'to suffer that self-immolation, which is common to unhappy lovers. She longed to see Roland once more'—to feast her eyes upon the man who seemed happy with another, no matter what the after-pain might be.

What she meant to say or do, or how to look—when this new fancy seized her—she knew not. She only knew that—meanly, she thought—she hungered and thirsted for the sound of his voice and a glance of his eyes, before, perhaps, he—even as the husband of Annot Drummond—went to Egypt or elsewhere, it might be to return, perhaps, no more.

Meanwhile, that 'fair one with the golden locks' was all feverish impatience till the time came for quitting Merlwood,

and had no doubt that Roland would cross the Forth to meet her.

‘You seem strangely interested in the movements of Roland,’ said Sir Harry rather grimly to her.

‘He is almost half a cousin, is he not, uncle?’ said Annot, in her most cooing and caressing way; ‘but no one would think me so foolish as to lose my heart to a mere cousin.’

‘None will suspect you of such a loss, indeed,’ observed Hester, with some pardonable bitterness, as she recalled all she had so unwillingly overheard in the shrubbery on that eventful evening.

CHAPTER X.

ROLAND'S HOME-COMING.

LET us return to the day of Roland Lindsay's departure from Merlwood, when full of thoughts of a sorrowful cast, and perhaps in the frame described by Wordsworth as

‘That sweet mood when pleasant thoughts
Bring sad thoughts to the mind.’

A letter that had come for him overnight—one from Annot's mother in South Belgravia—he scanned twice hurriedly, and consigned to his pocket. Annot, in that quarter, had made no secret, apparently, of the terms on which he and she were, and the congratulations of the old lady were palpable enough.

‘What is next?’ he muttered, as he opened a little basket and laughed. It contained sandwiches and sherry, peaches, grapes, and a little bouquet of hot-house flowers, all selected, he knew, by the white hands of Hester.

‘Poor girl!’ he muttered; ‘does she think I am bound, not for Earlshaugh, but for Alexandria?’

He had beautifully-coloured photos of both girls in his pocket-book—one of Annot, smiling, saucy, and arch, with her laughing eyes and golden hair; and one of Hester, with her calm, sweet expression, her dark, beseeching, and plead-

ing eyes, and hair of rich dark brown ; but he had one of the former's fair tresses—not the first of them that Annot had bestowed on 'Bob Hoyle' and others that he knew not of. But so it is—

'Fair tresses man's imperial race ensnare,
And beauty draws us with a single hair.'

Merlwood had vanished as the train sped on, and, away from the immediate influence of Annot, softer memories of Hester began to mingle upbraidingly with the idea of the former, and—as he thought it all over again—the past ; he recurred mentally to many a loving and half-ended episode, to Hester's winning softness, her pleading, truthful eyes of violet blue, and he felt himself, though uncommitted by pledge or promise, inexpressibly false !

It was not a pleasant reflection or conviction even while caressing Annot's shining tress of hair—his tempter and her supplanter.

Some men, it has been said, when they form a new attachment, try to teach themselves that the old one contained no true love in it. This was not the case with Roland, nor could he be a man to love two at once, though some natures are thought to be capable of such an idiosyncrasy.

At last he was roused from his mingled day-dreams by his train clanking into the Waverley Station, and he saw Edinburgh, the old town and the new, with gables, spires, and tower-crowned rocks rising on each side of him, with a mighty bridge of round arches high in air spanning the space between.

The day was yet young, so he idled for a time at the United Service Club with Jack Elliot, his comrade in Egypt, on leave like himself, and now his sister Maude's *fiancé*, a fine, handsome, and soldier-like young fellow, of whom more anon—full of such earnest love and enthusiasm for the girl of his unwavering choice, that Roland—reflecting on his late proceedings at Merlwood—felt his cheek redden more than once, as well it might, and an involuntary sigh escaped him, though he could little foresee the *future*.

So full was he of his own thoughts, that it was not until

he was landing on the Fife side of the Forth that he reflected with annoyance :

‘What a fool I have been, when in the city, not to call upon old MacWadsett, the W.S., about the exact terms of my father’s will. They never reached me in Egypt—the Bedouins at Ramleh made free with the mail-bags. Besides, I need not have gone before this, as the old fellow has been on the Continent.’

So he consoled himself with the inevitable cigar, while the train rolled on by many a familiar scene, on which he had not looked for an age, as it seemed now ; by the ‘lang, lang town’ of Kirkaldy, and picturesque Dysart, with its zigzag streets, overlooked by the gaunt dwelling-place of Queen Annabella, and the sea-beaten rock of Ravenscraig ; anon past Falkland Woods, and after he crossed the Eden he began to trace the landmarks of Earlshaugh, and the train halted at a little wayside station, close beside an old and almost unused avenue that led to the latter, and he sprang out upon the platform, where he seemed to be the only passenger. The two or three officials who were loitering about were strangers, and eyed him leisurely.

‘Has not a trap come for my luggage?’ he asked.

‘For where, sir?’

‘Earlshaugh.’

‘No sir,’ replied one, touching his cap, an ex-soldier recognising his questioner’s military air. ‘No trap is here.’

‘Strange!’ muttered Roland, giving his moustache an angry twist ; ‘and yet I wrote—I’ll walk on, and send for my things,’ he added.

The house was little more than a mile distant, and every foot of the way had been familiar to him from infancy.

On many a strange and foreign scene had he looked, and many a peril had he faced, in the land of the Pharaohs since last he had trod that shady avenue—the land of the Sphinx and the Pyramids, where the hot sand of the desert seemed to vibrate and quiver under the fierce glare of the unclouded sun.

Forgetful of old superstitions, he had entered the avenue by the Weird Yett. It was deemed unlucky for a Lindsay of Earlshaugh to approach his house after a long absence

through that barrier ; but as the gate was open, Roland, full of his own thoughts, passed in, heedless of the legend which told that the Lindsay fared ill who did so.

Two stone pillars, dated 1600, with an arch and coat of arms with the Lindsay supporters, two lions *sejant*, formed the barrier, which was usually closed by a massive iron gate, the barbs or pikes of which had once been gilt. A century later had seen it the favourite trysting-place of Roland Lindsay, the younger, of Earlshaugh, and a daughter of a neighbour, the Laird of Craigie Hall, till the former left with his regiment, the Scots Guards, for Spain. One evening the girl was lingering there, in the soft violet light of the gloaming, impelled by what emotion she scarcely knew, but doubtless to dream of her lover who she thought was far away, when suddenly a cry escaped her, as she saw him appear, in his scarlet uniform, with feather-bound hat—the Monmouth cock—his flowing wig, and sword in its splendid belt ; but gouts of blood were upon his lace cravat, and she could see that his face was sad and pale, as face and figure melted away and she found herself alone.

Apparitions generally ‘come in their habits as they lived,’ says the authoress of the ‘Night side of Nature,’ ‘and appear so much like the living person in the flesh that when they are *not* known to be dead, they are frequently mistaken for them. There are exceptions to this rule, but it is very rare that the forms in themselves exhibit anything to create alarm.’

So did the girl’s lover appear to her as if alive.

With a power of reason beyond her years and time, she tried to think—could it be a dream of her excited brain ? But no, she was awake with all her senses ; she thought of the blood on his dress, and the awful knowledge came to her, that she had looked upon the face of the dead—on the wraith of her lover—who, a month after she learned, had perished at that very hour and time, shot by the Spaniards on the fatal field of Almanza.

‘The divine arts of printing and gunpowder have frightened away Robin Goodfellow and the Fairies,’ wrote Sir John Aubrey of old ; but the ghost of the Weird Yett lingered long in the unused avenue of Earlshaugh.

When he did recall the terror of his boyhood, Roland smiled ; but kindly, for every feature round him spoke of *home*. Seen through the tree-stems was the old thatched hamlet of Earlsbaugh, on the side of a burn crossed by one huge stone as a bridge—the hamlet where the clatter of the weaver's loom still lingered even in these days of steam appliances, and on the humble doors of which the old Scottish risp or tirling-pin was to be seen as elsewhere in the East Neuk ; and as he looked at the gray fallen monolith by which the stream was crossed, he thought of the old song which seemed to describe it :

‘ Yet it had a bluirly look,
 Some score o’ years ago,
 An’ the wee burn seemed a river then,
 As it roared doon below ;
 And a bauld bairn was he,
 In the merry days lang gane,
 Wha waded through the burn,
 Aneath the auld brig-stane.’

And, as if to complete the picture, an old woman, wearing one of those white mutches, with the modest black band of widowhood, introduced by Mary of Guelders, sat on a ‘divot-seat’ knitting at the sunny end of her little thatched cottage.

A love of his birthplace and a pride in his historic race were the strongest features in the character of Roland Lindsay, and Earlsbaugh was certainly such a home as any man might be pardoned for regarding with something of enthusiasm.

As he looked upon the old manor house, high, square, and embattled, towering on its grassy steep above the haugh—that abode of so many memories, with all his pride in it, and pride of race and name, there came a stormy emotion, or sense of humiliation—even of rage, when he thought of the tenor or alleged tenor of that will, by which his father, in the senility of age (if all he heard were true), had degraded him to a cypher by leaving the estate entirely to an alien, to his second wife, who had been the artful companion of his first—to the exclusion of him—Roland, the heir of line and blood, save for such a pittance or allowance as she chose to

accord him, for the term of his or her natural life, which, when the chances of war and climate were considered, was certain to exceed his own, his senior though she was in years.

After all he had endured in the deserts by the Nile, hunger, thirst, suffering, sickness, and wounds, facing and enduring all that a soldier may since last he had looked on old, gray Earlshaugh, as memory went flashing back he strove to forget for a brief time the wrong his father had done himself and his sister Maude, and to think only of his happy boyhood, and all that had been then.

Memories of his dead parents, of his gentle and loving mother, of his manly and fox-hunting father, who had taught him to ride, and shoot, and fish—of little brothers who lay buried by their side in the grave—of his childhood, of games, and old—or rather young—longings and imaginings, when the woods of Earlshaugh, and the trouting stream, were objects of vague mystery, the former peopled with fairies, and the latter the abode of a wicked kelpie !

Many a living voice and loving face had passed away since then—vanished for ever ; but the memories of them were strong and pathetic. The rooks still clamoured in the old trees, and the birds sang amid the shrubberies as of old ; he heard the men whistling and singing in the stable-yard. In the fields the soil had a fresh and grassy odour in the noonday sunshine familiar to him ; and he felt the conviction that though he in many a sense had changed, Nature had not—‘for the wind blows as it will through all the long years, and the land wakes glad and fragrant at the kiss of the pale dawn, and plain daily labour goes on steadily and unheedingly from generation to generation.’

As unnoticed and unseen he drew near the house—a massive old Scottish fortalice with tourelles at every angle—and surveyed its striking façade, he recalled the words of his uncle and Hester, and felt that he had now much that was practical to think about, much that was painful and dubious to forgive or submit to, while a vague sense of coming bitter annoyance—it might be humiliation, as we have said—rose before his haughty spirit, and the suspicion or emotion was not long of being put to the test.

A man with his hands in the back pockets of his coat, his

hat set negligently into the nape of his neck—a thickset, well-to-do, little fellow, about thirty years of age, clad in a kind of semi-sporting style, with a straw in his mouth and much display of jewellery at his waistcoat—came leisurely down the front steps from a *porte-cochère*, which the late Laird had added to the old house—leisurely, we say, and with a very *insouciant* air, and accorded a nod—bow it could not be called—to Roland and paused.

‘Oh,’ said he, ‘Captain Lindsay, I presume?’

‘Yes,’ replied the other, with surprise, and curtly.

‘Ah, welcome; we’ve been expecting you. Did you walk from the station?’

‘I was obliged to do so——’

‘Ah.’

‘And you, sir?’ asked Roland inquiringly.

‘Mr. Sharpe—Hawkey Sharpe, at your service.’

‘The new steward?’ said Roland, repressing a vehement desire to kick him along the terrace.

‘If you please to call me so.’

(‘What the devil else does he think I should call him?’ thought Roland.)

As Mr. Hawkey Sharpe neither touched nor lifted his hat Roland ignored his tardily proffered hand, which was replaced in his coat pocket.

‘Had a pleasant morning journey, I hope.’

‘Yes.’

‘Ah, I am just going to the stables—all are well at home,’ said this strange and very confident personage, passing on, while Roland stood for a moment rooted to the ground by the profound *insouciance* of the man; but from *that* moment there was a secret, if unnamed, hatred of each other in the eyes of these two—hate blended with contempt and indignation in those of Roland, who felt intuitively that the other, though, as he supposed, his underling, would yet work him a mischief if he could.

‘D——n the fellow!’ thought Roland. ‘So this is Mr. Sharpe. I must put him to the rightabout! He ought to have ushered me in or preceded me.’

He rang the bell furiously.

A strange footman appeared promptly enough, but without

the indignation a 'London Jeames' would have manifested at a summons so rough and impatient; for natheless his irreproachable livery and powdered hair, he had been born and bred in the East Neuk of Fife, and had no 'West-End' airs about him.

'All are strangers now hereabout,' thought Roland, who was about to enter, when the man distinctly barred his way.

'Name, sir, please?' said he.

'Is Miss Maude—Miss Lindsay, I mean—at home?'

'No, sir; out riding.'

'Your mistress, then?' said Roland sharply.

'Yes, sir—if you will give me a card.'

'Card, ha!' exclaimed Roland, losing his temper now, and with fury blazing in his dark eyes. 'Say that Captain Lindsay has arrived!'

On this the valet—Tom Trotter by name—threw the door wide open, with a grin of welcome not unmingled with astonishment and alarm, and Roland found himself again under the roof of Earlsbaugh.

CHAPTER XI.

A COLD RECEPTION.

ROLAND found himself somewhat ceremoniously ushered into a drawing-room with which he was familiar, and which was known as the Red Room, where he was left at leisure for a few minutes, to look about him and reflect.

The second Mrs. Lindsay had been too wise, he could perceive, to remove much of the ancient furniture of the manor house, but she had interspersed it with much that was modern; large easy seats and rich hangings, gipsy tables, Chippendale chairs, and great rugs, Parian statuary, and one or two antique classic busts, had caught Roland's eye as he passed along; but all old portraits were banished to the staircases and corridors, for it had seemed to the intruder on their domains that the grim old Lindsays in ruff and breastplate, with hand on hip and sword in belt, with

their dames in hoops and old-fashioned Scottish fardingales, had rather scowled upon her.

The Red Room of Earlshaugh had been one of the 'show places' in the East Neuk, for nearly all its furniture was of red lacquer work, brought from Japan by a Lindsay in the close of the last century. The walls were hung with stamped leather, the golden tints of which had faded now, though the gilding gleamed out here and there, and against this sobered background the richly tinted furniture, with its painted suns, moons, and stars, grotesque monsters, and queerly designed houses and gardens, stood out redly and boldly, with bronzes, marbles, and ivory carvings now yellow with age.

It was noon now, and through the open and deeply embayed windows the perfume of many flowers stole in from the gardens below, mingling with that from roses and others that were in the *jardinières*, and to Roland it all seemed as if he had stood there only yesterday.

There was a sound ; he turned and found himself face to face with his stepmother, whom he had last seen and known as his own mother's useful, bland, suave, apparently patient and always obsequious companion.

'Welcome, Roland, at last,' said she ; but there was no welcome either in her voice or eye, though she accorded him her hand, and a kiss that was as cold as the expression of her face, though it was apparent that she was trying to get up a pathetic look for the occasion ; in fact, she felt the necessity for a little acting—of assuming a virtue, if she had it not—and Roland saw and understood the whole situation at once, for after a few commonplaces, and he had flung himself into a chair that had once been a favourite one of his father, she asked :

'How long does your leave of absence from the regiment last ?'

'So shortly,' replied Roland with an undisguised sneer, 'that I won't mar your pleasure or spoil your appetite by telling its duration.'

At this reply she coloured for a moment, and thought, 'We have here an independent and conceited young man, who must be kept at his proper distance.' But she only caressed *Fifine*, an odious little pug dog, which she carried under her arm.

And avoiding all family matters, which, sooth to say, Roland disdained to discuss with her, even his father's death, more than all the alleged terms of the odious will and similar subjects, they talked the merest commonplaces—of the weather, the crops, the country, and of the war in Egypt—but all in a jerky and unconnected fashion, as each felt that a moment might land them on that dangerous ground which was inevitably to be traversed yet.

‘And Maude?’ said Roland during a pause; ‘she must be quite a grown-up young lady now.’

‘Yes, she is close on twenty; but I do not see much of Maude.’

‘Why?’

‘She stays away from Earlshaugh as much as she can, with friends in Edinburgh, London, and elsewhere.’

While closely observing his stepmother, Roland was compelled to admit to himself that she was ladylike. In her fortieth year, her hair was fair and thick; her stature good; her hands well-shaped and white, but somewhat large.

Her face was perfectly colourless; her eyes small, glittering, of the palest gray, planted near a thin and aquiline nose; her lips were also thin, not ill-tempered, but like her whole expression—hard. Her teeth were small and sharp-looking; her face lineless—she looked ten years younger than she was, and was beautifully, even tastefully, dressed.

She wore now, as she always did, a handsome-trimmed black costume of the richest material, with a white cap of fine lace, slightly trimmed with black, as a sign of widowhood, and jet ornaments, with a few pearls among them.

‘I do so long to see my dear little Maude!’ exclaimed Roland.

‘You have been in no hurry to do so,’ said Mrs. Lindsay, with a cold smile.

‘My uncle at Merlwood was so hospitable,’ replied Roland, reddening a little. Could he say to Mrs. Lindsay that *her* presence had kept him away from Earlshaugh to the last moment, or refer to the new influence of Annot Drummond on himself? ‘By-the-bye,’ said he abruptly, ‘I met a fellow at the door—Mr. Hawkey Sharpe by name, it

seems—who I understand has been installed here as a kind of steward or general factotum.'

'What of him?'

'Only that I have made up my mind that he shall march from this, and pretty quick too!'

'There may be some difficulties about that,' replied Mrs. Lindsay, with a hectic flush crossing her pale cheek, and a sharp glitter in her cold gray eyes.

'Difficulties—how? With old MacWadsett?'

'With more than him.'

'What do you mean? By Jove, we shall soon see.'

'What we shall *see*,' muttered Mrs. Lindsay under her sharp teeth; but Roland, who could not be perfectly suave with her, now asked sharply:

'Why was there not a vehicle—trap—phaeton, or anything else, sent to meet me at the station?'

'Was there none?' she asked languidly.

'None—and I had to leave my luggage there.'

'Dear me—how negligent—eh, Fifine, was it not?' said she, toying with the ears of her cur.

'Negligent, indeed,' added Roland, his brow darkening.

'Yet I read your letter—or telegram was it?—to Mr. Sharpe.'

'You read my letter to—Mr. Sharpe?'

'At least that portion of it referring to your return.'

'Mr.—what's his name?—Sharpe had better act up to his cognomen while I have to do with him. I am accustomed to be obeyed.'

'Like the Centurion in the Scriptures—dear me!'

'Exactly,' said Roland, feeling that there was mockery in her tone or thoughts.

'If not?'

'We are accustomed to obedience in barracks, and enforce it. We have the guard-house to begin with.'

'An institution unknown in Earlsbaugh,' said she, with a curl on her lips.

'I have a number of friends coming here to knock over the birds after the 1st—you will please to order arrangements to be made for them.'

'A houseful—I have heard from Maude.'

‘Not at all—only Elliot of ours, Skene of Dunnimarle, and one or two more. My cousin Hester and Miss Drummond come too.’

‘Must you do this—must I entertain them all?’ said she with something like dismay.

‘You? Not at all! Let them alone—they will amuse themselves as people in a country house always do. Young fellows and pleasant girls generally contrive to cut out their own amusements.’

‘I see so few people now that I shall be quite scared.’

‘Let Maude act hostess then,’ said Roland sharply, with a tone that seemed to indicate he thought it more her place.

‘Maude is but a little child in my eyes—and none can take my position in Earlshaugh!’ said Mrs. Lindsay firmly and pointedly; and Roland, tired of an interview, the whole tenor of which provoked him, and in which an undefined and ill-disguised hostility to himself was manifested, looked at his watch and asked:

‘Any chance of lunch, do you think?’

‘Lunch?’

‘Yes. When a fellow has travelled nearly forty miles in a morning, and crossed the Firth, he wants something to pick him up.’

‘Lunch is past already,’ said Mrs. Lindsay stiffly; ‘but ring the bell, please.’

She made no attempt with effusive hospitality to rise from her seat. That would have implied kindness, attention, and, more than all, it would have involved exertion; and she was contriving now to be one of those imperturbable creatures who never allow themselves to be influenced or bored; and when Roland withdrew to the familiar dining-room to partake of the meal, and where he was welcomed by jolly old Simon Funnell, his father’s rubicund butler, with shining face and outstretched hands, she did not accompany him; nor did he observe, when he left her, how her pale face expressed by turns dread, defiance, hatred, and more!

One would have supposed that the mere difference of sex might have affected her, and made her disposed to view favourably, and to greet pleasantly at least, the only son of

the man to whose folly she owed so much—a handsome young fellow, whose face made even those of old women brighten. But it was not so ; and thus bitterly did Roland Lindsay feel that his home-coming, with all its sense of irritation and humiliation, was such that, but for Maude and those at Merlwood, he would have regretted that he did not perish after Kashgate, when he lay helpless in the desert, with the foul Egyptian vultures hovering over him.

CHAPTER XII.

MAUDE.

LUNCH ended, Roland was lingering rather gloomily over a glass of his father's old favourite Amontillado, which Simon Funnell had disinterred from the cobwebby bins of the cellar for his special delectation, when an exclamation made him start ; a pair of soft arms were thrown around his neck, and a bright, fair face was pressed against his cheek.

‘Maude !’

‘Roland—Roland—you here ! oh, such an unexpected joy !’ exclaimed his sister, a merry and impulsive girl, who had just returned from riding, in bearing so smart, handsome, and perfect in her hat and habit, as she tossed aside her whip and gauntlets and embraced him again and again, so effusively and affectionately that he felt an emotion of welcome for the first time.

‘I am here, Maude—but why did you not come to meet me ?’ said he.

‘I knew not that you were to be here to-day,’ she replied, with a sparkle in her eyes.

‘Did your—did not Mrs. Lindsay tell you I was coming ?’

‘No,’ replied Maude indignantly.

‘Another act of coldness and unwelcome.’

‘Oh, Roland—how I dread these people !’

‘Who ?’

‘Mrs. Lindsay and her Mr. Sharpe ! I have just had a spin over breezy Tentsmuirs, making the sheep and rabbits fly before me, as you and I and Hester Maule have often

done before, Roland,' said Maude, changing abruptly from grave to gay.

Full of health and spirits, with a soft rose-leaf complexion that was heightened by recent exercise and present excitement, she was a girl whose beauty was of a delicate type. Her hair was of the sunniest brown, her eyes a soft and dreamy blue, yet wont to beam and sparkle at times; her figure was slight, extremely graceful, and she was now in her twentieth year.

'By Jove, Maude, you have grown quite a little beauty!' exclaimed Roland, while, holding each other at arm's length, brother and sister surveyed each other's face; 'but in expression you are not changed a bit.'

'Nor you, Roland—yet, how scorched—how brown you are!'

'That was done in Egypt—but much of it wore off at Merlwood.'

'How long you have been of coming here, Roland!' said Maude, with a pout on her ruby lip.

'Since returning to Britain, you mean?'

'Since returning to Scotland.'

'With all my love for you, my dear little sister, I was loth to face the—the mortifications that I feared awaited me at home.'

'A changed home, Roland!'

'If we can call it so.'

'But then at Merlwood,' said she archly, 'Hester—dear Hester, would be an attraction, of course.'

Roland actually coloured, and stooped to scrape a cigar light on his heel, and to change the subject said:

'I saw Jack Elliot of ours for a few minutes at his club in Edinburgh.'

'Dear Jack! and how is he looking?'

'Well and jolly as usual; unluckily his leave is shorter than mine, yet I hope to keep him here till the pheasants are ready.'

'Darling Roland—how good of you!' exclaimed his sister, kissing him again.

'You and he expect your little affair to come off when——'

‘When the regiment returns home—I could not go out to Egypt, you know, Roland.’

‘Worse than useless, when we may be moving towards the frontier again.’

‘In her last letter to me Annot Drummond seemed full of Egypt, and Egypt only.’

‘She has a lover out there, perhaps—or going,’ said Roland, laughing.

‘Not improbable. She is coming here; but, truth to tell, I do not like Annot Drummond much.’

‘Why?’

‘I cannot say.’

‘Nay, Maude, that is unjust.’

‘It is a case of Dr. Fell, I suppose.’

‘Yet you have invited her for a month or two to Earls-haugh.’

‘Yes.’

‘Why, then?’

‘As a return for her mother’s kindness to me when in London—nothing more. There is no love lost between Annot and me.’

Roland became silent, as his sister evidently spoke unwillingly; and to change the subject, he said:

‘And the stepmother, Maude; how do you and she get on?’

‘As my letters have told you—oh, I hate her, as much as it is in my nature to hate anyone. When she comes near me I feel like a cat with its fur rubbed the wrong way. Can you not pension her away from Earls-haugh?’

‘Not if all I hear is true,’ replied Roland, giving his dark moustache an angry twist. ‘But who is this fellow Sharpe, who seems to be her factotum—and where did she pick him up?’

‘He is her brother.’

‘Her *brother*!’

‘Yes—so you must be wary——’

‘Till I see MacWadsett?’

‘If that will make any difference, which I fear not,’ replied Maude, lowering her voice, and actually glancing round with apprehension, while her blue eyes lighted with indignation; ‘he lives here—perhaps she told you so?’

‘No—lives here—here in Earlsbaugh?’

‘Yes; he has rooms set apart for him in the Beatoun wing.’

‘By *her* orders?’

‘Yes. She has the whole estate, and you and me too, completely in her power. Papa, in his folly, left her, apparently, everything; but to come to us, I presume, in time; and now she is entirely influenced and guided by her brother. Literally, we seem to be at his mercy,’ continued the girl, with a kind of a shudder, ‘and you must play your cards well to prevent a catastrophe.’

‘It is intolerable!’ exclaimed Roland, in an accent of rage.

‘It is beyond my comprehension.’

‘I wish old MacWadsett were at home.’

‘He will not be in town for some weeks yet.’

Some bitter words escaped Roland, who added:

‘God, give me patience! A fracas in the house with so many guests coming is, of course, to be avoided.’

‘I hope your return may make some change, Roland; it has been so dull here.’

‘Why—how?’

‘County people—the ladies at least—are shy of visiting; I feel that, and often long to join Hester at Merlwood. You may see that the calling cards in the basket are quite faded and old.’

‘No visitors!’

‘Very few, beyond the parish minister and his wife, or the doctor, when she has some petty illness. She was a reader, a worker, and a musician in mamma’s time, I understand; but is a total idler now, and, save to church, rarely leaves the grounds.’

‘Her dowry and the Dower House she was entitled to, but who could ever have dreamed that she, the meek-faced, humble, and most obsequious Deborah Sharpe would ever be the mistress of all this!’ exclaimed Roland as he strode to a window and looked forth upon the view with a heart that thrilled with many mingled emotions, for he loved his ancestral home with a love that was a species of passion, especially after his term of foreign exile.

Its situation was so perfect, overhanging the fertile haugh that gave the place a name, and through which meandered a stream, that, though insignificant there, widened greatly before it reached the sea.

The house of Earlshaugh is large and picturesque. Built originally in the days when James III. was King of the realm, and when that ill-fated monarch granted a special license to the then Baron to erect a fortalice, 'surrounded with walls and ditches, defended by gates of brass or iron,' many additions had been made to it, and the grace of a venerable antiquity was now combined with the comfort and luxury of modern days.

The old rooms were small, panelled with pine rather than oak; and the old shot and arrow loopholes under the windows had long since been plugged up and plastered over. In the olden time gardens were too valuable to be left outside the walls of a Scottish fortalice at a feudal neighbour's mercy, and trees only afforded cover for an attacking foe; but now the slopes crowned by Earlshaugh sheltered a modern garden with all its rare flowers, and the clefts of the rock afforded nurture for numerous trees and shrubs.

Royalty had often taken its ease in Earlshaugh, and in its grounds there is still a venerable thorn-tree in which tradition says the hawks of the Fifth and Sixth Jameses were wont to roost; nor was the house unknown in history and war, for there is still a room that was occupied by Cardinal Beaton, the stair to which had a peculiarity after his murder, that whoever went up its steps felt as if going down; and the western wall yet bears the marks of the cannon shot, when it was attacked by General D'Oisel, the Comte de Martigues, and other French chevaliers, in the wars of Mary of Guise, and when Kirkcaldy of Grange, by one stroke of his two-handed sword, slew at its gate the Comte de St. Pierre, Knight of St Michael.

In that old house every chamber had its story of some past occupant; for there the Lairds of Earlshaugh were born; there they brought home their brides, and there they had—unless they fell in battle—died and been borne forth by their own people to Leuchars Kirk, or to the Chapel of St. Bennet, of which no vestige now remains.

Looking over the fair and sunlit scene before him, Roland Lindsay was thinking of all these things, while Maude drooped her pretty head on his shoulder, and said :

‘It is so terrible to suppose that we may have lost all this through the folly—the weakness of papa.’

‘In the hands of an artful Jezebel ! But who is that person riding straight across the lawn, heedless of path or avenue ?’

‘Sharpe—Mr. Hawkey Sharpe,’ replied Maude, starting with something like a shudder again—an emotion which Roland fortunately did not perceive ; for with reference to this obnoxious person there was a secret between him and her which Maude, with all her love and affection, dared not confide to her fiery brother, lest it should bring about the very catastrophe which she dreaded so much.

CHAPTER XIII.

ROLAND’S VEXATION.

‘IN my father’s house on sufferance only, it would seem ?’ was the half-aloud remark muttered through his teeth by Roland, when betimes next morning he was up while the dew was glittering on shrub and tree, to have a ramble, cigar in mouth, and feeling with bitterness in his heart that through the fault of another, rather than himself, he had been severely and unjustly dealt with.

When Roland joined his regiment an elder brother now dead, Harry Lindsay of the Scots Guards, had been, like himself, somewhat extravagant—Harry particularly so amid the facilities afforded by London for spending freely and living fast—thus between certain bills which the latter had compelled the old gentleman to accept, looking upon him, as he too often said, ‘merely as the family banker,’ but more especially by his betting, racing, and other proclivities peculiar to ‘the Brigade,’ he had so enraged the old Laird of Earlishaugh that, acted upon by the influence of his unwise ‘second election,’ the latter had executed a will—the

obnoxious document so often referred to—completely in her favour, leaving her everything, with certain arrangements—a provision—for his surviving son Roland and his daughter Maude.

A codicil, tending to reverse or revoke this, had evidently been in preparation, but was never fulfilled or signed.

Thus far alone Roland had been made aware, but was still inclined to doubt the tenor of a document he had never seen, which he could not as yet see, and the copy of which, sent to him in Egypt, had been lost in the transmission as stated.

Moreover, he was a soldier—nothing but a soldier in many ways, and, as he was wont to say to himself, ‘an utter muff,’ so far as business matters were concerned.

Of his own dubious position at Earlshaugh and the presumption of Mr. Hawkey Sharpe, the steward or manager of the property, he was soon to have unpleasantly convincing proofs that sorely tested his patience and tried his proud and impetuous temper.

A prey to somewhat chequered thoughts, he had wandered in the dewy morning over much of the beautiful and picturesque property. Every lane, hedgerow, field, and farm had been familiar to him from his boyhood, since old Johnnie Buckle, the head groom, had taught him to take his fences, even as the old gamekeeper, Gavin Fowler, had shown him where the best grown coveys were sure to be found. He had seen alterations and innovations which displeased him extremely, and had visited some of the tenants, attended in his ramble by an old herd who had been in the service of the Lindsays for half a century; and he now returned by the great avenue, where still the ancient oaks, that erewhile had heard the bugle of King James, the Scottish Haroun, on many a hunting day, still gave forth their leaves from year to year, and entered the cosy old-fashioned breakfast-room, where Dresden china and glittering plate, with an array of cold meats, fish, and fruit, suggested a hearty Scottish morning repast, and over the carved stone fireplace of which hung a portrait of his father in the scarlet costume of the Caledonian Hunt. Maude was not there; but to his indignation the room had another occupant.

‘Mr. Trotter, when you have quite ended the perusal of that paper you will, perhaps, so far favour me?’

The person he addressed with a grim but mock suavity was Tam Trotter, who, clad, in the Lindsay livery, blue and yellow, making certain of not being disturbed, had—with all the coolness, if not the easy elegance, of a ‘Jeames’ of Belgravia or Mayfair—seated himself in the breakfast-room, and, with his slippers on a velvet fender stool, and his broad back reclined in an easy-chair, was deep in the columns of the *Fife Herald*.

He started up overwhelmed with confusion, and began in a breathless voice to stammer an apology.

‘There—there—that will do; but don’t let this happen again, Trotter,’ said Roland; ‘it shows that the discipline of the house wants adjustment. By Jove, if I had you in barracks I’d send you to knapsack-drill for a week!’

The wretched Tam made a hasty retreat, and Maude, detecting the situation, came in laughing merrily to get her brother’s morning kiss, and looking, he thought, so bright, so sweet, and so pretty. ‘Who,’ says Anthony Trollope, ‘has not seen some such girl when she has come down early, without the full completeness of her morning toilet, and yet nicer, fresher, prettier to the eye of him who is so favoured than she has ever been in more formal attire?’

‘Covers laid for two only—thank goodness, you and I are to have our breakfast *tête-à-tête*!’ she exclaimed, as she seated herself at the table, and the terribly ‘cowed’ or abashed Trotter took post behind her.

‘And then I must be off to the stables to see what cattle are there, and renew my acquaintance with old Johnnie Buckle, who taught me how to take my flying leaps—never to funk at a bullfinch, a sunk fence, a mill race, or anything. Many of Johnnie’s tricks stood me in good stead, Maude, when I was with poor Hicks and Baker in Egypt,’ said Roland.

Strolling forth in the bright morning sunshine, amid which the house of Earlsbaugh, with its massive walls of polished ashlar, its machicolated battlement and tall, old windows, glittered in light, with masses sunk in shadow, he was met by the head gardener, old Willie Wardlaw, whom he

remembered as a faithful servitor in years past (and whose rarest peaches he had stolen many a time and oft), with a hand outstretched in welcome, and his hat in the other, as he bowed his silvery head in token of respect.

'Oh, sir, but I've been langing to see ye ere it is owre late and the mischief done !' he exclaimed.

'What mischief?'

'The meadowing o' the park and lawn, where never a plough has been since the King was in Falkland.'

'Who has suggested this piece of utilitarian barbarity?' asked Roland with lowering brow.

'Wha wad it be but Mr. Hawkey Sharpe? Pawkie-Sharpe wad be a better name for him,' was the contemptuous response, made with evident bitterness of heart.

'I'll see to that, Willie,' said Roland as he strode on, but soon to be confronted by another official—a kind of forester—who had charge of all the timber on the property.

'I hope, Captain,' said the latter, 'you're in time to save the King's Wood, sir.'

'What do you mean?'

'Ye surely ken it is doomed—a' to the King's Thorn?'

'Doomed—how?'

'To be cut down and sold—a black, burning shame ! Some o' the aiks are auld as the three Trees o' Dysart !'

'By whose order?' asked Roland, greatly ruffled.

'Oh, Mr. Hawkey Sharpe's, of course.'

'But why?'

'It is no for me to say, sir,' replied the old man uneasily ; 'but folk hint that when a body backs the wrong horse at races some one maun pay the piper. Maister Sharpe cuts gey near the wind, and comes aftener wi' the rake than the shool ; but he'll get a bite o' his ain bridle, I hope, yet !'

'Racing, is it? I shall see this matter attended to also. His presumption is unparalleled !' said Roland, as with something between a groan and an imprecation on his lips he passed on, to look after a mount for Annot Drummond, and to digest this new piece of information—that the so-called steward was about to cut down one of the oldest of the ancestral woods on the property to meet a gambling debt !

At the stables, warm indeed was the welcome he met

from the veteran groom Johnnie, who did not seem older by a day since Roland had seen him last—hale, hardy, and lithe, though past his sixtieth year, with long body, short bandy legs, small, closely-shaven head, and sharp, keen, twinkling eyes—his white tie scrupulously folded, and attired as usual in a heavily flapped corduroy waistcoat, with large pockets, in one of which was stuck a curry-comb, and in his hands was a steel bridle-bit, which he was polishing with leather till it shone like silver.

Roland Lindsay had been so long away from among his own people and native country, that he felt the keenest pleasure at the warmth of his reception by any of the old servants whom the new *régime* permitted to linger about Earlsbaugh.

‘Eh, Captain, how like the Laird, your worthy father, you are!’ exclaimed old Johnnie Buckle, with kindly eyes, adding, ‘but I hope you’ll never live to be sic a gomerall—excuse me, sir.’

Roland knew to what the old fellow referred, and was silent.

Like the old English squire of Belton, his father had been, though a popular man with all his friends, and brother fox-hunters especially, and a boon companion too—one that had a dignity that was his from nature rather than effort, but was ‘a man who, in fact, did little or nothing in the world—whose life had been very useless, but who had been gifted with such a presence that he looked as though he were one of God’s noblest creatures. Though always dignified, he was ever affable, and the poor liked him better than they might have done had he passed his time in searching out their wants and supplying them.’ Though little of eleemosynary aid is ever required or looked for by the manly, self-reliant, and independent peasantry of Scotland.

‘You have some good nags here,’ said Roland, as he walked through the stables. ‘I shall want two or three for the saddle in a day or two.’

The old groom shook his head and chewed a straw viciously.

‘I should like a spin on this one—a pretty roan hunter.’

‘Yes; he’s about sixteen hands high, a bonnie wee

head, full chest and barrel, broad i' the loins, and firm of foot.'

'The very nag for me, Johnnie.'

'But you can't have him, Maister Roland,' said the groom, forgetting the lapse of years.

'Why?'

'That is Mr. Hawkey Sharpe's favourite saddle horse.'

'Oh—indeed—this mare, then?'

'That is his hack.'

'The devil! This roadster, then?'

'His pad; no leg must cross it but his own. That is a nag more difficult to find in perfection than even a hunter or roan,' said Buckle, passing a hand admiringly over the silky flank of the animal. 'That bay cob is close on sixteen hands high, bonnie in shape, as ye see, and high-stepping in action, gentle as a wean, and a wean might lead it.'

'That, too, is Mr. Sharpe's, I presume!'

'Yes, sir.'

'By Jove, he is well mounted!' said Roland, in irrepressible wrath, thinking of a certain individual 'on horse-back.'

'That pair of thirteen hands each are Miss Lindsay's.'

'Ah,' thought Roland, a little mollified, 'one of them will mount Annot. Mr. Sharpe dabbles a little in horse-flesh, I have heard?'

'And loses sometimes, Maister Roland.'

'How do you know?'

'By his face, for then he girns like a sheep's heid in the smith's tangs. He kens as little o' dogs, or he wadna gang about wi' a dust-hole pointer at his heels.'

'What kind of pointer is that, Buckle?'

'A cur o' nae mair breed than himsel',' replied the old groom, who evidently had no love for the steward. 'Hech, me!' he added under his breath, as Roland left the stable-yard with evident disgust and annoyance in his face and air, 'is he yet to learn that a bad servitor never made a gude maister, and that a sinking maister mak's a rising man? Dule seems to hang o'er Earlshaugh!'

But more mortification awaited Roland. He knew that there was an infinity of matters connected with the tenants

—rents, repairs, timber, oxen, fences, and winter forage, renewal of leases, and so forth—on which there was no appearance of *him*, the heir, the only son, being consulted ; and of this he soon had unpleasant proof.

‘Remember what I urged, dearest Roland,’ said his sister, as she joined him at the *porte cochère* and lifted her loving and smiling blue eyes to his, while clasping both hands over his arm and hanging upon him. ‘Do keep your temper in any interview you may have with this man Sharpe, who actually affects to think it a condescension to accept his post in our household, as he has been heard to say that a gentleman must live somehow, as well as other people do.’

‘I must see him,’ said Roland through his clenched teeth, as he entered the library, where he found Mr. Hawkey Sharpe, who was usually installed there at the same hour daily, on business matters intent, occupying the late Laird’s easy-chair, seated at his table, which was littered with account-books, letters, and papers, while at his back hung on the wall a full-length, by Scougal, of that Colonel Lindsay who figured in the Legend of the Weird Yett, looking grim, haughty, and proud, as the subjects of most old portraits do, when every gentleman looked like a great lord.

Sharpe saw the black expression that hovered in Roland’s sombre face, and, rising, accorded him a bow, and, in deference to the presence of Maude (and perhaps of his sister, who entered the room at the same moment), laid aside his cigar.

‘Among some letters to me this morning,’ said Roland, ‘is one from old Duncan Ged, for a renewal of his lease of the Mains of Dron.’

‘But I have no idea of doing so,’ replied Mr. Sharpe, dipping his pen in the ink-bottle.

‘*You ?*’ queried Roland.

‘I—I mean, that is——’

‘Who or what the devil do you mean, Mr. Sharpe?’ said Roland, undeterred by the pressure of Maude’s little hand on his arm.

‘I mean that Mrs. Lindsay, acting on my advice, has no intention of doing so.’

'Why?' asked Roland, dissembling his rage, to find the mask thrown off thus.

'Because the land is worth twice as much again as it was in the days when your grandfather gave a tack of the Mains to his grandfather.'

'Surely he deserves to benefit thereby?'

'We don't think so.'

'We again!' thought Roland, trembling with suppressed passion; but now Trotter, the servant, announced that the gamekeeper wished to see Mr. Sharpe, and Gavin Fowler was ushered in—an old man whose eyes, when Roland shook hands with him, glistened with pride and pleasure, as he exclaimed:

'Welcome back to your father's rooftree and yer ain fire-side, sir; a' here hae lang wanted ye sairly.'

A sneer hovered on the lips of Hawkey Sharpe, as he said briefly to the keeper, who had a gun under his arm, a shot-belt over his shoulders, and a couple of dogs at his heels:

'Well, what brings you here to-day?'

'I've caught that loon Jamie Spens snaring rabbits and hares in the King's Wood.'

'At last,' said Hawkey Sharpe through his teeth.

'At last, sir,' responded the keeper, chiefly to Roland.

'Did he show fight?' asked Sharpe.

'Of course he did; Jamie comes o' a camstairy and fechtin' race.'

'I know that,' said Roland; 'this is not his first offence, by what you said?'

'Allow *me*, sir,' said the steward pointedly, with a wave of his hand.

'He is no bad kind o' chield,' urged the keeper.

'He will serve for an example, anyway!'

'His family are puir—starving, in fact, sir.'

'What the deuce do I care? I'd as soon shoot a poacher as a weisel.'

'Let the poor fellow off for this time,' said Roland.

'Of course—do, please,' urged Maude; 'if you, Mr. Sharpe, were poor, hungry, and, more than all, had a hungry wife and children——'

‘They are nothing to me.’

‘But such pretty little children!’ urged Maude.

‘God bless your kind heart, miss!’ exclaimed the old keeper.

‘Let him go—this once—I say,’ said Roland, still boiling at the tone and manner adopted by the steward.

‘For my sake,’ added Maude sweetly.

‘For yours?’ asked Mr. Sharpe, looking at her with a peculiar expression to which Roland had not yet the key, for he said firmly and emphatically :

‘At my *order*, rather!’

‘Roland, please don’t interfere,’ said his cold and pale-faced stepmother; ‘Mr. Sharpe knows precisely how to deal with these people.’

‘Oh—indeed!’

‘I shall not take my way in this instance,’ said Mr. Sharpe condescendingly; ‘and so, to please *you*, Miss Lindsay, the culprit shall go free,’ he added, with a bow to Maude, who blushed, more with annoyance, apparently, than satisfaction, while Roland, in obedience to an imploring glance from her, stifled his indignation, and abruptly quitted the library.

‘I thank ye for trying to help me, sir,’ said old Duncan Ged, who stood in the hall, bonnet in hand, and apparently quite crushed by the non-renewal of his lease; ‘but Hawkey Sharpe is the hardest agent between the Forth an’ Tay; he turns the puir out o’ house and hame at a minute’s notice, and counts every hare and rabbit in the woods. E’en’s ye like, Mr. Sharpe!’ said the old man, shaking his clenched hand in the direction of the library door; ‘ilka man buckles his belt his ain gate, as I maun buckle mine. Everything has an end, and a pudding has twa.’

And thus strangely consoling himself, he took his departure. Roland sent the old man by post a cheque for fifty pounds; he could do no more at that time.

‘But for dear Maude’s sake,’ thought Roland, ‘I should certainly never set foot in Earlsbaugh till these matters of mine are cleared up—and perhaps never again! But I’ll make no fracas till after the covert shooting is over and our guests are gone; *then*, by Jove; won’t I bring Mr. Hawkey Sharpe and this grim stepmother to book, if I can!’

CHAPTER XIV.

MAUDE'S SECRET.

ROLAND had got a suitable mount from old Buckle and gone for 'a spin,' to leave, if possible, his worries and fidgets behind him, away by Radernie and as far as Carnbee, where the green hills that culminate in conical Kellie Law look down on the Firth of Forth and the dark blue German Sea ; while Maude—after being down at Spens the poacher's cottage with money and sundry comforts for his starving wife and children—full of the subject of Roland's return and the approaching visit of her *fiancé*, Jack Elliot, had written a long, effusive, and young girl-like epistle to the latter, and was on her way to slip it into the locked letter-bag in the hall with her own hand. She had a consciousness that she was watched, and with it no desire that her correspondence should be discussed just then, as she had a nervous dread of Mr. Hawkey Sharpe, who had actually and presumptuously ventured on more than one occasion to evince some unmistakable tenderness towards her—an indiscretion, to say the least of it, of which she dared give no hint to her fiery brother ; but which was the source of much disquietude to poor Maude, and of confusion and distress to her, as regarded the steward's power in the house, and made her change colour at the mere mention of his name.

And now when passing through a long and lonely wain-scotted corridor, the windows of which on one side overlooked the haugh beneath the house, and which led to the great staircase, she came suddenly upon the very object of her dread, Mr. Sharpe, and hastily thrust her letter into the bosom of her dress.

Though her own mistress, with her engagement to Captain Elliot acknowledged and accepted by her brother, Maude, from the influence of circumstances, was—as stated—actually afraid lest this daring admirer should discover that she was writing to Elliot, so much did she dread the power of Sharpe and his sister, and their capacity for working mischief.

Some vague sense, or doubt, of his security in the future, and of his sister's continued favour to himself, made Mr.

Sharpe thus raise his bold eyes to the daughter of the house, aware that she was almost unprotected ; her maternal uncle, Sir Harry, was an old and well-nigh helpless man, and her brother had yet to run the risks of war in that land now deemed the grave of armies—the Soudan.

Apart from her beauty of mind and person—not that Mr. Hawkey Sharpe cared much about the former or was influenced thereby—the latter certainly allured him, and the helplessness referred to encouraged him in his pretensions, even when he began to suspect that there was another in the field, though he knew not yet precisely who that other was.

Mr. Sharpe's antecedents were not brilliant. He had begun life in a solicitor's office in Glasgow, but had learned more than law elsewhere ; book-making, betting, the race-course, and billiards had brought him in contact with his betters in rank but equals in mischief and roguery, and from them he had acquired a certain factitious polish of manner, which he hoped now to turn to good account.

Maude Lindsay knew and believed in that which Roland struggled against knowing and believing, the precise tenor of their father's will ; and in terror of precipitating matters with Sharpe and his sister, she had been compelled to temporize and submit to the more than effusive politeness of the former, whose bearing, however, she could not mistake.

In nothing, as yet, had he gone beyond those—in him, somewhat clumsy—tendernesses of incipient love-making, which might, or might not, mean anything, though Maude felt that they meant too much ; and she never forgot the shock, the start, the humiliating conviction that she experienced when the necessity of regarding *him* as a lover was forced by necessity upon her.

Her disdain she utterly failed, at first, to conceal ; but Hawkey Sharpe, whose reading had taught him, through the perusal of many low and exciting love stories, that a girl might be won in spite of her teeth, was resolved to persevere.

‘Good-evening, Mr. Sharpe—what a start you gave me !’ said Maude, essaying to pass him in the narrow corridor ; but he contrived to bar her way.

‘Pardon me for a moment,’ said he submissively enough ;

'I wish you would not call me Mr. Sharpe ; and oh, more than all, that you would permit me to—to call you Maude !'

The latter's eyes flashed fire, soft and blue though they were. There was no mistaking the tenor of this mode of address. Hawkey Sharpe seemed to have opened the trenches at last, and Maude's first thought was :

'Has he been imbibing too much ?'

'It was for your sake I let off that poacher Spens this morning,' said he in a slightly reproachful tone.

'For the sake of his wife and children, I hope, rather.'

'Oh, bother his wife and brats ! what are they to me compared with the satisfaction of pleasing you ?'

'Mr. Sharpe !' said Maude, drawing back a pace, and, in spite of herself, cresting up her proud little head.

'It seems so hard,' said he, affecting an air of humility, and casting down his eyes for a moment, 'that there should be such a gulf apparently between us, Miss Lindsay.'

'A gulf,' repeated Maude, not precisely knowing what to say.

'Yes—and you deepen it. If I attempt to speak to you even as a friend, you recoil from me ; and in this huge, sequestered house, it seems natural that we should at least be friends.'

'If we are enemies, I know it not, Mr. Sharpe,' said Maude with some hesitation, and then attempting to cover the latter by a smile, as she knew the necessity—a knowledge which distressed and disgusted her—of temporizing, which seemed, even if for a moment, a species of treason to Jack Elliot.

On the other hand, inclination and calculations as to the future, made Sharpe admire Maude very much, and perhaps he was in love with her as much as it was in his nature to be in love with anyone beyond himself. Rejected, or even scorned, he was not a man to break his heart for any woman in the land, though it might become inspired by hatred and a longing for revenge. Yet he was prepared to make 'a bold stroke for a wife' in Maude's instance. If refused once he would try again, and even perhaps a third or a fourth time, and feel only an emotion of rage on his final rejection—so in reality heart was not so much the affair with him.

Maude attempted to pass him, but he still barred her way, and even sought, without success, to capture one of her hands.

‘Open confession is good for the soul,’ he resumed, in a blunt and blundering way, ‘and avowals come to one’s lips at times, and cannot be restrained. I have played too long with fire, or with edged tools. You must know, Miss Lindsay, that no man could be in your society much without admiring you, and admiration is but a prelude to—love.’

Fear of him, and all a quarrel with him might involve, repressed the girl’s desire to laugh at this inflated little speech; but he—with all his constitutional impudence—quailed for a moment under the expression that flashed in her eyes—blue, and usually soft and sunny though they were—while she remained silent and thinking:

‘What on earth will he say next?’

‘Do you not understand me, Miss Lindsay?’ he asked, perceiving a look of wonder gathering in her face. ‘Do you not know that I love you?’ he added, lowering his voice, while glancing round with quick and stealthy eyes.

‘Mr. Sharpe,’ said Maude, trembling, yet rising to the occasion, ‘I understand what you say; but I hope you are not serious, and not insulting me.’

‘Is the emotion with which you have inspired me likely to be mingled with jest, or with insult to you?’

‘Oh, this is too much!’ said Maude, interlacing her fingers, with difficulty restraining tears of anger and resentment; while, with a keen sense of future danger and his presumption, she felt as if there was something unreal and grotesque in the situation. Moreover, she was anxious to get her letter into the house postal bag ere the latter was taken away.

‘I am deeply earnest, Miss Lindsay,’ resumed Sharpe, still with great humility of tone and manner. ‘My regard for you is no passing fancy. I learned to love you from the first moment I saw you.’

‘Mr. Sharpe,’ said Maude, gathering courage from desperation, ‘I do not understand why you venture to talk in this style to me! Encouragement I have never given you, even by a glance.’

‘Too well do I know that,’ said he, affecting a mournful

tone; 'but I hope to lead you to—to like me a little in return.'

'I don't dislike you,' said Maude, again seeking to temporize.

'And, if possible, to love me—as a man—one to whom you can entrust a future you cannot see—one whom you will one day call husband.'

He drew nearer as his voice became lower and more earnest, and Maude recoiled hastily in growing dismay, and the words 'a future you cannot see' stung her deeply.

Too well did she know that all this bold love-making was born of the humbled, fallen, and peculiar nature of her position under her ancestral roof-tree, and of the ruin of her family—a ruin on which this man was rising under his sister's wing!

'I beseech you, Mr. Sharpe,' said she, 'to say no more on this subject, for more than the merest friendship there can never be between us.'

'Have you thought it over?'

'Certainly not!'

His face clouded, and his usually bold, observant, and keen gray eyes became inflamed with growing anger.

'Seriously—deliberately you refuse to accord me the slightest hope?'

'Yes.'

'You think by this bearing to humiliate me as much as a proud girl can do?'

'You pain me now by speaking thus,' she responded more gently.

'And you ruin my life!'

'I think not,' said Maude, with a little curl on her lovely lip.

'And may make that ruin a subject of jest to your brother's fine friends who are coming here in a few days—a few hours, rather, now.'

At this coarse remark Maude accorded him an inquiring stare.

'Oh, I know what young girls are,' he resumed in a half-savage, half-sullen manner. 'A rejection like mine is just the sort of thing they like to boast of.'

‘You thus add insult to your profound presumption!’ exclaimed Maude, quite exasperated now by the underbreeding of the style he adopted so suddenly; and, sweeping past him, she reached the entrance-hall, where the postal bag lay—a square and stately place, the stone floor of which was covered with soft matting; where in winter a great fire always blazed in the spacious stone fireplace, over which hung a single suit of armour, amid a trophy of weapons, old swords, mauls, and pikes.

She put her hand in her bosom—her letter—the letter she wished to dispose of with her own hand—was no longer there! How—where had she dropped it? She turned, looked hastily round her, and saw Mr. Hawkey Sharpe, who had evidently picked it up, descending the staircase, and he handed it to her with a slight and grave bow.

‘Oh—thank you,’ said Maude, her mind now full of confusion and vexation.

Quick as thought she dropped it into the postal bag after he handed it to her, but not before he had seen the address, and a dangerous gleam shot athwart his shifty eyes, and again the coarse, bold nature of the man came forth.

‘So—so,’ said he, through his clenched teeth. ‘I find I have been mistaken in you, Miss Lindsay.’

‘Mistaken, Mr. Sharpe?’

‘Yes—mistaken all along.’

‘I do not comprehend you.’

‘Deceived by your soft, fair face and gentle eyes, I thought you unlike other girls—no coquette—no flirt—and now—now, I find——’

‘What, sir?’ demanded Maude impetuously.

‘That you have correspondents.’

‘Few, I suppose, are without them.’

‘But who is he to whom you openly write—this Captain John Elliot?’

‘Intolerable! How dare you ask me?’ demanded Maude, her breast swelling, her cheeks, not flushed, but pale with anger, and her eyes flashing.

‘A military friend of your brother’s, I suppose we shall call him,’ said he with an undisguised sneer.

‘And a dear friend of mine,’ said Maude defiantly, ex-

asperated to find that the very discovery she wished to avoid had been made, and by this person particularly ; 'but here comes my brother, and perhaps you had better make your inquiries of him,' she added, as a great sigh of mingled anger and relief escaped her on hearing Roland dismount under the *porte-cochère* ; but, unable to face even him, distressed, humiliated, and altogether unnerved by her recent interview, all it involved, and all she had undergone, poor little Maude rushed away to seek alleviation amid a passion of tears, unseen and in the solitude of her own room.

So this was Maude's secret !

Hawkey Sharpe cared not just then to face Roland Lindsay ; but with hands clenched he sent a glance of hate after the retreating figure of Maude, and withdrew in haste.

They met in future, as we shall show, even amid Roland's guests ; but with a consciousness—a most humiliating and irritating one to Maude, that there was almost a secret understanding—that odious love-making between them—and known, as she thought, to themselves alone.

CHAPTER XV.

MR. HAWKEY SHARPE SEEKS COUNSEL.

WE have said that Maude thought that Mr. Hawkey Sharpe's love-making, with all its euphonious platitudes, was known to him and to herself alone.

In this she was mistaken, as Hawkey's sister Deborah, Mrs. Lindsay, was in his confidence in that matter, and quite *au fait* of its doubtful progress. She did not appear at dinner that evening, but dined in her own room, and then betook her to her brother's sanctum, or 'den,' as he called it—a picturesque old panelled apartment, in what was named the Beatoun wing—which had a quaint stone fireplace, the grate of which was full of August flowers then, but at the hearth of which in the winter of the year before Pinkeyfield was fought, his Eminence had been wont to toast his scarlet-slippered toes.

The furniture was quite modern. Fishing and shooting gear, with whips, spurs, billiard cues, a few soiled books on farriery and racing, were its chief features now; while sporting calendars, etc., strewed the table, with a few note and account books, and letters of minor importance.

After gloomily referring to his late interview with Maude Lindsay, he assisted himself to a briar-root pipe from a nice arrangement of meerschaums and other pipes stuck in an oaken and steel mounted horseshoe on the broad mantel-shelf, and prepared to soothe himself with 'a weed' and the contents of a remarkably long tumbler—brandy and soda—sent up, per Mr. Trotter, from the pantry of old Funnell, the butler, for his delectation; while his pale and sallow-visaged sister was content to sip from a slender glass a decoction of some medical stuff prescribed for chronic low spirits and weak action of the heart—an affliction under which she laboured, and to which, no doubt, her pallid and at times stone-coloured complexion was attributable.

Always calm in demeanour, she was otherwise unlike her brother Hawkey, who was not particular to a shade in anything (provided he was not found out), and she was outwardly a model of religion and propriety, blended with hypocrisy, which—according to Rochefoucauld—is the homage that vice pays to virtue.

Attired in a luxurious dressing-gown and tasselled smoking-cap, Mr. Sharpe lounged in a cosy easy-chair, shooting his huge cuffs forward from time to time, and stroking his sandy, ragged moustache, in what he thought to be 'good style.'

Instead of being thick and podgy, as his humble origin might suggest, his hands, we must admit, were rather thin, with long spiky filbert nails, reminding one—with all their cultivated whiteness—of the talons of a bird of prey.

'Deuced good thing for us, Deb, that codicil was never completed,' said he (for about the hundredth time), breaking a pause; 'but still we have now that fellow, Roland Lindsay, back again, ready to overhaul matters, after escaping Arab bullets and swords, desert fever, and the devil only knows what more.'

'You forget that this is his home,' said she, with a little

touch of womanly feeling for the moment, 'or he deems it as such.'

'So long as you permit it, I suppose.'

'I cannot throw down the glove to the County just now.'

'But assume a virtue if you have it not,' said Hawkey, applying himself to the long tumbler, that still sparkled and effervesced in the lamp-light.

'He cannot harm me, at all events.'

'I don't know that, and I was deuced easier when he was away in Egypt. Some might call this selfish—what the devil do I care! A man's chief duty centres on himself.'

'Without pity for the unfortunate?'

'Don't be a humbug, Deb, and don't act to me! The poor and unfortunate are so, by their own fault, I suppose. I wish to speak with you about that to which I have—reluctantly—referred more than once.'

Mrs. Lindsay made a gesture of impatience, and said, while toying with her pet cur Fifine:

'Ah—money matters with reference to yourself in the future?'

'Yes; but I do dislike, my dear Deb,' said he, with an affection which she knew right well was mostly simulated, 'discussing them with you.'

'Why?'

'It is so disagreeable.'

'It would be more disagreeable for you if there were no money matters to discuss,' she replied with the smallest approach to a sneer. 'But, to the point, Hawkey—I know what it is!'

'You are not strong, you know, dear Deb; you may go off—' (the hook, he was about to say, but changed his mind) —'off suddenly, and not leave your house well ordered. We should always be prepared for the worst. You know what the best doctors in Edinburgh have told you,' he added, burying his nose and moustache in the tumbler again.

'Well?' said she.

'I mean that you should execute that will you spoke of.'

'In your favour?'

‘And so preclude all contention from any quarter—a hundred times I have hinted this to you.’

‘How kind and soothing the reminder is!’ she replied bitterly, unwilling, like all selfish people, to adopt or face the dire idea of death, sudden or otherwise.

‘I do advise you to consider well, Deb.’

‘For your sake, of course.’

‘Well—it may seem selfish, dear Deb.’

‘Ah—advice is a commodity which every possessor deems most valuable, and yet hastens to get rid of.’

Hawkey eyed her anxiously, for her irritation and animosity, when her delicate health and disease of the heart were referred to, always predominated over every other feeling, but she waived them for the time and returned to the first subject.

‘So that was all your success with Maude?’

‘Not much, certainly,’ he replied, with a scowl at vacancy.

‘Unfortunate!’

‘Rather!’

‘As the provision left by her father is a most ample one for her.’

‘Not so ample as all Earlsbaugh, however,’ thought he, refilling his briar-root in silence.

‘You must persevere. It has been truly said that “the days of Jacob are over, that men don’t understand waiting now, and it is always as well to catch your fish when you can.”’

Hawkey smoked on in silence. He had never before dared to lift his eyes so high, never before ventured to ‘make love’ to a lady. His past experience had been more sudden, abrupt, less bothersome, and more acceptable. Had he done or said too much, or too little? Ought he to have gone down on his knees like the lovers he had seen on the stage, or read of in old story books?

No—he was certain she would have laughed at him had he done so; and he was also certain no one ‘did that sort of thing’ nowadays. The age of such supplication was assuredly past; and he thought, viciously too, that he had ‘done all that may become a man.’

‘These bloated aristocrats, Deb, have a way all their own, of setting a fellow down!’ said he, with a louring expression in his shifty, pale-gray eyes; ‘she is, I know, my superior in position, in the way the world goes, *as yet*,’ he continued, for Mr. Hawkey Sharpe, though longing for the vineyard of Naboth, was—at heart—a Social-Democrat; ‘my superior in birth, education, and habits.’

‘I should think so.’

‘Don’t sneer at me, Deb.’

‘So far, perhaps, as Maude is concerned, your success depends, Hawkey, upon whether there is anyone else in her thoughts.’

‘Before me, you mean?’

‘Yes—she may be engaged for all we know. I, for one, am certainly not in her confidence. She has a lover, however, I suspect.’

‘It looks deuced like the case. I saw her post a letter to a fellow named Elliot to-night,’ he added, with a knit in his brow and an ugly gleam in his pale eyes.

‘Elliot—that is the name of one of those who come here to shoot, for the First.’

‘To shoot?’

‘Yes—on Roland’s invitation.’

‘There may be something else shot than partridges.’

‘Elliot—Captain Elliot?’

‘Yes—that was the name on her letter.’

‘Well—you must not quarrel with him—that would be unseemly.’

‘My dear Deb, I never *quarrel* with those I *hate*,’ was the comprehensive and sinister reply of Hawkey Sharpe, with his most diabolical expression; ‘and though I have never seen this interloper Elliot, I feel a most ungodly hatred of him already.’

‘I repeat that no good can come of a vulgar quarrel, and that you must not forget the proprieties. What would the servants alone say or think?’

‘Oh, d——n the servants!’ responded her brother, tugging his moustache angrily; ‘but if that fellow Elliot *is* her lover, I must put my brains in steep and contrive to separate them at all hazards, Deb. If I allow him or anyone else to

enter the stakes, I shall be out of the running. Anyhow, as you are looking pale, Deb, I mustn't keep you here talking over my incipient love affairs, or you will not be able to receive some of these infernal guests, who, I believe, come to-morrow. You are not overburdened with visitors, however.'

'Yet I would rather it was the time of their going than their coming,' said Mrs. Lindsay, whom his remark touched on a tender point.

'Why?' asked Hawkey.

'They must soon perceive that I am tabooed by the county families—that no one calls here as of old.'

'Well?'

'Except, perhaps, the people from the Manse and the doctor.'

'Neither—or none—of whom I care to see.'

'And yet I subscribe to all local charities, bazaars, school feasts, as regularly——'

'As if you were an Elder of the Kirk—thereby wasting your money to win a place among the "unco guid," and all to no purpose,' said Hawkey, with the slightest approach to derision. 'Well—well; how I shall succeed with the fair Maude—if I succeed at all—time and a little management, in more ways than one, will show,' he added with knitted brows and hands clenched by thoughts that were full of vague but savage intentions.

'You know the proverb,' said Mrs. Lindsay, with a cold smile, as she lifted up her dog and retired: 'a man may woo as he will, but maun wed where his weird is.'

Hawkey Sharpe set his teeth, and his eyes gleamed as he thought with—but did not quote—Georges Ohnet, because he knew him not: 'Money is the password of these venal and avaricious times. Beauty, virtue, and intelligence count for nothing. People no longer say, "Room for the worthiest," but "Room for the wealthiest!"'

Then other things occurred to him.

'I am certain that Maude' (he spoke of her as 'Maude' to himself and his sister) 'won't mention our little matter, for cogent reasons, to her brother,' he reflected confidently; 'but I *must* work the oracle with Deb about her will. With

that heart ailment which she undoubtedly has, she may go off the hooks at any moment, as I, perhaps unwisely, hinted ; and I am not lawyer enough to know how old Earlshaugh's last testament may stand ; yet, surely, I am Deb's heir-at-law, anyhow, I should think !'

Unless Mr. Hawkey Sharpe had indulged—which was not improbable—in 'tall talk,' his language and disposition augured ill for the safety and comfort of Maude's *fiancé* if he came to Earlshaugh ; but Sharpe's threatened vengeance had no decided plan as yet.

CHAPTER XVI.

'FOOL'S PARADISE.'

THE earliest of the guests so roughly referred to by Mr. Hawkey Sharpe, as stated in the preceding chapter, duly arrived in the noon of the following day, and were closely reconnoitred by that personage through a field-glass from an angle of the bartizan, and he was enabled to perceive that there were only two young ladies—a tall, dark-haired one, and another less in stature, very *petite* indeed, with a small, flower-like face and golden hair ; for they were simply the somewhat reluctant Hester Maule and the irrepressible Annot Drummond, for whose accommodation Mrs. Drugget, the housekeeper, had made all the necessary preparations.

'Welcome to Earlshaugh—you are no stranger here, Hester !' said Roland, as he kissed the latter when he assisted her to alight from the carriage at the *porte-cochère*—the lightest and fleetest thing possible in the way of a salute—one without warmth or lingering force ; but then Annot—whom he did not kiss at all 'before folk'—had her hazel-green eyes upon them.

For Annot he had the most choice little bouquet that old Willie Wardlaw, the gardener, could prepare ; but there was none for Hester, an omission which the latter scarcely noticed.

'And this is your home !' exclaimed Annot, burying her

little nose among the many lilies of the valley, pink rosebuds, and fragrant stephanotis.

‘It is the home of my forefathers,’ replied Roland almost evasively, as he gave her his arm.

‘What a romantic reply—savours quite of a three-volume novel!’ exclaimed Annot, unaware of what the answer too literally implied, and what was actually passing in Roland’s mind; but Hester felt for him, and saw the painful blush that crossed his nut-brown cheek.

The family legal agent had not yet returned to Edinburgh, so Roland had not been able to see or take counsel with him as to what transpired when he was lurking in the desert after Kashgate.

But Annot was come, and for the time he was content to live at Earlshaugh in that species of Fool’s Paradise—‘to few unknown,’ as Milton has it. As yet nothing more had been heard of the meadowing of the park or cutting down the King’s Wood; and save that Mr. Hawkey Sharpe from time to time crossed his path, and even—to Maude’s intense annoyance, and that of Roland from other causes—joined his sister at the family meals, Roland had no other specific grievance; but he felt as if upon a volcano.

As Annot left the carriage, she was greeted warmly and kindly by Maude, who was glad to return attentions received in London, and who as yet knew nothing of how the young lady was situated with regard to Roland, who now looked round for Mrs. Lindsay as the lady of the house.

But the latter, under the *régime* of her predecessor, his mother, ‘was too accurately acquainted with the weights and measures of society for such a movement as that;’ and thus received her two guests—or Maude’s rather—in the Red Drawing-room, accurately attired in rich black moire, with lace lappets and jet ornaments; and was, of course, ‘delighted’ to see both, while according to each, not her hand, but a finger thereof; and Hester, who knew her well of old, read again in her pale face that mixture of hardness and cunning with which the slight smile on her thin lips—a smile that never reached her sharp gray eyes—well accorded.

Her eyes were handsome, and had been pleasing in their expression once; but now her somewhat false position in

Earlshaugh and her secret ailment had imparted to them a defiant, restless, and peculiar one.

The coldness of her manner struck Hester as unpleasant ; Roland's politeness was not warmth that made up for it, and the girl already began to think—' I was a fool—a weak fool to come ! But how to get away, now that I am here ?'

' It is a beautiful place !' thought the artful and ambitious little Annot, when left for a few minutes in the solitude of her own room, and, forgetting even to glance at her soft face and *petite* figure in the tall cheval glass or toilette mirror, gazed dreamily from the windows, arched and deep in the massive wall, over the far extent of pastoral country, tufted here and there with dark green woods, with a glimpse of the German Sea in the distance ; and she felt, for a time, all the anticipative joy of being the mistress—the joint owner—of such a stately old pile as Earlshaugh with all its surroundings, the historic interest of which was to her, however, a sealed book ; but there is much in the glory of a sense of ownership, says a writer—' of the ownership of land and houses, of beeves and woolly flocks, of wide fields and thick growing woods, even when that ownership is of late date, when it conveys to the owner nothing but the realization of a property on the soil ; but there is much more in it when it contains the memories of old years ; when the glory is the glory of a race as well as the glory of power and property.'

And though to a little town-bred bird like Annot such historic flights were empty things, the old walls of Earlshaugh had seen ancestors of Roland ride forth heading their followers with morion, jack, and spear, to the fields of Flodden, Pinkey, and Dunbar ; to the muster place of the Fife lairds, in the year of Sherriffmuir, and to many a stirring broil in the days when the Scotsman's sword was always in his hand and never in its scabbard ; but from such day-dreams as did occur to her, Annot was now roused by the welcome sound of the luncheon gong echoing from the entrance-hall, and, dispensing with the assistance of a maid, she hurried at once downstairs.

In expectation of the gentlemen who were coming after the birds on the First, a day or two passed off delightfully enough, amid the novelty of Earlshaugh, and the evenings

were devoted to music ; and despite the unwelcome presence of the cold, haughty, and somewhat repellant Mrs. Lindsay, Annot, as at Merlwood, talked to Roland, played for, sang to Roland, and put forth—more effusively than ever—all her little arts in the way of attraction for him, and him alone ; which his sister Maude, to whom this style of thing was rather new, looked on with amused surprise at first, and then somewhat reprehensively and gloomily.

To Hester, Roland, acting as host, was elaborate in his brotherly kindness and attention ; perhaps—nay doubtless—a lingering sentiment of remorse had made him so ; and she received it all, but with secret pain and intense mortification, and Maude's soft blue eyes were not slow to detect this.

'Hester,' said Maude, with arms affectionately twined round her, 'I used to think that you and Roland were very fond of each other !'

'So we were,' said Hester in a low voice.

'Were ?'

'Are, I mean—very fond of each other. Why should we be otherwise ?' stammered poor Hester, turning away for a moment.

'I mean—I thought (uncle Harry used to quiz you both so much !) he cared for you, and you for him more—more——'

'Than cousins usually do ?'

'Yes.'

'Oh, no—no—you mistake, dear Maude.'

'Well—it seems Annot now ; and yet I hope—ah, no—it cannot be.'

One fact soon became too apparent to Roland Lindsay : that his sister Maude did not like Annot Drummond now, if she ever did.

'I never saw a girl so changed since we were at school together at Madame Raffineur's in Belgium—even since I saw her last in London !' said Maude ; 'why, Roland, she has become quite an artful little woman of the world !'

'Artful—oh, Maude !' he expostulated.

'Girls in their confidential moods say and admit many things their best friends know nothing of ; but don't let me

vex you, dear Roland. However, I don't like to hear Annot boast of enjoying cigarettes and being a good shot.'

'All talk, Maude; she takes a waggish delight in startling you country folks. I'd stake a round sum on it, she never tried either,' he replied, with undisguised irritation.

Maude was silent for a moment; but she would have been more than blind had she not seen how Annot and her brother were affected to each other, and she disliked it.

'You love Annot then?' she asked.

'I do.'

'And mean to—to marry her?'

'I hope so.'

'With Annot you have not a sentiment in common; and marriage between two persons whose tastes are diverse is a great error.'

'If our tastes are so; but surely we know our own minds, little one, quite as much as you and Jack Elliot of ours do.'

'There now—you are angry with me!' said Maude, with a pout on her lip.

'Angry—not at all, Maude; who could be angry with you? But I am disappointed a little.'

'And so am I—not a little, but very much.'

'How?'

'I always thought you were attached to our sweet and earnest-eyed Hester.'

'And so I am,' replied Roland, selecting a cigar with great apparent care; 'but, as a cousin, you know.'

'And now it seems to be Annot!' said Maude, with her white hands folded on her knee and looking up at him with an air of annoyance.

'Beyond my admissions just made, what led you to think so?'

'A thousand things! I am not blind, nor is anyone else. According to what you have said, then you must be engaged!'

'Well—yes.'

'And you keep it a secret?'

'Yes.'

'But why?'

'Surely, Maude, that should be obvious to you. Till I

can see old Mr. MacWadsett and have certain matters cleared up.'

'You are wise. But Annot, does she, too, wish the engagement kept secret?'

'Decidedly, from the world at least.'

'A comprehensive word; but why?'

'I have a little tour in Egypt before me yet.'

'My poor Roland! But to me it seems that when a couple are engaged there is no reason why all the world need not know of it, unless there are impediments.'

'Which certainly exist so far in our case. I am the heir of Earlshaugh, yet is Earlshaugh mine? At the present moment,' he added, with his teeth almost set in anger, 'congratulations might be embarrassing.'

Maude sighed for her brother's future, but not for her own. That seemed assured. She thought that if the fashion of congratulations prevented promises of marriage being lightly given, they served a purpose that was good. She had read that a girl might say yes 'when asked to marry, with the mental reservation that if anything better came along she will continue not to keep her word and think twice about it if she has to go through such a form' (and such a girl she shrewdly suspected Annot to be). Maude also thought that marriage engagements are frequently too lightly entered into and too lightly set aside, and that the contract should be as sacred as marriage itself.

'You surely know Annot well?' said Roland, breaking a silence that embarrassed him.

'Oh yes,' replied Maude, without looking up.

'I think you will learn to like, nay, must like her!' he urged.

'I shall try, Roland,' was the dubious response, with which he was obliged to content himself as with other things in his then Fool's Paradise.

CHAPTER XVII.

AT EARLSHAUGH.

FOR two or three days before the all-important First of September, Roland, the old gamekeeper, Gavin Fowler, young Malcolm Skene, and even the pardoned poacher Jamie Spens, had all been busy in a vivid and anxious spirit of anticipation as the day approached. Many a time had they reconnoitered by the King's Wood, the Mains of Dron, in the Fairy Den, and elsewhere, till they knew every rood of ground—ground over which Roland's father had last rambled on his old shooting pony—by stubble field, hedge-row, and scroggy upland slope, where the coveys of the neighbourhood lay, and knew almost the number of birds in every covey ; and many a time and oft the route of the first day was planned, schemed out, and enjoyed in imagination ; while the dogs were carefully seen to in their kennels, and the guns and ammunition inspected in the gunroom, as if a day of battle were at hand.

Yet, even in the Lowlands of Scotland, the palmy days of shooting are gone in many places never to return. Muirland after muirland has been enclosed, marshes reclaimed, and in other parts the hill slopes, that were lonely, stern, and wild—often all but inaccessible—have now become the sites of villas, mansions, and new-made railway villages, till people sometimes may wonder what Cowper meant in his 'Task' when he wrote—

'God made the country, and man made the town !'

But much of this applies more to England than to the sister kingdom.

The last evening of August saw a gay dinner party in the stately old dining-hall of Earlsbaugh, with Roland acting as host, and Mrs. Lindsay, pale and composed as usual, but brilliant in his mother's suite of diamonds (heir-looms of the line), too brilliant, he thought, for the occasion, at the head of the table.

Among other friends who had come for the morrow's

shooting were Jack Elliot and Malcolm Skene, both most prepossessing-looking young fellows; and the style and bearing of both—but especially of the former, who had about him that finishing touch which the service, foreign travel, and good society impart—inspired the heart of Mr. Hawkey Sharpe with much jealous rancour and envy, and with something of mortification too.

It may be superfluous to say that in all the elements that make a perfect gentleman, and one accustomed to the world, he far outshone the unfortunate Hawkey; and as he sat there, clad in evening costume, toying with his wine-glass, and conversing in a pleasantly modulated voice with Annot Drummond, who affected to be deeply interested in Cairo and Alexandria, Tel-el-Kebir and Kassassin, he had no more consciousness or idea of finding a rival in such a person than in old Gavin Fowler, the keeper, or Funnell, the butler, who officiated behind his chair.

But Deborah—Mrs. Lindsay—was observing Elliot, and thought of her brother's jealousy, his ambition and avarice, and his recent threats with secret dread and misgivings, and, knowing of what he was capable, she glanced at him uneasily from time to time as he sat silent, almost sullen, and imbibing more wine than was quite good for him.

The appurtenances of the table, especially so far as plate went, were all that might be expected in a house of such a style and age as Earshaugh, and the great chandelier that hung in the dome-shaped roof with its profusely parqueted ceiling, shed a soft light over all—on many a stately but dim portrait on the walls—among others, one of the Lindsay of the Weird Yett, above the stone mantelpiece, on which was carved the *fesse-chequy* of Lindsay, crested by a tent, with stars overhead, and the motto, *Astra castra, numen lumen*.

In the centre of the board towered a giant silver épergne (the gift of the Hunt to the late laird) laden with fruit and flowers, a tableau representing the gallant King James V., the 'Commons King,' slaying a stag at bay in Falkland Wood.

Several attractive girls were present, but none perhaps were more so in their different degree than Maude, with her

sunny hair and winning blue eyes ; Hester, with her pure complexion, soft bearing, and rich dark-brown braids ; and Annot, with her flower-like face, childish playfulness of manner, and glorious wealth of shining golden tresses.

Nearly all at the table were young, and the dinner was a happy and joyous one, save perhaps to Mr. Hawkey Sharpe, who felt himself, with all his profound assurance, somewhat *de trop*, though he deemed himself, as he was, certainly 'got up as well as any fellow there.'

He was as vain of the form and whiteness of his hands as ever Lord Byron was, and he was wont to hold forth his right one, clenching a cambric handkerchief, with a brilliant sparkling ring of unusual size. His tie was faultless, his eyeglass arrogant and offensive, especially to Elliot, after a time ; his would-be general air of stiffness and languid exclusiveness (imitated ill from others) sat as grotesquely on him as his habit of leaving remarks unanswered, while to all appearance critically examining the condition of his spiky finger-nails.

His presence on this particular occasion, though under the auspices of his sister, at first roused Roland's anger to fever heat, and the latter took his seat at table with a very black expression in his handsome face indeed ; but he saw or felt the necessity for dissembling, and ignored his existence. Then after a time, affected by the geniality of his surroundings, by the bright, pleasant faces of his friends, the conversation, and the circulation of Mr. Funnell's good wines—more than all, by the presence of such a sunny little creature as Annot, who had been consigned to the care of Jack Elliot—he completely thawed, and acted the host to perfection.

At his back stood old Funnell, his rubicund visage shining like a harvest moon, radiant to see Roland in his father's chair and place at the foot of the table, even though *she*, Mrs. Lindsay (*née* Deborah Sharpe), was at the head thereof, though 'not Falkland bred,' an old and unforgotten Fife saying of the days of the princely James's which conveys much there with reference to birth and breeding.

So Roland tried to forget—perhaps for the time actually forgot—the probable or inevitable future, and strove to be

genial with her, though it was quite beyond him to be so with her cub of a brother ; and, indeed, he never stooped to address him at all.

From the opposite side of the table Elliot silently enjoyed the luxury of admiring his merry-eyed and bright-haired Maude, and all the natural grace of her actions ; but Hawkey Sharpe was seated directly opposite to her too ; yet her manner betrayed—even to his keen and observant eyes—none of the annoyance or constant confusion which might have shown itself as regarded *him* and a recent episode, as she entirely ignored his existence, while the presence of Jack shed an ægis over her.

After the ladies withdrew, in obedience to a silent sign from Mrs. Lindsay, the conversation of the gentlemen, as they closed up towards Roland's chair, developed some unpleasant features ; for Hawkey Sharpe, whose tongue was loosened and his constitutional impudence encouraged by Funnell's excellent Pomery-greno, evinced an unpleasant disposition to cavil at and contradict whatever Elliot advanced or mentioned—rather a risky proceeding on the part of Mr. Sharpe, as Elliot was what has been described as a 'stand-offish sort of man, with whom one would not care to joke on an early acquaintance, or slap on the back and call 'old fellow,' or abbreviate his Christian name ;' so, when the different breeds of sporting dogs and new fire-arms were under discussion, the steward said abruptly :

'Guns—oh, talking of guns, there is nothing I know for sport like that with the new grip action, with Schultze powder.'

'Ah ! you mean,' said Elliot, 'the one with the only action that works independently of the top lever spring.'

'Yes.'

'But not for partridges or pheasants.'

'For anything,' said Sharpe curtly.

'Come, you are mistaken,' replied Jack.

'Not at all,' said Sharpe doggedly.

'Excuse me,' said the young officer ; 'as a sportsman and an ex-instructor in musketry, you may permit me to have some knowledge of fire-arms ; but the one you refer to is for big game, and will neither stick nor jam like the Govern-

ment rubbish issued to us in Egypt, and is based on the non-fouling principle.'

'Non-fowling? It will shoot any fowl you aim at,' replied Sharpe, mistaking his meaning; 'but you don't know what you are talking about.'

Elliot simply raised his eyebrows and stared at the speaker for a moment.

'You heard me?' added Sharpe, with an angry gleam in his eye.

Elliot turned to Skene and spoke of something else; but his cool and steady, yet inoffensive, stare, and his ignoring the last defiant remark, exasperated Hawkey Sharpe, who had—we have said—imbibed more wine than he was wont; and, like all men of his class, particularly felt the quiet contempt implied by the other's silence and utter indifference to his presence—a spirit of defiance very humiliating and difficult to grapple with, especially by the underbred; thus, 'while nursing his wrath to keep it warm,' Sharpe was determined to pursue a system of aggravation, and when Elliot remarked to Roland, in pursuance of some general observations, that shooting, even in the matter of black-game and muirgame, should never begin till October, as thousands of young partridges that are not fair game would escape being shot by gentlemen-poachers, or falling a prey when in the hedges and hassocks to the mere pot-hunter—Hawkey Sharpe contradicted him bluntly, without knowing what to urge on the contrary, and made some blundering statements about following young game into the standing corn, and how jolly it was to pot even young pheasants in the standing barley during the month of September.

'In these little matters, my good man, you are rather at variance with Colonel Hawker.'

'Who the devil is Hawker?' said Sharpe.

'A great authority on all such matters, sir,' said young Skene, 'and not to have heard of him argues that you are—well, imperfectly up in the subject.'

'Which we had better drop,' said Roland, with a dangerous sparkle in his dark eyes; 'but pass the decanters, Jack—they stand with you.'

Mr. Hawkey Sharpe gave an audible sniff of contempt,

meant, doubtless, for Elliot, whose cool stare at him was now blended with a smile indicative of curiosity and amusement, that proved alike enraging and baffling.

When the gentlemen rose to join the ladies in the drawing-room, whence came the distant notes of the piano and the voice of Annot Drummond with her inevitable '*Du du,*' Hawkey Sharpe, with an unpleasant consciousness that he had been somewhat foolish and had the worst of his arguments, withdrew to his sanctum in the Beatoun wing to growl and smoke over his brandy and soda, and was seen no more for that night.

Pausing in the entrance-hall, Elliot said :

'Pardon me, Roland, but who *is* that unmitigated cad who contradicted me so at table?—seemed to want to fix a quarrel, by Jove !'

Roland coloured.

'Why, you redden as if he was a bailiff in disguise—a man in possession !' said Elliot, laughing.

'You forget, Jack, that such officials are unknown on this side of the Border.'

'Then who or what is he?' persisted Elliot.

'My overseer—steward.'

'Steward—the devil ! and you have a fellow of that kind at table.'

'Mrs. Lindsay has—not I,' replied Roland, with growing confusion and annoyance. 'There are wheels within wheels here at Earlshaugh, Jack—a little time and you shall know all, even before the pheasants you disputed about are ready for potting.'

But before that period came, or the opportunity so lightly referred to, much was to happen at Earlshaugh that none could at all foresee.

CHAPTER XVIII.

'MY LOVE SHE'S BUT A LASSIE YET.'

THE First of September came in all that could be wished for the shooting, in which, to Roland's disgust and Elliot's surprise, Hawkey Sharpe took a part, but attired in accurate sporting costume, and duly armed with an excellent breech-loader. The corn was yellow in some places, the stubble bare in others; there were rich 'bits' of colour in every field, and silver clouds floating in the blue expanse overhead. In such light, says a writer with an artistic eye, 'the white horses seem cut out of silver, the chestnuts of ruddy gold; while the black horses stand out against the sky as if cut in black marble; and what gaps half a dozen reapers soon make in the standing corn!'

Then the trails of the ground convolvulus and cyanus or corn-flower, of every hue, may be seen, while the little gleaners are afield, tolerated by a good-hearted farmer, who, like Boaz of old, may, perhaps, permit the poor to glean 'even amongst the sheaves.' Elsewhere the fern and heather-covered muirlands were beautiful, with their tiny bushes laden with wild fruits, bramble, and sloe.

How the shooting progressed there—how coveys were flushed and surrounded; how the brown birds rose whirring up, and the *cheepers* tumbled over in quick succession or were caught by the dogs; how the latter found the birds lurking among turnips or potatoes, or where the uncut corn waved (for there they shelter, engender, and breed), till they rose in coveys of twenty and even thirty—may not interest the reader, so now we must hasten on to other points in our story, having more important matters to relate; but, as Mr. Hawkey Sharpe had an unpleasant reputation for shooting sometimes a little wildly, and forgetting the line of fire, all—by the whispered advice of old Fowler, the keeper—gave him a very wide berth in the field, and of this he was angrily conscious.

Yet he brought upon himself the irate animadversions of most of the sportsmen, and more particularly of Jack Elliot,

by ill-using one of the best pointers on the ground. Trained by old Gavin Fowler, this animal would not only stand at the scent of a bird or a hare, but, if in company, would instantly *back* if he saw another dog point. This perfection, the propensity to stand at the scent of game, though a striking example of intelligence and docility, was so misunderstood by Hawkey Sharpe that he dealt poor Ponto a blow with the butt-end of his rifle, eliciting an oath from the white-haired keeper, and anger from all—remarks which made him clench his teeth with rage and mortification.

But, as the hot month of September is not meant for hard fagging, the whole party were back at the house by luncheon-time, and the united spoil of all the bags was duly laid out by braces on the pavement of the court-yard, and a goodly show it made.

After shooting in the morning and forenoon, as there were three sets of lovers among the party at Earlshaugh, much of the time was spent in riding, driving, and rambling about the grounds and their vicinity, while Roland found a congenial task in teaching Annot to ride, as he had procured a most suitable pad for her, by the aid of old Johnnie Buckle, at the Cupar Tuesday Fair; and just then nothing seemed to exist for him but Annot's white soft cheek, her golden hair, and the graceful little figure that made all other women look, to his eyes, angular and peculiar; and then truly he felt that 'there are days on which heaven opens to us all, though to many of us next day it shuts again.' And shut indeed it seemed to Malcolm Skene, who followed Hester like her shadow, and whose eyes often wore a tender and wistful intensity as he gazed upon her soft dark ones without winning one responsive glance; and he would seek to lure her into the subject that was nearest his own heart—his great love for her—while with the rest, but always somewhat apart, they would ramble on by the silvery birches in the Fairy's Den, by the King's Wood, with its great old oaks and heaven-high Scottish firs that towered against the blue sky; in the leafy dingles where the white-tailed rabbits skurried out of their sandy holes, where the birds twittered overhead, the black gleds soared skyward in the welkin, the dun deer started from the rustling bracken and underwood, and so on

to where the woods grew more open, and there came distant glimpses of the German Sea or perhaps of the Firth of Tay, rippling in the glory of the evening sun as it set beyond the Sidlaw Hills.

Unlike Maude and Elliot, who took their assured regard with less demonstration, Roland and Annot Drummond—owing doubtless to the impressible and effusive nature of the latter young lady—were so much together, everywhere and every way, as to provoke a smile among their friends and an emotion of amusement, which certainly Hester Maule did not share.

'Why did I come here after all?' she often asked of herself, as her mind harked back to old days and dreams. 'I could have declined that woman, old Deborah's invitation, and Roland's too. Save papa's suspicions, there was no compulsion upon me. Fool that I have been to come—yet,' she would add with a bitter smile, 'I shall not wear my heart on my sleeve.'

Thus she seemed to lead the van in every proposed scheme for amusement, and the attentions of her old admirer, Malcolm Skene, if they failed to win, at least pleased and soothed her; and, watching her sometimes, Roland would think—

'Well, after all, I am glad to see her so happy.'

A ball had early been proposed, but through the opposition or mal-influence of Mrs. Lindsay the scheme proved a failure; visions of the large dining-hall gay with floral decorations, the lines on the floor and the ball cloth smooth and tight as a drum-head, passed away, and a simple, half-impromptu carpet-dance was substituted; hired musicians were procured from the nearest town, and all the invited—even Hester—looked forward to a night of enjoyment; and, sooth to say, since her visit she had sedulously done all in her power to avoid meeting Roland alone—no difficult matter, so occupied was he with Annot; and then Earlshaugh was a large and rambling old house, intersected by tortuous passages without end, little landings and flights of steps in unexpected places, rooms opening curiously out of each other, and turret stairs up and down, the result of repairs and additions in past times; thus, while it was a glorious

old house for flirtation, for appointments and partings, it was quite possible for two persons to reside therein and yet meet each other seldom, unless they wished it to be otherwise.

It was impossible for the mind of Hester not to dwell on the time when Roland was—as she thought—her lover; of rambles and conversations and silences that were eloquent, and beatings of the heart in the bat-haunted gloaming, when the Esk gurgled over its stony bed and the crescent moon was in the violet-tinted sky.

She thought she had got over it all, but she had not yet—she felt that she had not; but now Malcolm Skene was there, and she might if she chose show Roland the sceptre of power, and that the art of pleasing was still hers as ever.

Roland had actually been more than once on the point of seeking some apologetic explanation with her; in his inner consciousness he felt that he owed it to her; but he shrank from it with a species of moral cowardice—he who had hacked his way out of the carnage of Kashgate, and ridden through the slaughter of other Egyptian fields; and though he had often rehearsed in his mind the *amende* he owed her, how could he dare to approach it?

‘It was a mistake of his at Merlwood thinking that he loved me,’ Hester would ponder on the other hand; ‘and he did not know then—still less did I—that it was a mistake; but I know it now! The only thing left for me is to school myself, if I can, to love him as a friend or sister, a cousin merely. But it is hard—hard after all; and for such an artificial girl as Annot!’

Maude’s carpet-dance—for the idea was hers—proved a great success, and many were present to whom, as they have no place in our story, we need not refer; but the music was excellent, and from an arched and partially curtained recess of the Red Drawing-room it swelled along the lofty ceilings and through the stately apartment, on the floor of which the dancers glided away to their hearts’ content.

Mr. Hawkey Sharpe, bold and unabashed, was there attired *de rigueur* in evening costume; but even he did not venture on asking Maude to favour him with one dance; yet he ground his sharp teeth from time to time as he

watched her and Captain Elliot, and overheard some—but only some of his remarks to her, though Hawkey had the ears of a fox.

'Maudie, darling, I am afraid you are tired,' said Jack tenderly, pausing for a moment.

'Already? Not at all, Jack; I would go on for ever,' exclaimed the girl, and they swept away again.

To her how delightful it was, waltzing with him—his hand pressed lightly on her willowy waist, her fingers, gloved and soft and slender, just resting on his shoulder; a faint perfume of her silky hair, a drowsy languor in every movement and in the whole situation.

'After we are married, Maudie,' whispered Jack, 'I am sure I shall disapprove of waltzing.'

'Disapprove—why?'

'Because I shall hate to see you whirling away with another.'

'Don't be a goose, Jack.'

'Won't I have the right to forbid you?'

'A right I shall not recognise. You surely would not be jealous of me?'

'Of you—no; but of others—a humiliating confession, is it not?' he added, smiling tenderly down upon her.

Though it was all a hastily got up and *impromptu* affair, Maude and Annot were radiantly happy; the latter in securing such a lover as Roland Lindsay, with all his surroundings, which she appreciated highly, as they far exceeded the most brilliant hopes and aspirations of herself and her match-making mother in South Belgravia. Her soft cheeks flushed and paled, and her tiny feet—for tiny they were as those of Cinderella—beat responsive to the music; and in the fulness of her own joy even her original emotions of covetousness, and ambition perhaps, were dimmed or lessened; while the dances which she had with Roland seemed quite unlike those she had enjoyed with other men; even when Hawkey Sharpe, who, being a Scotchman, danced of course, ploughing away with the minister's good-natured daughter, cannoned with some violence against them, and made Roland frown and mutter under his moustache till he drew Annot into the recess of a window, and while fanning her, and in doing so

lightly ruffling her shining hair, talked that soft nonsense so dear to them then.

‘How childlike you are, Annot, in the brightness of your joy and in your genuine love of amusement!’ said he admiringly, as he stooped over her.

‘I feel as light as a bird when I hear good dance music like that and have such a good partner as you, Roland,’ she exclaimed, looking up, her green hazel eyes beaming with pleasure.

‘How could it be otherwise,’ said he, ‘when,

“My love she’s but a lassie yet,
A lightsome, lovely lassie yet.”

a sweet one that never had even a passing *penchant*, I am sure, or perhaps a flirtation!’

‘Yet having a very decided tendency thereto,’ replied Annot, with one of her arch smiles. ‘But nothing more, dear Roland, nothing more!’ she added, perfectly oblivious of poor Bob Hoyle and many other ‘detrimentals,’ as Mamma Drummond called them.

‘Have you never had even what the French call a *caprice*?’ he asked, with a soft laugh and a fond glance.

‘Never—never—till——’

‘Till when?’

‘I came to Merlwood.’

‘My little darling!’

‘So Hester and Mr. Skene are dancing together again,’ said Annot, anxious to change what she deemed a dangerous subject. ‘I saw her dancing with Captain Elliot after you resigned her.’

‘Yes—she seems enjoying herself, poor Hester!’

‘I am so glad to see her with Mr. Skene.’

‘Why?’

‘Because I hope they will marry yet, and bring their little comedy to a close.’

‘How a young girl’s mind always runs on love and marriage!’ said Roland. ‘But this little comedy you refer to, I never heard of it, save from yourself.’

‘Indeed!’ replied Annot, who, from cogent reasons of her own, was anxious to make the most of Skene’s undoubted

admiration for Hester. 'We noticed them greatly in London.'

'I always knew that Malcolm was her unvarying admirer, who singled her out in the Edinburgh assemblies and balls elsewhere from the first, and had, of course, poured much sweet nonsense into her pretty little ears—treasured flowers she had worn, gloves, handkerchiefs, bits of ribbon, and all that sort of thing——'

'Which you all do?'

'That I don't admit, Annot.'

'Anyway, this absurd appreciation of each other's society was a source of great amusement to us in London,' she continued, not very fairly, so far as concerned Hester; but then Annot, a far-seeing young lady, was full of past preconceived suspicions and of present plans of her own.

'However, Annot, this little affair is nothing to us—to me,' added Roland, and oddly enough, with the slightest *souçon* of pique in his glance and tone, as he saw Malcolm Skene, a tall and stately fellow, who might please any woman's eye—and did please the eyes of many—leading his dark-eyed and dark-haired cousin, not into the whirl of dances, nor to the refreshment-room, but—as if almost unconsciously—towards the entrance of the long and dimly-lighted conservatory which opened off the Red Drawing-room.

As Jack Elliot was too well-bred a man to attract attention by dancing too much with Maude, his *fiancée*, the observant Mr. Hawkey Sharpe saw, with no small satisfaction, that for nearly the remainder of the night he bestowed the most of his attention on strangers, wholly intent that Maude's little entertainment should please all and go off well, and that intention, which Mr. Sharpe misunderstood, was one of the causes that led to a serious misadventure at a future time.

Old Gavin Fowler, as he carried Ponto home in his arms to his own lodge, while the dog, conscious of kindness, whined and licked his weather-beaten hands, had muttered between his teeth to Roland:

'A better dog never entered a field! Eleven years has he followed me, and now he is thirteen years auld, and can yet find game wi' the youngest and the best whelp we hae;

and to think that he should get sic a clowre from a clod like that ! But dogs bark as they are bred—so does Hawkey Sharpe ! He's like the witches o' Auchencraw ; he'll get mair for your ill than your gude.'

A proverb that means, favours are often granted an individual through fear of his malevolence.

Roland felt all the words implied, and colouring, said, pale with anger :

'He shall pay up this score and others, I hope, ere long, Gavin.'

And Mrs. Lindsay placed her hand upon her heart, on hearing of the episode, and was secretly thankful that the only one who suffered from Hawkey's jealous vengeance was poor Ponto, the pointer.

CHAPTER XIX.

HESTER RECEIVES A PROPOSAL.

ANNOY was certainly curious to know what was passing between the two whom she had seen wandering into the cooler atmosphere of the conservatory ; but she could not at the same time relinquish the society of Roland, and to suggest that they should adjourn thither might only mar the end she wished—without any real affection for Hester—to come to pass, as she had not been without her own suspicions retrospectively. But, sore though it was, we fear that the heart of Hester Maule was not to be caught on the rebound.

And in dread and dislike of Annoy's observation, her jests and comments, she had—so far as she could—lately avoided being, if possible, for a moment alone with Malcolm Skene, or giving him an opportunity of addressing her, and he had felt this keenly.

In the long drawing-room the dancing was still gaily in progress, and the soft strains of Strauss went floating along the leafy and gorgeous aisles of the conservatory, where Skene and Hester had—so far as she was concerned—un-

consciously wandered. She seated herself, wearily and flushed with dancing, while he hung over her, with his elbow resting on a shelf of flowers, while looking pensively and tenderly down on her—on the heaving of her rounded bosom, her long dark lashes, and the clear white parting of the rich brown hair on her shapely head, longing with all his soul to place his arms round her, and draw that beloved head caressingly on his breast; and yet the words he said at first were somewhat commonplace after all. But Hester, while slowly fanning herself to hide the tremulousness of her hands, knew and felt intuitively that a scene between them was on the tapis; and, deeming it inevitable at some time or other, she thought the sooner it was over the better; and in the then weariness of her heart, she felt a little reckless; but his introductory remarks surprised her by their bluntness.

‘My life now seems but one manœuvre, Miss Maule—to be alone with you for a moment or two.’

Hester made some inaudible reply; so he resumed:

‘I have heard it said by some—by whom matters not—that you are engaged, Miss Maule?’

‘Then they know more than I do—but to whom have my good friends assigned me?’

‘To your cousin.’

‘Roland!’

‘Yes.’

‘I am not engaged to Roland certainly,’ replied Hester, her lips and eyelashes quivering as she spoke.

‘I thought not,’ said Malcolm Skene, gathering courage; ‘Miss Drummond seems to me his chief attraction. If he is as happy as I wish him, he will be the happiest of deserving men.’

‘The phrase of a novel writer, Mr. Skene,’ said Hester, a little bitterly, as she thought over some episodes at Merlwood; ‘but do not talk so inflatedly of what men deserve. The best of them are often unwise, unkind, unjust.’

‘Do not blame all men for the faults perhaps of one,’ said Skene at haphazard, and a little unluckily, as the speech went home to Hester’s heart. She grew pale, as if he had divined her secret.

‘I do not understand you,’ she faltered a little haughtily, while flashing one upward glance at him.

‘Considering the way you view men now, and the way you avoid or rebuff me, I wonder that I have got a word with you, as I do to-night.’

‘Do I rebuff you?’

‘Yes—to my sorrow, I have felt it.’

‘Sorrow—of what do you really accuse me?’

‘Treating me with coldness, distance——’

‘I am not aware—that—that——’ she paused, not knowing what to say.

‘Hester—dearest Hester,’ said he in a low and earnest voice, while stealing nearer her and assuring himself by one swift glance that they were alone in the conservatory; ‘let me call you so, were it only for to-night—you know how long I have loved you, and surely you will love me a little in time. I know how true, how tender of heart you are; I know, too, that I have no rival in the present—with the past I have nothing to do; but tell me, even silently, by one touch of your hand, that you love me in turn, or will try to love me in time, Hester—dear, dear Hester!’

She opened her lips, but no sound came from them, and her interlaced hands trembled in her lap, for the ‘scene’ had gone somewhat beyond her idea in depth and earnestness; and she felt that Malcolm Skene’s deduction as regarded there being no rival in the present was a mistake in one sense.

Encouraged by her silence, and construing it in his own favour, little conceiving that her head was then full of a false idol, he resumed:

‘Hester, ever since I first saw and knew you, it has been the great hope of my existence to make you my wife.’

Still the girl was voiceless, and felt chained to her seat.

She could feel—yea, could hear her heart beating painfully, as she had a pure regard and most perfect esteem for the young fellow by her side; and thought that to the end of her days the perfume of the lily of the valley, of stephanotis, and other plants close by would come back to memory with Malcolm’s voice, the strains of Strauss, the

strange atmosphere of the conservatory, and the dull sense of unreality that was over her then.

‘Oh, Hester, will you not tell me that you will try to love me—to love me a little? Have you not a single word to give me?’

Passionately earnest were his handsome eyes—anxious and eager was his lowered voice and the expression of his clearly cut face. He said nothing to her, as other men might have done, of his fortune, of his estate, of his lands of Dunnimarle that overlooked the Forth, of his prospects or his future; all such items were forgotten in the present. Neither did he urge that he was going far—far away from her soon—much sooner than he had then the least idea of—to enhance his value in her eyes, or win her interest in his favour; for even that, too, he forgot.

She looked up at him with her soft, velvety, dark-blue eyes suffused, gravely and kindly; the charming little tint gone from her rounded cheeks; her whole face looking very sweet and fair, but not wearing the expression of one who listened with happiness to a welcome tale of love.

‘Oh, why do you say all this to me, Mr. Skene—Malcolm I shall call you for old acquaintance’ sake—why ask me to marry you?’

‘Why? a strange question, Hester,’ said he, a little baffled by her apparent self-possession, while tremulous with joy to hear for the first time his Christian name upon her lips.

‘Yes—why?’ she asked, wearily and sadly.

‘Because I love you as much as it is in the nature of an honest man to love a woman.’

‘But—but I do not return the sentiment—I cannot love you as you would wish.’

‘Not even in the end, Hester?’

‘What end?’

‘Any time I may give you and hopefully wait for?’

She shook her head and cast down her white eyelids.

‘And yet no one else seeks your love?’ said he a little reproachfully.

‘No one else.’

‘Can I never make you care for me?’ he urged in a kind of dull desperation.

‘Pardon me—but I do not think so; my regard, my friendship and gratitude will ever be yours; but please—please,’ she added almost piteously, ‘do not let us recur to this matter again.’

‘You feel the impossibility——’

‘Of receiving your words as you wish.’

‘You are at least candid with me, Hester; and I shall, indeed, trouble you no more.’

He spoke with more grief than bitterness, as he dropped the little and softly gloved hand which he had captured for a moment.

She then passed it over his arm and rose, as if to show that all was over and that they were to return to the drawing-room—which she now deeply regretted having quitted—and with them the dancing, the joy, and the brilliance of Maude’s little fête had departed for the night.

Skene felt that nothing was left for him now but to quit Earlsbaugh at once, and the time and the hour came sooner than he expected, and all the more welcome now.

But the adventures of the night—adventures in which Mr. Hawkey Sharpe bore a somewhat prominent part—were not yet over.

CHAPTER XX.

MR. SHARPE MAKES A MISTAKE.

MAUDE, though she knew not then the reason, had seen how Hester Maule, after coming from the conservatory, with a kind of good-night bow to Skene, had abruptly quitted the dancers, and looking pale, ill, and utterly out of spirits, had retired to her own room, whither she soon accompanied her; but failing to learn the reason of her discomposure, was returning downstairs to have one last turn with Jack Elliot, when she suddenly met Mr. Hawkey Sharpe, the result of whose attentions to the wine in the refreshment-room was pretty apparent in his face and watery gray eyes, and he paused unsteadily with a hand on the great oaken banisters.

As Maude came tripping down the broad stone staircase

with leisurely grace and clad in a soft and most becoming dress, one of those 'whose apparently inexpensive simplicity men innocently admire, and over the bills for which husbands and fathers wag their heads aghast,' he glanced appreciatively at her snowy neck and shoulders, where her girlish plumpness hid even the small collar-bones; at her beautiful, blooming face, her sunny hair; her petulant, scornful mouth, and delicate profile; while she, with some remembrance of how he had acquitted himself among the dancers, and when waltzing, in attempting to reverse, had spread dismay around him, for a moment felt inclined to smile.

Wine gave Hawkey Sharpe fresh courage, and just then some new thoughts had begun to occur to him.

He had seen that—unlike young Malcolm Skene, who hovered about Hester like her shadow, and unlike Roland, who was never absent from the side of Annot—Captain Elliot and Maude were not apparently overmuch together; for in the assured position of their love and engagement they seemed in society very much like other persons. He was ignorant of the mystery that there could be

‘Sighs the deeper for suppression,
And stolen glances sweeter for the theft,’

and in the coarseness of his nature and lack of fine perception he mistook the situation, and began to think that, notwithstanding all he heard mooted, and notwithstanding the fact of seeing a letter addressed in Maude's handwriting to the gentleman in question, there might be 'nothing in it,' but perhaps an incipient flirtation; and he had resolved on the first opportune occasion to renew his pretensions, as the Captain had evidently danced much with other girls—perhaps, he thought, had preferred them—during the past night.

And now it seemed the time had come; and, over and above all his extreme assurance, he thought to win through her terror and necessity of temporizing for appearance' sake what she never might yield to any regard for himself; and even now, as he prepared to address her, anger, fear, and a sickly sense of humiliation suddenly came into the heart of Maude, though a moment before it had been beating happily with thoughts that were all her own.

‘I hope,’ said he, with what he meant for a smile, but was more like a grimace, ‘that you enjoyed the dancing to-night, Miss Lindsay?’

‘Thanks,’ replied Maude curtly. ‘I hope you, too, have been amused,’ she added, making a side step to pass, but, as on a previous occasion, he barred the way, and said :

‘I did not venture to ask you for one dance, even.’

Maude, who deemed his presence there, though at the invitation most probably of her stepmother, presumption enough, smiled coldly and haughtily, and was about to pass down with a bow, which might mean anything, when, still opposing her progress, he said, while eyeing her fair beauty with undisguised admiration, and with a would-be soft voice, which, however, was rather ‘feathery’ :

‘Have you quite forgotten the subject on which I last addressed you?’

‘The subject!’

‘Yes.’

‘I have not forgotten your profound presumption, Mr. Sharpe, as I then called it, if it is to that you refer,’ replied Maude, trembling with anger.

‘Presumption! You so style my veneration—my regard—my——’

‘Take care what you say, sir, and how you may provoke my extreme patience too far,’ interrupted Maude, her face now blanched and pale.

‘Your patience! *that* for it!’ said he, suddenly snapping his fingers, and giving way to a sudden gust of coarse anger that caused his cheeks to redden and his eyes to gleam. ‘It is your fear of me—your fear of me for your brother and his popinjay friends that gives you what you pretend to call patience, Maude Lindsay, and by the heavens above us,’ he continued, wine and rage mounting into his brain together, ‘by the heavens above us, I say, if that fellow Elliot——’

What he was about to say remains unknown, as it was suddenly cut short. A hand from behind was laid firmly on his right ear, and by that he was twisted round, flaming with rage, fury, and no small amount of pain, to find himself confronted by the calm, stern, and inquiring face of the very person he referred to—Captain Elliot.

There was a half-minute's pause after the latter flung Hawkey Sharpe aside.

The steward glared at his assailant, who scarcely knew what to make of the situation, a sound like a hiss escaping through his teeth in his speechless rage and sense of affront ; he clenched his hands till the spiky nails pierced his flesh. He grew deadly pale, and, with an almost grotesque expression of hate there is no describing in his pale, shifty, and watery eyes, he turned away muttering something deeply and huskily ; while with a smile of disdain Jack Elliot drew the trembling girl's arm through his own and led her downstairs ; but her dancing was over for that night.

'Maudie, darling, is that fellow mad? What the deuce is all this about?' asked Elliot, full of concern and surprise.

'Jack, dear Jack,' said Maude beseechingly, and in tears now, 'I implore you not to speak to Roland of this unseemly episode.'

'The fellow seems to have taken too much wine.'

'Yes, Jack, and forgot himself.'

'But he should have remembered you, and who you are.'

'But you don't know—you can't know, how Roland is situated,' said Maude, in a breathless and broken voice.

'I suspect much ; but there—don't weep, Maude ; the fellow's whole existence is not worth one of your tears.'

Maude was full of fear and distress for what might ensue if Roland knew all. Alas ! she could very little foresee what *did* ensue.

But notwithstanding his promise to Maude, Elliot was too puzzled by the apparent mystery, and her too evident sense of grief and mortification, not to make some small reference to the affair when he and Roland met for a farewell cigar in the smoke-room, after the last of the guests had driven away. He kept, however, Maude's name out of the matter.

'I am loth, Roland, to have an unseemly row with one of your dependents ; but, d——n me, if I don't feel inclined to lash that fellow—Sharpe, I think, his name is !'

'He is certainly an underbred fellow,' said Roland uneasily.

'Then why not send him to the right-about?'

‘Easier said than done, Jack—if you knew all,’ said Roland, almost with a groan; ‘but has he been rude to you?’

‘To me—well—yes, in a way he has.’

‘With all his impudent would-be air of ease, it is evident he has none, as one may see at a glance,’ said Skene, who had been smoking moodily in a corner; ‘he is a man who does not know what to do with his legs and arms, or to seem in any way at ease like a gentleman.’

‘I feel at times that I would like to kick the fellow,’ said Roland, with a sudden gush of anger, ‘when he sits with that aggravating smile and see-nothing look on his face, yet “taking stock” of everyone and everything all round—all the while answering me so softly, when he knows that I am burning with contempt and dislike of him. If he would get into a passion and fly out I would respect him more, but he seems to be for ever biding his time—his time for what?’ added Roland, almost to himself.

‘Passion? You should have seen him to-night!’ said Elliot, who, unfortunately for himself, had not yet seen the tail of the storm he had roused; ‘but why give him house-room, I say?’

‘He is just now a necessary evil—a little time, Jack, and you shall know all,’ replied Roland in a somewhat dejected voice; so Elliot said no more.

Meantime the subject of these remarks had betaken him to his own apartments, and certainly as he had ascended the old hollowed steps of the turret stair that led thereto they seemed, according to the Earlshaugh legend, to lead down rather than up.

‘I’ll be even with you, Miss Maude Lindsay, some fine day—see if I am not!’ he muttered as he went; ‘your high and mighty hoity-toity airs will be the ruin of you and yours. And as for that fellow Elliot, I’ll take change out of him—make cold meat of him, by heaven, if I can!’

Sobered by rage he reached his peculiar sanctum, and sat down there to scheme out revenge, through the medium of a briar-root from his rack of pipes, and brandy and soda from a cellarette he possessed.

‘I’ll marry that girl Maude—or—by Jove! not a bad

idea, the *other* one, with the golden hair, if old Deb fails me, which I can scarcely think. The little party with the golden hair seems game for anything,' he added, showing more acuteness than Roland in the matter. 'Why shouldn't I? I am going in for respectability now, and I rather flatter myself I am as good as any of that Brummagem lot downstairs, for all their coats of arms, pedigrees, and bosh! I'm in clover here—in society now, and, by Jove, I'll keep to it. But, Deb,' he continued talking aloud, as the new beverage cast loose his tongue, 'her heart is in a bad way—devil a doubt of that! The doctors assure me of it—is breaking up—breaking up—tell more to me than they have done to her; and that she may go off any time like a farthing candle! Poor Deb—she is not half a bad sort—yet I wish she would settle her little affairs and——'

A sound made him look round, and he saw his sister looking pale—white indeed—and weary, with an unpleasant expression in her cold, deep eyes, and a palpable knit on her usually smooth and lineless forehead.

'How much had she overheard?' was Hawkey's first fearful thought.

'My dear Deb,' he stammered, 'I was just thinking that you should make the whole of that pack clear out of the house—they are too much for you, and the house is yours! Have a little brandy and water, Deb—you look so ill! Poor, dear Deb,' he continued in a maudlin way, 'if anything happened to you, you know how I should sorrow for it.'

'I have no intention of affording you that opportunity yet,' she replied, with something of a flash in her eyes.

CHAPTER XXI.

MALCOLM SKENE.

THE sportsmen assembled next morning a little later than usual, and after hastily partaking of coffee, were about to set forth after the partridges, with dogs, keepers, and beaters, to a particular spot where Gavin Fowler assured them that the coveys were so thick as to cover the ground, when Malcolm Skene, whom all were beginning to miss, suddenly appeared, but minus gun, shot belt, and other shooting paraphernalia, yet with a brighter smile on his face that it had won overnight.

‘What is up, Malcolm?’ asked Roland; ‘don’t you go with us?’

‘Impossible! I have just had a telegram from the Colonel. The corps is short of officers, from sickness, casualties, and so forth; so I must resign my leave and start at once.’

‘For the dépôt?’

‘No—for Egypt,’ continued Skene, ‘so I must be off. Let me have a trap, Roland, that I may catch the up train for the South.’

‘This is sudden!’ exclaimed several.

‘Sudden indeed—but no less welcome.’

‘I am so sorry, old fellow!’ exclaimed Roland, ‘when the birds are in such excellent order, too.’

‘I can scarcely realize it, said Skene, whose thoughts were not with the birds certainly. ‘In a fortnight, I shall be again in my fighting kit and in the land of the Pharaohs.’

Ignorant of what had so suddenly transpired, Hester, for whom he looked anxiously and wistfully, was lingering in her room, till the shooting party should have gone forth, unwilling to face Malcolm Skene after the interview of last night, and full of a determination to return at once to Merlwood, to her old life by the wooded Esk, with her silver-haired father, his bubbling hookah, and his Indian reminiscences—oh! how well she knew them all! But Maude, and even the selfish and apparently volatile Annot, regarded the handsome fellow with deep interest, and the

lips of the former were white and quivering as she bade him adieu.

‘Good-bye, all you fellows;’ he exclaimed, when old Buckle came with the trap to the *porte-cochère*. ‘Good-bye, Roland and you, Jack—when shall we three meet again? In thunder and all the rest of it, no doubt. Farewell, Miss Lindsay—Maude I may call you just now—bid Hes—, your cousin, adieu for me, and God keep you all till we meet once more—if ever!’ he added, under his moustache.

Another moment he was gone, and no trace remained of him but the wheel-tracks in the avenue.

‘Good-bye—good-bye;’ it sounded like a dirge in the air of the warm autumn morning.

‘Poor Malcolm—he is the king of good fellows,’ said Roland to his friends who were gathered in the entrance-hall, just as Hester Maule, pale as a lily, after vainly practising a little the art of smiling and looking happy in her mirror, appeared at the foot of the staircase, and heard what had occurred.

‘Yes—Skene has just gone, poor fellow. Should you not have liked to have bade him farewell?’

‘Yes—of course,’ said Hester, with colourless lips; but thought, ‘it is better not—better not *now*.’

‘His last message was to *you*,’ whispered Maude.

‘Well—it will be my turn next, and yours too, Elliot,’ said Roland as he lit a cigarette.

‘It but reminds me of Wolfe’s song,’ added Elliot cheerily, as he sang in a tragic-comic way—

‘Let mirth and wine abound.
The trumpets sound,
And the colours flying are, my boys!
’Tis he, you, or I,
Whose business is to die;
Then why should we be melancholy, boys,
Whose business is to die?’

Come along—here are the dogs.’

‘Skene’s departure seems to have upset you girls,’ said Roland, ‘and now, Hester, my dear cousin,’ he added in a blundering way, ‘you look as pale as if Melancholy had marked you for her own.’

‘Don’t jest, Roland,’ said Maude; ‘Malcolm Skene looks like one who has a history behind him, and a strange destiny before him. Only think, Roland,’ she added in a whisper, as she drew her brother aside; ‘he proposed to Hester in the conservatory last night!’

‘And—and she——’

‘Refused him.’

‘Why?’

Maude only shook her pretty head; but his heart told him too probably *why*, and for a time his conscience smote him.

‘Don’t you think she was foolish?’ asked Maude; ‘I certainly told her that I thought so, as Malcolm is such a lovable fellow.’

‘And what did she say?’

‘Replied, with a feeble laugh, that she meant to die an unappropriated blessing.’

‘What is that, Maudie?’

‘An old maid.’

‘Nonsense—a handsome girl like Hester!’

To do the latter justice, she asked herself more than once why had she refused him, and for *what*?

Many may deem that Hester acted a foolish part; but her heart was too sore, and still too full of regard for another to find a place in it for the love of Malcolm Skene, though she knew it had been hers in the past, ready to lay at her feet.

Steadfast of purpose, she was, in some respects, a remarkable girl, Hester Maule. Roland, her companion in childhood, as we have elsewhere stated, was the one love of her life.

‘All of hers upon that die was thrown,’ and her heart was not to be caught on the rebound, through pique, pride, soreness, or disappointment.

But now that Malcolm was gone, Hester in solitude could not but give a few tears as she thought of his true regard for her; his stately presence, his soft earnestness, and his sad, tender eyes—thought over all that—but for Roland’s image—might have been; and of the high compliment Skene’s honest and gallant heart had paid her; but all—even could she have wished it otherwise—was over now,

and he had gone to that fatal land of battle and disease, where so many found their graves then !

Did Roland jest when he asked if Melancholy had marked her for its own ? If so, it was a species of wound, and she felt that 'it is only wounds inflicted by those we love whose sting lasts.'

Maude and Annot, with the old groom, Johnnie Buckle, as their *Escudero*, had gone for a 'spin' on their pads as far as Kilmany, to visit the Gaules-Den, a deep ravine through which a river runs ; Mrs. Lindsay was in the seclusion of her own room, as usual at that time of the day, when she took some kind of drops for her heart, and Hester, left alone to silence and solitude, mentally followed Malcolm Skene in his journey southward. Her hands were folded idly in her lap ; a kind of sad listlessness was all over her, and her soft dark eyes were dreamily fixed on vacancy, and seemed to see—if we may say so—visions, while, as on yesternight, the perfume of the lily of the valley, of the stephanotis, and other flowers was floating round her.

She thought she might have seen him once again had she gone downstairs at the usual time—but have seen him to what end or purpose, constituted as her mind was then ? Better not.

In these days it seemed to Hester that there was not one of her actions which she did not repent of before it was half conceived or half acted upon.

The forenoon sun soared hot and high, and the drowsy flies and one huge humming bee, enclosed by the windows of her room, made their useless journeys up and down the panes, on which the climbing ivy pattered ; the birds twittered among the leaves of the latter ; an occasional dog barked in the stable-yard, and the voice of the peacock—never pleasant at any time—was heard on the terrace without ; but soon other sounds—voices indicative of excitement and alarm—caused her to rise, throw open a window in the deep embayment of the ancient wall, and look out.

Advancing across the emerald sward of the lawn, but slowly and carefully, came a group—the sportsmen of the morning, with their guns sloped on the shoulder or carried

under an arm, and the dogs cowering, as if overawed, about their footsteps.

What was the cause of this? What had happened?

Four men were bearing a fifth on a stretcher or hurdle of some kind—a man either terribly wounded or dead, he lay so still—so very still!

A half-stifled cry escaped Hester, as she rushed downstairs, for some dreadful catastrophe had evidently taken place!

CHAPTER XXII.

A FATAL SHOT.

WHEN the shooting party, after being somewhat delayed by Skene's unexpected departure, was setting forth, Roland and Elliot, with no small indignation, and confounded by his profound assurance, saw Hawkey Sharpe join them, belted, accoutred, gaitered, and gun in hand, looking quite sobered and fresh, having doubtless just had from Mr. Funnell 'a hair of the dog that bit him' overnight.

'That fellow here, actually—after all!' said Roland through his clenched teeth, though Elliot had given him but a vague outline of Sharpe's rudeness, remembering Maude's earnest desire and evident anxiety.

While somewhat 'dashed' by the coolness of his reception by all—even to old Ponto the setter, who gave him a wide berth—Mr. Hawkey Sharpe was mean enough—or subtle enough—to hammer a kind of excuse for 'some mistake' he had made last night, attributing it to the wine he had taken—mixing champagne and claret-cup with brandies and soda—of all of which he had certainly imbibed freely, as his still yellow-balled and bloodshot eyes bore witness.

Elliot heard him with a fixed stare of calm disdain; while Roland, writhing in his soul, still temporized—despising himself heartily the while—for the sake of appearances, but determined now, before twenty-four hours were past, to get at the bottom of the mystery—to ascertain the real state of his affairs.

There was something in Jack Elliot's well-bred and steady stare, as he focussed him with his eye-glass, that expressed vague wonder, *insouciance*, and no small contempt; it enraged Hawkey Sharpe and made his whole heart seem to burn in his breast with hate and suppressed passion, while fixing his own eyeglass defiantly and attempting suavely to say :

'Good-morning, Captain Lindsay—good-morning, gentlemen, *all*.'

Roland could scarcely master his passion or the impulse to club his fowling-piece and knock the fellow down.

'Mr. Sharpe,' said he in a low voice that seemed all unlike his own, so low and husky was it, as he beckoned Hawkey aside, 'considering the rudeness of which I understand you were guilty last night, I wonder that you have the bad taste to address me at all, or thrust yourself upon our society.'

'Thrust—Captain Lindsay!' exclaimed Sharpe, in turn suppressing his rage.

'Yes—I repeat that considering there was something—I scarcely know what—amounting to a fracas between my friend Captain Elliot and you, I also wonder—nathless your relative and assumed position in this house—that you venture to join my party this morning.'

It was the first time that Roland had spoken so plainly to this obnoxious personage.

'I don't quite understand all your words imply,' replied the latter with an assumption of dignity and would-be *hauteur* that sat grotesquely upon him. 'I am in the house of my sister, Mrs. Lindsay of Earlshaugh, who has accorded me permission to shoot, and shoot I shall whether you like it or not!'

'For the last time, I trust,' muttered Roland under his moustache.

'That we shall see,' was the mocking remark of Hawkey, who overheard him.

Roland turned abruptly away, loth to excite comment or surprise among his friends by the strange bearing of one deemed by them his mere dependent.

So the shooting progressed, and for a time without let or impediment. Away through the King's Wood and the

Fairy's Den went the sportsmen, over the harvest fields, so rich in beauty to the picture-loving eye, by the green and scented hawthorn hedgerows, where the golden spoil of the passing corn carts remained for the gleaner; among brambles and red fern—the crimson bracken that, according to the Scottish proverb, brings milk and butter in October; firing in line, as adjusted by old Gavin Fowler; and as their guns went off, bang, bang, bang, in the clear and ambient air, when the startled coveys went whirring up, the brown birds came tumbling down with outspread wings, before the double barrels.

If the autumn sunset in Scotland is lovely, not less so is the autumn sunrise, when seen from the slope of some green hill, like the spur of the Ochils that looks down on Logie, while through pastoral valley and wooded haugh the white silver mist is rolling. 'Then the tops of the trees seem at first to rise above a country that is flooded, while the kirk spire appears like some sea mark heaving out of the mist. Then comes a great wedge-like beam of gold, cutting deep down into the hollows, showing the stems of the trees and the roofs of the cottages, gilding barn and outhouse, making a golden road through a land of white mist that seems to rise on either side like the sea which Moses divided to pass through dryshod. The dew-drops on the sun-lighted summit the feet rest upon, are coloured like precious stones of every dye, and every blade of grass is beaded with the gorgeous gems.'

And never do the deer look more graceful and beautiful than when in autumn they leave their lair among the bracken, when the blue atmosphere is on a Scottish mountain side, and changing hues are on leafy grove and heath-clad slope.

As the sportsmen, now pretty far apart, after beating successfully up the slope of a stubble field on a hill-side, came upon some aged and irregular hedgerows, full of gaps and interspersed with stunted thorn-trees, and having on each side a wet grassy ditch, the warning voice of the old keeper was heard some paces in the rear:

'Tak' tent, gentlemen; tak' tent. Nae cross shots here. There is a different ground owre beyond.'

A covey of some twenty birds whirred up from a gap in the hedge, and both Elliot and Hawkey Sharpe seemed to fire at it. We say seemed, as the former fired straight to his front, the latter, who was on his right, obliquely to the left; and then there came a sharp cry of anguish and pain but seldom or never heard among a group of gay sportsmen.

‘By the Lord, but he’s done it at last,’ cried old Fowler.

‘I aye thocht he wad be the death on the field o’ somebody,’ cried Jamie Spens, the ex-poacher, who was acting as a beater.

‘Sharpe’s dune it at last,’ cried Fowler again.

‘What—who—what?’ said a dozen voices.

‘Murdered some ane—hang me if it isna Captain Elliot. Sharpe’s a devilish gleed gunner, if ever there was ane.’

Hawkey Sharpe heard these excited exclamations as if in a dream, and as if heard by another and not himself.

He had unexpectedly seen Jack Elliot come, if not in his line of fire, unseen by others, within range of it; and though hitherto vaguely intent on mischief, a sudden, a devil-born impulse came like a flash of lightning over him.

He fired, and Jack Elliot dropped like a stone!

The moment he had done so the heart of Hawkey Sharpe seemed to stand still; enmity, rivalry, and affront were all forgotten—seemed never to have existed. There was a roaring or surging of the blood in his ears, while a sudden darkness seemed to fall upon the sunshiny landscape.

Was it accident or murder, he thought, and then felt keenly that

‘Murder, though it have no tongue, will speak
With most miraculous organ.’

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE CITY OF THE CALIPHS—OCTOBER IN THE LAND OF
THE PHARAOHS.

MALCOLM SKENE had been three weeks among 'the flesh-pots of Egypt,' as he wrote to Roland Lindsay, since he landed from a great white 'trooper' at Alexandria.

It was now nearly the close of what is called the first season in that part of the world—that of the inundation of the Nile—which extends from the first of July to the winter solstice, and when, till the month preceding Skene's arrival, the whole country appears like one vast sea, in which the towns and villages rise like so many islands, and when the air is consequently moist, the mornings and evenings foggy; and Malcolm thought of what brown October was at home in his native land, where new vistas of hamlet and valley are seen through the half-stripped groves, a few hardy apples yet hang in the orchards, and nests are seen in the hedges where none were seen before; where the flocks are driven to fold as the dim sunset comes and the landscape assumes its sober hue, while the call of the partridge and of the few remaining birds on the low sighing wind, fall sadly on the ear. He thought of all this, and of the thick old woods that sheltered his ancestral home, where Dunnimarle looks down on the northern shore of the Forth.

He often thought of Hester Maule too, and *why* she had refused him, after all—after all he had been half led to hope.

'So—so,' he reflected, 'we shall live out the rest of our lives each without the other—forgetting and perhaps in time forgot.'

Thought was not dead nor memory faint yet, and he seemed, just then, to have no object to live for, save to kill both, if possible, amid any excitement that came to hand, and such was not wanting at that crisis both in Alexandria and Grand Cairo.

No fighting—though such was expected daily—was going

on in the Upper Province or on its frontier ; and to kill time, Skene more than once resorted to the gambling booths of the Greeks and Italians, as most of our officers did occasionally—a perilous resource at times, as the reader will admit, when we describe some of the events connected with them ; and, curious to say, it was amid such scenes that Malcolm Skene was to hear some startling news of his friends at Earlshaugh.

Long before this he had ‘done’ Cairo, and seen all that was to be seen in that wonderful city, which, though less purely Oriental than Damascus, yet displays a more lively and varied kind of Oriental life than Constantinople itself ; for there are still to be found the picturesque scenes and most of the *dramatis personæ* of the ‘Arabian Nights’—and found side by side with the latest results of nineteenth century civilization. ‘The short quarter of an hour’s drive from the railway station,’ says M’Coan, ‘transports you into the very world of the Caliphs—the same as when Nouredin, Abou Shamma, Bedredde Hassan, Ali Cogia, the Jew Physician, and the rest of them played their parts any time since or before Saladin.’

A labyrinth of dark and tortuous lanes and alleys is the old city still—places where two donkeys cannot pass abreast, and the toppling stories and outshoots shut out the narrowest streak of sky ; while the apparently masquerading crowd below seems unchanged from what it was when Elliot Warburton wrote of it a quarter of a century ago ; ‘Ladies wrapped closely in white veils ; women of the lower classes carrying water on their heads, and only with a long blue garment that reveals too plainly the exquisite symmetry of the young, and the hideous deformity of the old ; here are camels perched upon by black slaves, magpied with white napkins round their heads and loins ; there are portly merchants, with turbans and long pipes, smoking on their knowing-looking donkeys ; here an Arab dashes through the crowd at almost full gallop ; or a European, still more haughtily, shoves aside the pompous-looking bearded throng ; now a bridal or circumcising procession squeezes along, with music ; now the running footmen of some Bey or Pacha endeavour to jostle you to the wall, till they recognise

you as an Englishmen—one of that race whom they think the devil can't frighten or teach manners to.'

Now the streets and the Esbekeyeh Square are dotted by redcoats ; the trumpets of our Hussars ring out in the Abbasiyeh Barracks ; the drums of our infantry are heard at those of Kasr-el-Nil ; and the pipes of the Highlanders ever and anon waken the echoes of El Kaleb, or the wondrous citadel of Saladin, with the 'March o' Lochiel,' or the pibroch of 'Donuill Dhu.'

Skene and his brother-officers enjoyed many a cigar on the low terrace in front of Shepherd's now historical hotel, under the shade of the acacia trees, watching the changing crowds in the modern street, which, with all its splendour, cannot compare with the picturesqueness of older Cairo ; but the dresses are strangely beautiful, and the whole panorama seems part of a stage, rather than real life ; while among the veiled women, the swarthy men in turban and tarboosh, the British orderly dragoon clanks past, or groups of heedless, thoughtless, and happy young officers set forth in open cabs to have a day at the Pyramids—an institution among our troops at Cairo—especially early in the day, when the air has that purity and freshness peculiar to a winter morning in Egypt, and towering skyward are seen those marvels in stone, of which it has been said, that 'Time mocks all things, but the Pyramids mock time !' and where the mighty Sphinx at their base, 'the Father of Terrors,' has its stony eyes for ever fixed on the desert—the gate of that other world, where the work of men's hands ends, and Eternity seems to begin.

At this time several peculiar duties, exciting enough, though not orthodox soldiering, devolved on the troops, and more than once Malcolm Skene, as a subaltern, found himself with a part of the picket aiding the miserable Egyptian police in the now nightly task of closing and clearing out the *Assommoirs* and *Brasseries*, gambling and other dens, which were kept open with flaring lamps till gun-fire—a task often achieved by the fixed bayonet and clubbed rifle ; and in the course of these duties he had more than once come unpleasantly in almost personal contact with Pietro Girolamo, a leading promoter and frequenter

of such places, and one of the greatest ruffians in Cairo or Alexandria, under what is now known as the *Band* system.

One result of the leniency shown to the followers of Arabi Pacha, who were allowed to escape or disperse after Tel-el-Kebir, was a flooding of the country with armed banditti, by whom some districts were absolutely devastated, and with whom it was suspected that the native authorities were in league, as the police always disappeared with a curious rapidity whenever they were most required. A 'Flying Commission' was appointed to deal with these brigands, but without much avail, though certainly some were captured, tried, and hanged—even on the Shoubra Road, the 'Rotten Row' of the fashionable Cairenes.

The *Band* system, in which Pietro Girolamo figured so prominently, is a murdering one by no means stamped out by the presence even of our army of occupation, and is a result of the pernicious habit of carrying weapons among the lower class of Greeks and Italians; thus scarcely a week passes without a stabbing affray.

In the Esbekeyeh Gardens, outside the theatre, some high words passed one evening about a girl *artiste*, during one of the *entr'actes*, between an Italian and Girolamo, who laid the former dead by one blow of his poniard. For this he was tried before his Consulate and merely punished by a nominal fine, while nightly the actress appeared on the stage, draped in black for her lover, to sing her comic songs.

'Cairo and all the large towns' (says the *Globe*) 'are infested by the refuse of the Levant—hordes of Greeks of the criminal class and of the most desperate character, with no more respect for the sanctity of human life than a Thug. These men come here to spoil Egypt, and some of them are, in addition, retained by private persons as bullies, if not assassins. Appeal to the Greek Consul, and he will tell you that he can do nothing in regard to these idle and disorderly characters, though the French, Italian, and German authorities deport the same class of their own countrymen on the first complaint.'

The reason of Pietro Girolamo transferring the scene of his life, or operations, from Alexandria to Cairo was an

outrage in which he had been concerned a year or two before this period.

In a café near the Place des Consuls were two respectable and very beautiful girls who served as waitresses, till one evening several carriages drove up and a number of ruffians, armed with yataghan, pistol, and poniard, entered, and instead of opposing them, every man in the café made his escape.

‘This girl’s smiles would inspire a flame in marble!’ cried Girolamo, seizing one of the waitresses, whom his companions carried off to the Rosetta Gate, where she was savagely treated and left for dead by the wayside; and—according to a writer in the *Standard*—only one of her murderers—an Egyptian Bey—was punished by a fine.

‘Life is short—what is the use of fussing about anything?’ was the philosophic remark of Pietro Girolamo, who was a native of Cerigo (the Cythera of classical antiquity), and latterly the ‘Botany Bay’ of the Ionian Isles.

All unaware that this personage was in league with the proprietors—if not actually one—of a handsome roulette saloon, in a thoroughfare near the Esbekeyeh Gardens—a place from where it was said no man ever got home alive with his winnings—Malcolm Skene, then in the mood to do anything to teach him to forget, if possible, Hester Maule and that night in the conservatory at Earlshaugh, had spent an hour or so watching the fatal revolving ball, and risking a few coins thereon, after which he seated himself to enjoy a cigar, a glass of wine, and a London newspaper, at a little marble table, under a flower-decorated awning, in front of the edifice.

Malcolm had been deep in the columns of home news, while sipping his wine from time to time—wine that was not the Mareotic vintage so celebrated by Strabo and Horace, but of the common espalier trees in the Delta—before he became aware that he had a companion at his table similarly engaged, but in the pages of the obnoxious *Bosphore Egyptien*.

He was a striking and picturesque-looking fellow in the prime and strength of manhood. Though somewhat hawk-like in contour, his features were fine and dark; his

eyes and moustache jetty black—the former keen, and his knitted brows betokened something of a stern and savage nature. He was well armed with a handsome poniard and pistols, and his dress resembled the Hydriote costume, which is generally of dark material, with wide blue trousers descending as far as the knee, a loose jacket of brown stuff braided with red, and an embroidered skull-cap with a gold tassel.

Furtively, above his paper, he had been eyeing from time to time the unconscious Skene, in whose grave face he was keen enough to trace a mixture of power and patience, of concentrated thought without gloom ; a face well browned by exposure, a thick dark moustache, and expression that savoured of the resolution and perfect assurance of the genuine Briton ; by all of which he was no way deterred, as the picturesque-looking rascal was no other than Pietro Girolamo, the perpetrator of so many unpunished outrages.

Malcolm Skene was intent on his paper, and read calmly from column to column, till a start escaped him on his eye catching the following paragraph :

‘Misfortune seems to attend the sporting season at Earls-haugh, in Fifeshire. A short time since we had to record the accidental—or supposed accidental—shooting of one of the guests—a distinguished young officer ; and now we have to add thereto, the mysterious disappearance of the host, Captain Roland Lindsay, who, when covert shooting last evening, disappeared, and as yet cannot be traced, alive or dead.’

Skene started, and for a moment the paper dropped from his hand.

‘Dogs dream of bones and fishermen of fish, but what the devil are you dreaming of?’ said a voice in rather tolerable English, and Malcolm found himself seated face to face with Pietro Girolamo !

With an unmistakable expression of annoyance and disdain, if not positive disgust in his face, Skene rose to leave the table, when the hand of the other was lightly laid on his arm, and Pietro said with mock suavity :

‘The Signor will make his apologies?’

‘For what?’ asked Malcolm bluntly.

‘Permitting his English paper to touch my boot just now.’

‘Absurd; I merely dropped it,’ said Malcolm Skene, turning away and about to look at the paragraph again.

‘You must, you shall apologize!’ cried the Levantine bully, his sparkling eyes flaming and his pale cheek reddening with rage and rancour.

‘This is outrageous. Stand back, fellow!’ cried Malcolm, laying his left hand on the scabbard of his sword to bring the hilt handy.

‘I mean what I say, Signor,’ cried the Greek, snatching away the paper and treading it under foot.

‘And so do I,’ replied Malcolm, making a forward stride.

The hand of the Greek was wandering to the poniard in his girdle. Malcolm knew that in another moment it would be out; but, disdaining to draw his sword in an open thoroughfare and upon such an adversary, he clenched his right hand and dealt him, straight out from the shoulder, a blow fairly under the left ear that stretched him senseless in a heap on the pavement beside the marble table.

Thinking that he had sufficiently punished the fellow’s overbearing insolence, Malcolm, with his usually quiet blood at fever heat, muttering with a grim laugh, ‘That was not a bad blow for a kail-supper of Fife,’ was turning away to leave the spot, when a dreadful uproar in the café behind him made him pause, and hearing shouts for succour in English he at once re-entered it.

There he found a number of Europeans and of British officers—chiefly middies—who had come by rail from Alexandria for a ‘spree’ in the city of the Caliphs, engaged in a fierce *mêlée* with a number of those ruffians who frequent such places.

The vicinity of the wretched roulette-table had been very much crowded, and a dozen or so of these thoughtless young Britons, who could not get near enough to stake their money personally, had been passing it on from one to another to stake it on the colours. A trivial dispute had occurred, and then a Greek ruffian, who was well known to be a terror

to every gambling saloon, rushed forward with his cocked revolver, savagely resolute, and demanded as his, 'every piastre—yea, every para on the tables'—a demand not at all uncommon by such persons in such places. Greeks came in from all points, armed with cudgels and poniards, and in a moment a battle-royal ensued. The roulette-table was overturned, the chairs smashed, and bloodshed became plain on every hand.

While plunging into the *mêlée* to rescue more than one lad in peril, Malcolm Skene towered above them all, in his herculean strength; and as he laid about him with a cudgel he had found, there floated through his mind a sense of rage and mortification at what Hester Maule would think if he perished in a brawl so obscure and disreputable.

'Take, cut, and burn!' was the cry of the Greek, a local laconism, signifying 'take their money, burn their houses, cut their throats!'

'Kill the Frankish dogs, these smokers and pilaff eaters!' shouted Girolamo, who had now gathered himself up and plunged into the fray, intent only on putting his poniard into Skene.

But the latter, now relinquishing the cudgel, achieved the feat which afterwards found its way into more than one British print.

From the gambling saloon there was only one issue, down a narrow passage, in which a number of the rabble had taken post on both sides, and with knife and club allowed none to pass, so that the place soon became a species of shamble. Perceiving this, Malcolm Skene—bearing back the seething mass of yelling Greeks, Italians, and Levantine scum, who, with glaring black eyes, set white teeth, and visages pallid and distorted with avarice and the lust of blood and cruelty, surged about him with knife and cudgel, impeding and wounding each other in their frantic efforts to get at him—dragged up a couple of Greeks, one in each hand, and by sheer dint of muscular strength lifting them off the floor, and using their bodies as shields on each side, he charged right through the passage and gained the street, where he flung them down, gashed and bleeding from cuts and stabs by the misdirected weapons of their compatriots, while he

escaped almost without a scratch ; gathered about him his companions, all of whom had suffered more or less severely, and getting cabs they drove to the barracks.

For this affair Pietro Girolamo was arrested in the Shoubra Road, and brought before the Greek Consul after twenty-four hours' incarceration in the Zaptieh ; but as usual, like all the rogues of his nationality, he claimed protection under the Alexandrian Capitulations, and went forth free into the streets again.

Malcolm Skene soon dismissed the row from his thoughts, but not the newspaper paragraph in the perusal or consideration of which he had been so roughly interrupted ; and he pondered deeply and vainly on what was involved by the mysterious and alarming—'disappearance at Earlshaugh.'

CHAPTER XXIV.

JACK ELLIOT'S PERIL.

WE have anticipated some of the occurrences referred to in the last chapter, but shall relate them in their place.

Gathering in an excited group at the scene of the catastrophe, the sportsmen, keepers, and beaters found Elliot reclining against, or clinging to the stem of a tree in the old hedge, looking very pale, with his chest all bloody—at least his shirt dyed crimson, and divested of his coat and vest, which he had thrown off.

Scared by what he had done, the moment Hawkey Sharpe had seen his victim fall—the moment his finger had pulled the trigger—the savage and secret exultation that had filled his heart passed away.

He felt as if on the verge of a giddy precipice, over which he dared not look ; yet he was compelled to confront the scene, and to proceed—but apparently with lead-laden feet—with the others, to where his victim was now supported in the arms of Gavin Fowler and Spens, the beater.

For a minute the intended assassin scarcely seemed to breathe, and to have but one wish—that the deed were undone, for the hot blood that prompted it was cool enough now, and the instincts of revenge had grown dull. Terror seized his soul, and his gaze wandered in the air, on the white flying clouds, on the yellow stubble fields and waving woods ; but he nerved himself to approach the startled and infuriated group, whose menacing eyes were on him ; and he nerved himself also to act a part, or, if not, lose his senses, and with them, everything.

He felt that beyond cheating, cardsharpping, jockeying at horse races, and peculation at Earlshaugh, he had taken a mighty stride in crime, and that mingling curiously with his craven fear, there was an insane recklessness—a wild incoherence about his brain and heart, with a sickening knowledge that if Captain Elliot died, he—Hawkey Sharpe—would be *that* which he dared not name to himself, even in thought.

Hence his apparent sorrow and compunction seemed, and perhaps were, genuine *pro tem.*, but the outcome of selfishness.

‘How in Heaven’s name came this to pass—how did it happen?’ demanded Roland, his eyes blazing as he fixed them on Sharpe.

‘It was an accident—an entire accident,’ faltered the latter. ‘The leaves of a turnip twisted round my right ankle, causing me to stumble and my rifle to explode.’

‘A likely thing,’ growled Jamie Spens, the beater, with a scowl in his eyes. ‘Ye were oot o’ the belt o’ neeps at the time ; but I’ve aye thocht ye wad pot some puir devil, as ye have done the Captain.’

‘Silence, you poaching——,’ began Sharpe in a furious voice ; but Roland interrupted him.

‘Stand back, sir. This is no time for words. “Accident,” you say. To me it seems a piece of cowardly revenge—a case for the police and the Procurator-Fiscal.’

At these words Hawkey Sharpe grew, if possible, paler still, as they were the echoes of his own fears, and drew sullenly back.

‘My poor, dear fellow—Elliot—Jack,’ exclaimed Roland,

kneeling down by his friend's side, 'are you much hurt—tell me?'

'I cannot say,' replied Elliot faintly. 'I feel as if my breast was scorched with fire—the charge, or some of it, seems thereabout.' Then, after a pause, he added in a husky voice: 'This horrible accident is most inopportune, when my leave is running out, and I am so soon due at headquarters.'

'Don't bother about that, dear Jack, I'll make all that right—meantime your hurt must be instantly seen to. Jamie Spens, run, as if for your life, my man, to the stables; get a good horse from Buckle, and ride to Cupar on the spur for the doctors—send a couple, at least.'

'Let me—let me go!' urged Hawkey Sharpe, in a breathless voice.

'You—be hanged!' cried old Fowler, who, like all the people on and about the estate, hated the tyrannical steward.

So the ex-poacher was away on his errand—speeding across the fields like a hare.

'Now, my lads,' cried Roland, after having, with soldier-like promptitude, secured a handkerchief folded as a pad, by another torn into bandages, across the wound; 'quick with that iron hurdle,' pointing to one in a gap of the hedge; 'hand it here to form a litter.'

Roland, like Elliot, had faced danger and death too often to be made a woman by it now, and his eyes seemed stern and fearless as he gave one long, steady, and withering glance at the cowering and white-faced Hawkey Sharpe; then he took off his coat, an example others were not slow in following, to make as soft a couch as possible of the iron hurdle, which four stout fellows lifted, as soon as the sufferer was laid thereon, and the sorrowful procession, which Hester from the window had seen approaching, set out for Earlshaugh.

'Fules shouldna hae chappin' sticks! I kent how it wad be wi' some o' us, muttered old Gavin Fowler, as he sharply drew his cartridges, and unaware of Hawkey Sharpe's secret motives for action, added, 'Maister Roland, he has nearly made cauld meat o' me mair than ance; but ne'er again—'

ne'er again will I beat the coveys wi' him. It is as muckle as your life's worth !

Slowly the shooting party wended their way, by field and hedgerow, towards the mansion-house ; and, with his heart full of bitter and vengeful, if vague, thoughts, Roland strode by that blood-stained litter, thinking of the time when he had seen Jack Elliot similarly borne from the field of Tel-el-Kebir.

Seeing the deep commiseration of Roland, Elliot attempted to smile, and said :

'You know, perhaps, the old Spanish proverb—that a soldier had better smell of *polvora rancho de Santa Barbara*, than of musk or lavender.'

'But not in this fashion, Jack, at the hands of a blundering cad—if a blunder it was !'

The bearers had some distance to traverse, as the park stretched for a couple of miles around them, wooded and undulating, crossed by a broad silvery burn or stream, that flowed through the haugh, and past the Weird Yett to the hamlet of Earlsbaugh.

Their arrival at the house elicited a shout of dismay from Tom Trotter, whose nerves were not of the strongest order, and consternation spread from the drawing-room to the servants' hall and from thence to the stable court, with many exaggerated reports of the very awkward part the obnoxious Mr. Hawkey Sharpe—for obnoxious he was to all—had played in the catastrophe ; while the anguish of Maude, her suspicion and her loathing of the latter, may be imagined, as Elliot was borne past her to his rooms.

On hearing of an accident, neither Annot nor Hester had thought of Captain Elliot. The first dread of the former—a selfish one, we fear, and of the latter, a purer one, certainly—was for Roland Lindsay, who, accustomed to bloodshed, wounds, and suffering, was to all appearance singularly cool and collected.

'Don't be alarmed, Maudie, darling,' said he, endeavouring to look cheerful, as he drew his terrified sister almost forcibly aside ; 'Jack will be all right in a few days.'

'But what—oh, what has happened ?'

‘He has been hit—shot—wounded, I mean—that is all, by Hawkey Sharpe, or some other duffer.’

‘Oh, Roland, why did you have that horrid fellow to shoot with you? But need I ask why—we can help nothing now! But Jack—my darling—my darling!’ she added with a torrent of tears; ‘I had a presentiment—I knew something would happen, and it *has* happened! Oh heavens, Roland, our position here seems overstrained and unnatural. Would that we were out of Earlshaugh and his power!’

‘Maude? Our father’s house!’

‘Our father’s house no more.’

‘That is as may be,’ replied Roland, through his set teeth.

Meanwhile the author of all this dismay ascended the turret-stairs to his ‘sanctum’ and betook him without delay, with tremulous hands and chattering teeth, to a stiff and tall rummer of brandy and soda to steady his nerves, gather Dutch courage, and prepare to face the worst, while muttering as if to excuse himself.

‘An insult of the sort he gave me can never be forgotten!’ and he rubbed his right ear, which seemed yet to be conscious of Jack’s finger and thumb when used by the latter as a fulcrum to twist him round; while, to do her justice, his sister Deborah grew paler than ever, and seemed on the point of sinking when she heard of what had occurred.

‘It was all an accident—a horrible accident, Deb,’ said he, an assertion to which he stuck vigorously; ‘my ankle got twisted in a turnip shaw, don’t you see—anyhow, don’t get up your agitation-of-the-heart business just now, for my nerves may not stand it.’

She eyed him coldly—almost sternly, and not as she was won’t to do; she read his real fear, and knew the full value of his sham contrition, and that it was born of alarm for himself; but his courage rose, and his secret wrath and hate returned apace, when the doctors, after a consultation and much pulling of nether lips, with also much mysterious and technical jargon, declared that the wound was not a serious one, though some of the charge (No. 5), which had crossed Jack’s chest transversely, went perilously near the heart;

and that unless suppuration took place, his constitution was so fine 'he would soon pull through.'

The doubt that he might *not*, or that a relapse might ensue, proved too much just then for the nerves of Mr. Hawkey Sharpe, who resolved on taking his departure for a time.

'And you go—for where, Hawkey?' asked his sister, not surprised that he should suddenly remember an engagement.

'To the western meeting—they make such a fuss over this accident, and you know I hate fuss. Besides, I have a pot of money on the Welter Cup, and if I lose——'

'Well?'

'Well—why, the timber of that old King's Wood may come to the hammer—that's all, Deb,' said he, as confidently as if it were his own.

'Now, girls, don't be foolish,' said Roland, in reply to the entreaties of Maude and Hester—the former especially—to be permitted to visit Jack, who was now abed, and in the hands of an accredited nurse.

'Why—may not I see him?' pled Maude.

'Not yet, certainly,' replied Roland, caressing her sunny brown hair, and patting her cheek, from which the faint rose tint was fled.

'I must see him, Roland, that I may know he is not—not—dead.'

'Dead, you dear little goose! Such fellows as Jack Elliot take a long time in dying. You should have seen him as I did (though it is well, however, you did not), when doubled up by a grape-shot at Tel-el-Kebir. He'll be all right in a day or two, and meanwhile——'

'What, Roland?' asked the trembling girl.

'I go to Edinburgh, to get at the real state of our affairs, what or however they may be; I feel inclined to shoot that fellow Sharpe like a dog if he crosses my path again at Earlsbaugh!'

'Roland, Roland, you surely know all?' said his sister with intense sadness.

'No, I do not know all,' said he, drawing her head on his breast and caressing her; and feeling keenly that their

father's roof was degraded by the presence of this fellow, after attempting such a crime—for a crime Roland felt and knew it to be; albeit that the perpetrator was the brother of their father's widow, and should, but for cogent reasons, be handed over to the mercies of the Procurator-Fiscal for the county.

By the very outrage he had committed, Sharpe had excited all the tenderness and commiseration for Elliot of which Maude's nature was capable, and for himself all the loathing and detestation which her usually gentle heart could feel. Thus he had lost much and won nothing; and notwithstanding his sister's position, influence, and interest at Earlshaugh, he felt himself very much *de trop*; and, unable to face the heavy fire of obloquy and blame that met him on every hand, he feigned the excuse—if such were wanting—of having to attend the Ayr races, which came off about that time, and departed ostensibly for the great western meeting on that famous course which lies southward of the ancient town of Ayr. His farewell words to his sister were:

‘I'll be even with Roland Lindsay yet—yes, more than even, as you shall see, Deb!’

Whether he really went there was apocryphal, as he was seen ere long hovering about the vicinity of Earlshaugh, if not in the house itself.

And Hawkey Sharpe never did anything without a prime or ulterior object in view.

The event we have narrated marred the partridge shooting at Earlshaugh for a time; and as lately quite a crop of dances and drums, garden and music parties had sprung up in the vicinity, and attendance at these was marred too, Annot Drummond felt more exasperation than commiseration at the cause thereof.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE WILL.

IN the pursuit of personal information, which should have been in his possession before, that somewhat too easy-going young soldier, Roland Lindsay, in the course of a day or two, found himself in the 'Gray Metropolis of the North,' or rather in that portion thereof which has sprung up within the last hundred and forty years or so.

The office of Mr. M'Wadsett, W.S., was amid a number of such 'wasps' nests,' in a small and rather gloomy and depressing arena known as Thistle Court, under the shadow of St. Andrew's great, sombre, and circular-shaped church.

The situation was a good one for a prosperous town lawyer's office, and Mr. M'Wadsett was a prosperous—and, as usual with many of them, effusively pious—lawyer, and all about him, whether by chance or design, was arranged to give clients—victims many deemed themselves—an impression that his practice was wide, select, and respectable—intensely respectable—while Mr. M'Wadsett never omitted church services at least twice daily, for the kirk was his fetish—the test of a decorous life, like his black suit and white necktie.

He was busily engaged just then, so Roland sent in his card and had to wait, which he felt as a kind of hint that he was not so important a client now as he might have been. The room he was ushered into was a dull one, overlooking the gloomy court; and slowly the time seemed to pass, for Roland was in an agony of impatience now to know the worst—the profound folly of his father, for whom his feelings just then were, to say the least of them, of a somewhat mingled cast.

Mr. M'Wadsett's office consisted of several rooms—the interior and upper floors of an old-fashioned house. In one of these, partly furnished like a parlour, the walls hung with fly-blown maps and prospectuses—a waiting-room—Roland was left to fume and 'cool his heels'; while in one somewhere adjacent he heard a curious clashing of fire-irons, and

a voice giving the—to him—somewhat familiar words of command, but in a suppressed tone :

‘Guard—point—two! Low guard—point—two!’ etc., for it was evident that some of the clerks who were rifle volunteers were having a little bayonet exercise, till a bell rang, when they all vaulted upon their stools and began to write intensely, for then the voice of old Mr. M’Wadsett was heard, and Roland was ushered into his presence.

His room was snug and cosy, albeit its principal furniture consisted of green charter boxes on iron frames, all of which held secrets relating to the families whose well-known names were displayed upon them. How much, indeed, did he not know about all the leading proprietors of Fife and Kinross?

He received his visitor warmly and pleasantly enough, spoke of the war in Egypt, his health, the weather, of course, and then when a pause ensued, Roland stated the object for which he had come.

The lawyer, a fussy little man, with a sharp, keen manner, and sharp, keen gray eyes, raised his silver-rimmed glasses above his bushy white eyebrows, and said :

‘My dear sir, I sent a copy of your respected father’s will to Egypt.’

‘Addressed to me?’

‘Yes.’

‘I never got it.’

‘Why?’

‘We were holding the lines in front of Ramleh at that time; the Arabs made free with the mail-bags, and lit their pipes with the contents, no doubt, in the desert beyond Ghizeh.’

‘My dear sir, how lawless of them!’

‘I have thought about this will at times, till I have become stupid—woolly in fact, and hated the name of it.’

‘Your good father——’

‘Ah,’ interrupted Roland, a little testily, ‘I fear we only looked upon him latterly as the family banker, and he was useful in that way—very.’

‘To your brother in the Guards perhaps too much so,’ said the lawyer gravely.

‘Well—about the cursed document itself?’ began Roland a little impetuously.

‘Strong language, my dear sir—strong language! The terms of your respected father’s will are, I must say, a little peculiar, and were framed much against my advice; though his old family agent, I scarcely felt justified in drawing out the document.’

‘I have heard that its conditions are outrageous.’

‘They are—my dear sir—they are.’

‘Such as no respectable lawyer should have drawn up,’ said Roland sternly.

‘Captain Lindsay, there you are wrong—severe—but I excuse you,’ replied Mr. M’Wadsett, perking up his bald, shining head, as he drew the document in question from a charter box, after some trouble in finding the key thereof, and which Roland eyed—without touching it—with a very gloomy and louring expression.

‘Dear me—dear me,’ muttered M’Wadsett, as, seating himself in a well-stuffed circular chair, and adjusting his spectacles, he glanced over the document. ‘He wrote: “I have delayed making my will so long as I have thought it safe to do so, but I am an old man now, and the gross and wilful extravagance of——” Shall I read it all, Captain Lindsay? The first few clauses are unimportant enough: £1,000 to Sir Harry Maule; some jewellery to his daughter Hester—bequests to the servants—Funnell the butler, Buckle the head groom, and then with the provisions appointed for your sister and yourself——’

‘Comes the “crusher,” I suppose,’ interrupted Roland, crashing his right heel on the floor.

‘Precisely so, my dear sir; I don’t wonder that you feel it; but listen and I shall read it all.’

‘Please don’t,’ cried Roland; ‘lawyers make everything so lengthy, so elaborate, so full of circumlocution and irritating repetition. Cut it short—the gist of it.’

‘Is—that all the estates, real and personal, are devised and bequeathed by the testator to his wife, Deborah Sharpe or Lindsay.’

‘For life?’

‘No—to do with as she pleases in all time coming; the

whole power of willing everything away is left in her hands, as you may read for yourself here.'

There was a silence of a minute.

'I thought such episodes—such outrages—never happened but in novels?' said Roland.

The lawyer smiled faintly and shook his head, and refolding the document, said :

'It is, of course, duly recorded.'

'And Earlshaugh will go to her heirs?'

'To Mr. Hawkey Sharpe, unless she devises otherwise.'

'A bitter satire!'

'A codicil was framed, or nearly so, revoking much that had gone before; but was never signed. By that omission——'

'I have lost all,' said Roland, starting to his feet; 'so the fortunes of the Lindsays of Earlshaugh are at their lowest ebb.'

'Unless you can find an heiress,' said the lawyer, with another of his weak smiles.

Annot was no heiress, Roland remembered.

'As for my father's folly,' he was beginning bitterly, when M'Wadsett touched his arm :

'Let us not speak ill of the dead,' said he; 'the late Laird may have been deceived, misled—let us not wrong him.'

'But he has wronged the living, who have to feel—to endure and to suffer!'

'The folly of your brother, the Guardsman—rather than your own—brought all this about, Captain Lindsay,' said the lawyer, rising too, as if the unprofitable interview had come to an end; and, a few minutes after, Roland found himself outside in the bustle and sunshine of George Street, that broad, stately, and magnificent thoroughfare, along which he wandered like one in a bad dream, and full of vague, angry, and bitter thoughts.

A deep sense of unmerited humiliation galled his naturally proud spirit, now that the truth of his real position had been laid before him without doubt.

The 'fool's paradise' in which he had been partly living

had vanished ; and he thought how much better it had been had he left his bones at Tel-el-Kebir, at Kashgate, or anywhere else in Egypt, as so many of his comrades had done.

What was he to do now ?

His profession at least was left him. Would he return to his regiment at once, and go to Earlshaugh no more ? It was impossible just yet to turn his back on what was once his home. There was Annot, his *fiancée* ; there was Maude, his sister ; there were Jack Elliot and other guests ; before them a part must be acted as yet—and then—what then—what next ?

A bitter malediction rose to his lips, but he stifled it.

Once matters were somehow smoothed over, back to the regiment he should, of course, go, and turning his back on Scotland for ever, try to forget the past and everything !

With incessant iteration the thought—the question—was ever before him how to explain to Jack Elliot and Annot Drummond that he—Roland Lindsay, deemed the heir, the Lord of Earlshaugh and all its acres of wood and wold, field and pasture, was little better than an outcast—admitted there on the sufferances of the sister of that most pitiful wretch, Hawkey Sharpe !

Viewed in every way the situation was maddening—intolerable. With regard to Annot, he could but trust to her love now. Should he ask Maude or Hester to break the matter to her gently ? No—that task must be his own.

Most of the hopes of himself and his sister seemed to be based on the goodwill that might be borne them by Deborah Sharpe (how he loathed to think of her as Mrs. Lindsay), and she, too, evidently, was inimical to them both, and under the complete influence of her brother, Hawkey Sharpe.

Amid the turmoil of his thoughts he did not forget to procure as a souvenir of this wretched visit to Edinburgh a valuable bracelet for Annot Drummond, and then took his way—homeward he could not deem it—to Earlshaugh.

He had but one crumb of consolation, that at the last

hour his father seemed to have repented the evil he had done him—at the last hour—but too late !

‘Not always in life is it possible to unravel the mesh which our fingers have woven,’ says a writer. ‘Sometimes it is permitted to recall the lost opportunities of a few mistaken hours ; sometimes, when all too late, we would willingly buy back with every drop of our heart’s blood the moments we have so wilfully abused, and the chances we have so foolishly neglected. But it is too late !’

So it was too late when Roland’s father thought to amend his fatal will.

CHAPTER XXVI.

MOLOCH.

WHILE Roland’s mind was agitated by a nervous dread of how to break to the ambitious little Annot—for ambitious he knew her to be—the real state of his position and his altered fortune, unknown to him, and in his absence, that young lady was receiving an inkling of how matters stood, and thus, when the time came, some trouble and pain were saved him.

Red-eyed, and apparently inconsolable for his absence for a single day, the ‘gushing’ Annot had cast her society almost entirely upon Hester, as Maude was too much occupied by her own thoughts and cares to give her sympathy.

‘Why has he gone, why left me so soon after we came here?’ she moaned for the twentieth time, with her golden head reclined on Hester’s shoulder. ‘What shall I do without him?’ she added.

‘For a few hours only. What will you say when winter comes or spring, and he is back in Egypt, if you think so much of a few hours now?’

‘It is very silly of me, I suppose, but I cannot help it ; but we have never been separated since—since——’

‘You met at Merlwood,’ said Hester coldly, and annoyed

by the other's acting or childishness, she scarcely knew which it was. She added, 'Business has taken him to Edinburgh.'

'Business—he never told me ! About what ?'

'Something very unpleasant, I fear ; but you know that a man of property——'

Hester paused, not knowing very well how to parry the questions of Annot, who had put them to her frequently, and for a few minutes they promenaded together the long flowery aisles of the conservatory in silence.

Hester was so tall and straight, so proud-looking and yet so soft and womanly, her bearing a thing of beauty in itself, her dark velvety eyes so sensitive and sweet in expression that anyone might wonder how Annot Drummond, with all her fair and fairy-like loveliness, had lured Roland away from her, yet it was so.

Now and then, oftener than she wished, there came back unbidden to Hester's mind memories of those happy August evenings at Merlwood, ere Annot came, when she and Roland wandered in the leafy dingles by the Esk, by 'caverned Hawthornden' and Roslin's ruin-crowned rock ; and when these memories came she strove to stifle them, as if they caused a pain in her heart, for such haunting day-dreams were full of tenderness, a vanished future and a present sense of keen disappointment.

And she remembered well, though she never sang now, the old song he loved so well, and which went to the air of the 'Bonnie Briar Bush':

'The visions of the buried past
Come thronging, dearer far
Than joys the present hour can give,
Than present objects are.'

And she felt with a sigh that her past was indeed buried and done with.

Honest and gentle, Hester had long since felt that she was unequal to cope with Annot Drummond, or the game the latter played—a damsel who possessed, as a clever female writer says, 'all the thousand and one tricks, in short, by which an artificial woman understands how to lay

herself out for the attraction and capture of that noble beast of prey called man ; and Annot was indeed artificial to the tips of her tiny fingers.

‘Hester,’ said Annot, breaking the silence mentioned, and following some thoughts of her own, ‘have you never had dreams—day-dreams, I mean—of being rich?’

‘I don’t think so.’

‘Why is this?’

‘Because I am quite content ; and when one is so there is no more to be desired. As our proverb says : “Content is nae bairn o’ wealth.”’

‘I cannot understand your point of view,’ said Annot. ‘I should like gorgeous dresses—Worth’s best ; fine horses, with skins like satin, and glittering harness ; stately carriages, such as we see in the parks ; tall footmen, well-liveried and well-matched ; a house in Park Lane——’

‘And lots of poor to feed?’

‘I never think of them—they can take care of themselves, if the police don’t.’

‘Oh, Annot!’

‘And I should like my wedding presents to be the wonder of all, and duly catalogued in all the ‘Society’ papers—services in exquisite silver, the *épergne* of silver and gold—spoons and forks without number—ice buckets and biscuit boxes—coffee sets in Dresden china, *écru*, and gold—toilette suites in crystal and gold—Russian sables, fans, gloves, jewels—a Cashmere shawl from the Queen, of course—a lovely suite of diamonds and opals from the brother-officers of the bridegroom—shoals of letters of congratulation, and a present with each!’

‘In all this you say nothing of love,’ said Hester, with a curl on her sweet red lip, ‘and without it all these things were worthless.’

‘And without them it were useless,’ replied the mercenary little beauty, with a perfect coolness that kindled an emotion of something akin to contempt rather than amusement in the breast of Hester.

‘As Claude Melnotte says, after describing his palace by the Lake of Como, “Dost like the picture?”’ asked Annot laughingly.

‘Not at all from your point of view,’ replied Hester, a little wearily. ‘The diamond and opal suite, to be the gift of the bridegroom’s brother-officers, has reference, I suppose——’

‘To Roland, of course.’

‘Poor Roland !’ said Hester, with a genuine sigh.

‘Why do you adopt that tone in regard to him ?’ asked Annot, her eyes of bright hazel green dilating with surprise.

‘For reasons of which, I fear, you know nothing,’ replied Hester, unable to repress a growing repugnance for the questioner.

‘But I surely must know them in time ?’

‘Perhaps.’

‘There is no “perhaps” in the matter,’ said Annot pettishly ; ‘what *do* you mean, Hester—speak ?’

‘Is it possible,’ said the other with extreme reluctance, ‘that you have never heard of the terms of his father’s will ?’

‘Scotch-like, you reply to one question by another. Well, what will ?’

‘His father’s most singular and unjust one.’

‘No.’

‘Not even from Roland ?’

‘No—never, I say !’

‘Most strange !’

‘You know that I cannot speak of it.’

‘Of course not.’

‘But mamma may. This estate of Earlsbaugh——’

‘Is the property by gift of his father to his second wife——’

‘That grim woman, Deborah Sharpe ?’

‘Yes—to have and to hold—I don’t know the exact terms.’

‘How should you ?’ said Annot incredulously. ‘You cannot be much of a lawyer, Hester !’

‘Of course not—but this is not a lawyer’s question now.’

‘Why.’

‘The will is an accomplished fact. Roland, when abroad, may have been misled—nay, has been misled—by words

and delusive hopes ; but these the family agent will shatter when he shows him the truth.'

Annot made no immediate reply to a startling statement, which she suspected was merely the outcome of natural female jealousy, and perhaps rancour in the heart of Hester Maule. But the memory of the latter went too distinctly back to that mournful day at Earlshaugh when the last laird had been borne to his last home on the shoulders of his serving men, while Roland was in Egypt, and poor Maude too ill to leave her own room ; the solemn and substantial luncheon that was laid in the dining-hall for all who attended the funeral, and of the subsequent reading of the will by Mr. M'Wadsett in the Red Drawing-room to that listening group, over whom lay the hush and the shadow of selfish anticipation ; the legacies to faithful old servants, those to her father, to herself, and other relations ; and then the terrible clause which bequeathed to 'his well-beloved wife and ministering angel of his later days' everything else of which the testator died possessed. And then followed the buzz of astonishment and dissatisfaction with which the sombre assembly broke up.

Of these details Hester said nothing to Annot ; but the latter had now something *to reflect upon*, which was too distasteful for consideration, and which she endeavoured resolutely to set aside.

Sooth to say, her selfish delight in the solid, luxurious, and baronial glories of Earlshaugh was too great to be easily dissipated, and she had still, as ever, a decided repugnance to the recollections of her widowed mother's struggles with limited means ; and their somewhat sordid home in South Belgravia, as she sought courageously to shut her bright eyes to the gruesome probabilities of Hester's communication.

With a sigh of sorrow, in which, notwithstanding the gentleness of her nature, much of contempt was mingled, Hester Maule regarded her town-bred cousin, who though apparently so volatile and thoughtless, was quite a watchful little woman of the world, with what seemed childish ways, and Hebe-like beauty, so fair, so soft, with rose-leaf complexion, and her *petite* face peeping forth, as it were, from among the coils and masses of her wonderful golden hair ;

and yet she was ever ready to sacrifice everything to society—that Moloch to which so many now sacrifice purity, happiness, and life itself.

For Annot believed in a union of hands and lands, with hearts left out of the compact.

CHAPTER XXVII.

ANNOT'S MISGIVINGS.

JACK ELLIOT'S mishap—accident though it could scarcely be called—thoroughly marred and shortened the partridge shooting at Earlishaugh, and the birds had quite a holiday of it.

‘Never mind, Jack,’ Roland had said on his departure for Edinburgh, ‘you’ll make amends when the pheasants are ready.’

Irritated by the event which had struck him down—exasperated by the whole affair, the secret motives for which had gradually become more apparent to him, Elliot tossed on his bed feverishly and wearily, at times scarcely conscious, in a sleepy trance, for he had lost much blood; but being a tough fellow, with a splendid constitution, he soon became convalescent, after the few grains of No. 5 that lodged had been picked out by the doctors.

Feverishly he called for cooling draughts, which were always at hand, prepared by old Mrs. Drugget, the buxom housekeeper, and even by grim, grave Mrs. Lindsay, whom the catastrophe had seriously startled and upset, as it showed the cruelty, cunning, and devilish villany of which her brother and *protégé* was capable.

Mrs. Drugget, influenced by Jack's love of Maude, whom she had known from infancy, scarcely left the patient for an instant, and ever sat motionless and watchful by his bedside, till he was safe, and in the way of a rapid recovery.

Many were the calls to know the progress of the invalid, whose ‘accident’ had made some noise and excited much

speculation ; carriages were always rolling up to the *porte-cochère*, the great iron bell of which was clanged incessantly, and on the same errand horsemen came cantering across the park ; and one thing seemed certain, that, until the party then assembled at Earlsbaugh left the place, Mr. Hawkey Sharpe would not show himself there in the field, nor under the roof of the house, it was confidently supposed.

Ere long Elliot was promoted from jellies and beef-tea to chicken and champagne, administered by the loving little white hands of Maude ; and, with such a nurse, it seemed not a bad thing to lie convalescent to one like Jack, who had undergone enteric fever in the hospital at Ismailia, by the Lake of Tismah, and later still in the huts at Quarantine Island, by the burning shore of Suakim.

Maude grew bright and merry ; she had got over the shock ; but yet had in her heart all the terror and loathing it could feel for the hand that had dealt the injury—an injury which, but for the scandal it must have caused in the county generally, and in the ‘East Neuk’ in particular, might have been made a very serious matter for Mr. Hawkey Sharpe.

Actuated by some judicious remarks from the old Writer to the Signet of Thistle Court, Roland returned to Earlsbaugh with the intention of endeavouring to ‘tide over’ the humiliation and difficulties of his position till he could turn his back upon that place for ever, without making any more unpleasantness, and, more than all, giving rise to any useless speculation or *esclandre*.

Mrs. Lindsay had somehow heard of his sudden, but certainly not unexpected, visit to Edinburgh, and divined its object, if indeed no casual rumour had reached her about it ; and a smile of derision and triumph, that would greatly have pleased her obnoxious brother, stole over her pale and usually calm face when she thought of the utter futility of Roland’s expedition ; and something of this emotion in her eyes was the response to his somewhat crest-fallen aspect when she met him in the Red Drawing-room on his return.

But he was master of himself, if he was master of nothing more, and resolved to have a truce, if not a treaty of peace,

with 'Deborah Sharpe,' as he and Maude always called her in her absence.

Strange to say, he found that, outwardly at least, her old animosity, jealousy, and spirit of defiance were much lessened, though he knew not the secret cause thereof; but she was a woman, and as he looked on the deathly pallor of her face, the ill-concealed agitation of her manner, and thought of the terrible secret disease under which she laboured, he felt something of pity for her, that was for the time both genuine and generous.

'You look pale,' said he gently as he took her hand and led her to a sofa, adjusting a cushion at her back; 'I hope you have not been exciting yourself about the state of my friend Elliot; Jack will be all right in a few days now.'

The soft grace of his manner and sweetness of his tone (common to him when addressing all women) impressed her greatly; her own brother, Hawkey Sharpe, never spoke thus, even when seeking his incessant monetary favours. If the latter watched her pallor or detected illness, his observation was rendered acute, not by fraternal tenderness, but by selfishness and ulterior views of his own; thus Roland's bearing vanquished, for a time at least, her innate dislike of him, for it is an idiosyncrasy in the hearts of many to dislike and fear those they have wronged or supplanted.

Thus Roland was superior to her.

'A more glorious victory cannot be gained over another than this,' says Tiilotson; 'when the injury began on their part, the kindness should begin on ours.'

'I hope you have secured medical advice as to the state of your health?' said he after a little pause, and with a nameless courtesy in his attitude.

'Thank you so much for your kindness, Roland.' (She usually called him 'Captain Lindsay.') 'Just now you remind me so much of your father; and this is the anniversary of the day when he met with his terrible accident, and his horse threw him,' she added, looking not at him, but past him; yet the woman's usually hard disposition was suddenly moved by the touch of nature that 'makes the whole world kin.'

‘Like my father, you think?’ said Roland coldly.

‘Yes—and for *his* sake it is perhaps not too late—too late——’

‘For what?’ he asked, as her lip quivered and she paused.

‘Time will show,’ she replied, as one of her spasms made her lip quiver again, and her breath came short and heavily.

‘Is there anything Maude or I can do for you—speak, please?’ said Roland, starting up.

‘Nothing—but do give me your arm to the door of my own room, and ring for Mrs. Drügget.’

He gave her his escort tenderly and courteously; and thus ended a brief interview—the first pleasant one he had ever had with ‘the usurper’ of his patrimony, and which he was to recall at a future time.

Whether or not Annot Drummond was thinking over Hester’s cloudy and alarming communications it is difficult to say; but she said to the latter after a most effusive meeting with her *fiancé*:

‘What *has* come over Roland since his visit to Edinburgh? He looks shockingly ill—so changed—so *triste*—what does it all mean?’

‘I told you he went there on business, and that seems to have always its worries—all the greater, perhaps, to those who detest or know nothing about it.’

‘His moodiness quite belies the sobriquet of his name—“The Lindsays lightsome and gay;” but here he comes again. Roland,’ she added, springing up and kissing his cheek, ‘a thousand thanks, darling, for this lovely bracelet you have brought me. It was so kind—so like you to remember poor little me!’

‘As if I could, even for a moment, forget,’ was his half-maudlin response, while she drew up her sleeve a little way, coquetishly displaying a lovely arm of snowy whiteness, firmly and roundly moulded by perfect health and youth, with the bracelet clasped on her slender wrist; and while turning it round and round, so as to inspect it in every light and from every point of view, she was thinking that when—after the bestowal of so many other valuable

gifts—he could bring her a jewel so expensive as this, surely Hester's hints about *the will* must have been nonsense, or the outcome of jealousy at her—Annot's—success with a handsome cousin, whom she knew that Hester was at least well disposed to regard with interest.

Yet, when she and Roland were together, to Annot's watchful eyes his manner did seem thoughtful and absent at times, and would have caused misgivings but that she thought, and flattered herself, that it was caused, perhaps, by his having to go prematurely to Egypt, like Malcolm Skene.

After Elliot had become convalescent, and Roland, with others, had resumed their guns, and betaken them again to the slaughter of the patridges, all went well apparently for a few weeks. There were gay riding parties in the afternoon to visit the ruined castles at Ceres and the muir where Archbishop Sharpe was slain ; to the caves of Dura Den at Kemback ; picnics to Creich and the hills of Logie ; there were dances in the evening, and music, when Hester's rich contralto, Elliot's tenor, Maude's soft soprano, and Roland's bass, took principal parts.

‘ Young hearts, bright eyes, and rosy lips were there ;
And fairy steps, and light and laughing voices
Ringing like welcome music through the air—
A sound at which the untroubled heart rejoices.’

Life seemed a happy idyl, and that of Annot—we must suppose that she had her special dreams of happiness too—was ever gay apparently ; but Roland's soul was secretly steeped in misery !

Circumstanced as he knew himself to be, Annot's frequent praises of Earlshaugh and her delight with all therein galled and fretted him, and made him so strange in manner at times that the girl, to do her justice, was bewildered and grieved ; and Hester, though she wished it not nor thought of it, was in some degree avenged.

‘ What can be the meaning of it ? ’ was often Annot's secret thought.

Like Elliot and Maude, to her it seemed that perhaps they were too happy for commonplace speeches as they idled

hand-in-hand about the grounds, wandering through vistas of thick and venerable hawthorn-hedges, away by the thatched hamlet, through the wooded haugh, where the 'auld brig-stane' still spanned the wimpling burn, while face turned to radiant face, and loving eye met eye.

In such moments what need had they, she thought, for words that might seem dull or clumsy? 'But, after all, words, though coarse or clumsy, are the coin in which human creatures must pay each other, and failing in which they are often bankrupts for life.'

Had Roland spoken then and said much that he left unsaid, perhaps much suffering might have been spared him at a future time—we says 'perhaps,' but not with certainty, as we have only our story to tell, without indulging in casuistry as to what might have occurred in the sequel.

The story of the will, Annot began to think, must have been a fallacy—a cruel and unpalatable one. By-and-by she refused to face the probability at all; but she could not help remarking that when their conversation insensibly turned upon the future, as that of lovers must do, upon their probable trip to London, his certain tour of service in Egypt, or on anything that lay beyond the sunny horizon of the *present*, Roland became strange in manner, abrupt and cloudy, and nervously sought to turn the subject into another channel.

Could he tell her yet, that he was a kind of outcast in the house of his forefathers; that he was a mere visitor at Earlsbaugh, and that not a foot of the soil he trod was his own?

And so day by day and night after night went on. The riding lessons through which Annot hoped sometime to shine in 'The Lady's Mile,' were still continued, on the beautiful and graceful pad which old Johnnie Buckle had procured for her at Cupar fair—tasks requiring at Roland's hand much adjustment of flowing skirts and loose reins; of a dainty foot in a tiny stirrup of bright steel; the buttoning of pretty gauntlets; much pressure of lingering fingers, and joyous laughter in the sunny and grassy parks, where now the deers' antlers were still lying, though one tradition avers that stags bury their horns in the moss after casting them,

and another that they chew and eat them—a practice which Gavin Fowler and the forester asserted they had often seen them attempt.

‘And in all your stately old home there is not even one traditional ghost?’ said Annot, looking back from the spacious lawn to where the lofty façade of the ancient fortalice towered up on its rock in the red autumnal sunshine.

‘A ghost there is, or used to be in my grandmother’s time, at the Weird Yett,’ replied Roland; ‘but in the house, thank Heaven, no—though there are bits about it eerie enough to scare the housemaids after dark without that dismal adjunct; yet blood enough and to spare has been shed in and about Earlshaugh often in the olden time; and more than one ancestor of mine has ridden forth to die on the battlefield or at Edinburgh Cross, for the Stuart kings. But let us drop this subject, Annot; a fellow cuts a poor figure swaggering about his ancestors and their belongings in these days, when even every Cockney cad airs his imaginary bit of heraldry on his notepaper.’

‘But there were fairies surely in the Fairy Den?’ persisted Annot.

‘But never with golden hair like yours, Annot,’ said Roland, laughing now. ‘Tradition has it that an ancestor of mine, who was Master of the Horse to Anne of Denmark, made a friend of an old Elf who dwelt in the glen—a droll little fellow with a huge head, a great ruff, and a gray beard that reached to his knees—and when the then Laird of Earlshaugh, after being caught in a flirtation with the Queen in Falkland Wood, was about to be led to the scaffold for his pretended share in the Gowrie Conspiracy, the Elf came on a white palfrey and bore him away, through crowd and soldiers and all, from the Heading Hill of Stirling to his own woods of Earlshaugh, a story which Sir Walter Scott assigns to another family, I believe.’

So Annot strove with success in partially abandoning herself to the joy of the present, and to the full budding hope of the future.

She could not bring herself, ‘little woman of the world,’ as Hester knew her to be, to do or say anything that could

have the aspect of a wish on her part to hurry on a marriage before Roland departed to Egypt ; but, while trembling at all the contingencies thereby involved, had to content herself by prettily and coquettishly referring from time to time to the events of their future life together and combined ; consoling herself with the knowledge that so far as Roland's honour went, and that of his family, ' an engagement known to all the world is much more difficult to break than one to which only three or four persons are privy ;' whilst for herself, she adopted the tone of being, in her correspondence with London friends, vague and cloudy, as if the engagement might or might not be ; or that her visit to Earlsbaugh meant nothing at all, more than one anywhere else.

' Now that Jack is nearly quite well,' said Maude to her, ' we are to have all manner of festivities before the pheasant shooting is over, and we all bid adieu to dear old Earlsbaugh, Roland says. There will be a ball, the Hunt Ball, a steeplechase is also talked of, and I know not what more.'

But ere these things came to pass there occurred a catastrophe which none at Earlsbaugh could foresee, that of which, to his profound concern and bewilderment, Malcolm Skene read in the papers at Pietro Girolamo's roulette saloon at Cairo.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE FIRST OF OCTOBER.

' As weel try to sup soor dook wi' an elshin as shoot in comfort wi' that coof or waur—that gowk Hawkey Sharpe—so thank gudeness he's no wi' us this day !' snorted old Gavin Fowler, the gamekeeper, when, on the morning of the all-important 1st of October, he shouldered his gun and whistled forth the dogs.

But Hawkey Sharpe was fated to be cognisant of one grim feature in that day's sport in a way none knew save himself.

So October had come—‘the time,’ says Colonel Hawker, ‘when the farmer has leisure to enjoy a little sport after all his hard labour without neglecting his business ; and the gentleman, by a day’s shooting at that time, becomes refreshed and invigorated, instead of wearing out himself and his dogs by slaving after partridges under the broiling sun of the preceding month. The evenings begin to close, and he then enjoys his home and fireside, after a day’s shooting of sufficient duration to brace his nerves and make everything agreeable.’

‘We’ll make good bags to-day,’ was the opinion of all.

Despite Maude’s entreaties, Jack Elliot was too keen a sportsman to forego the first day of the pheasant shooting, though his scar was scarcely healed, and thought, though he did not say so to her, that next October might see him ‘potting’ a darker kind of game in the Soudan.

‘Get me a golden pheasant’s wing for my hat, dear Roland,’ said Annot laughingly, as he came forth with his favourite breechloader from the gun-room ; and though such birds were scarce in the East Neuk, the request proved somewhat of a fatal one, as we shall show ; but Annot had no foreboding of that when, with her usual childish effusiveness, she bade Roland farewell, as he went to join the group of sportsmen and dogs at the *porte-cochère*.

‘You have no father, I believe, Miss Drummond ?’ said Mrs. Lindsay, who had been observing her.

‘No ; poor papa died quite suddenly about two years ago,’ was the reply.

‘Suddenly ?’ queried Mrs. Lindsay, becoming interested.

‘Yes,’ said Annot hesitatingly.

‘In what way—by an accident ?’

‘Oh, dear—no.’

‘How then ?’

‘Of disease of the heart ; we never suspected it, but he dropped down dead—quite dead—while poor mamma was speaking to him about a drive in the park—but oh ! what have I said to startle you so ?’ she added, on perceiving that Mrs. Lindsay grew pale as ashes, and half closing her eyes, pressed her hand upon her left breast, a custom she had when excited.

‘Nothing—nothing—only a faintness,’ she said, with something of irritation ; ‘it is the wind without.’

‘But there is none,’ urged Annot.

‘I often feel this when stormy weather is at hand,’ replied the other with an attempt at a smile, but a ghastly one ; and Annot said no more, as she had already seen that the slightest reference to her secret ailment irritated Mrs. Lindsay, who abruptly left her.

‘There is not much liking lost between us,’ thought the young lady, as she adjusted in the breast of her morning dress a bunch of stephanotis Roland had given her. ‘It is evident, too, that Mrs. Lindsay knows little of county society, and is one with whom county society is shy of associating. Well, well ; when Roland and I are married, this grim matron shall be relegated from Earlshaugh to the Dower House at King’s Wood. It is a pity we shall not be able to send her farther off.’

Meanwhile the sportsmen were getting to work, and the guns began to bang in the coverts.

Autumn was rapidly advancing now ; every portion of the beautiful landscape told the eye so. The summer look was gone, and the sound of the leaves fluttering down was apt to make one thoughtful. Then even the sun seems older ; he rises later, and goes to bed earlier. The singing birds had gone from the King’s Wood and the Earl’s Haugh to warmer climes. The swallows were preparing to leave, assembling at their own places on the banks of the burn, waiting till thousands mustered for their mysterious southern flight. Elsewhere, as Clare has it, might be seen—

‘The hedger stopping gaps, amid the leaves,
Which time o’erhead in every colour weaves ;
The milkmaid passing, with a timid look,
From stone to stone across the brimming brook ;
The cottar journeying with his noisy swine
Along the wood side, where the branches twine ;
Shaking from many oaks the acorns brown,
Or from the hedges red haws dashing down.’

But the scenery was lost on the sportsmen, who had eyes and ears for the pheasants alone !

The keepers and beaters were waiting at the corner of the

King's Wood when Roland and his friends made their appearance.

Though the copses had not lost all their autumnal glory, the season was an advanced one; a cold breeze swept down the grassy glens, and frost rime hung for a time on boughs and thick undergrowth, sparkling like diamonds in the bright morning sunshine, till melted away; and in the clear air was heard that which someone describes as the indescribable and never-to-be-forgotten sound for the sportsman—that of the pheasant as he rises before the advancing line of beaters—when the cock bird, roused by the tapping of their sticks on the tree trunks, whirrs high over the tops to some sanctuary in the wood, which the gun beneath him fates him never to reach.

A spirt of smoke spouts upward, some brown feathers puff out in the air, and with closed wings the beautiful bird falls within some thirty yards of its killer.

Though the shooting was most successful, other coverts than the King's Wood were tried, some of which gave pheasants, others rabbits and hares, till fairly good bags were made; and so the sportsmen shot down the side of a remote spur of the Ochil hills—save the banging of the guns no other sounds being heard but the beating of sticks against trees or whin bushes, and the voices of Gavin and the beaters shouting, 'Mark cock,' 'Ware hen,' 'Hare forward,' and so on, till a dark dell was reached—a regular zeriba (Roland called it) of bracken, briars, and gorse—where luncheon was to meet the party—one of the not least pleasant features of a day's shooting; but the sportsmen had become so intent on their work that they now realized fully for the first time that the day had become overcast; masses of dark gathered cloud had enveloped the sun; that dense gray mist was rolling along the upper slopes of the hills, and in the distant direction of Earlsbaugh, the dark and blurred horizon showed that rain was pouring aslant, and so heavily that Maude and Hester, who had promised to bring the viands in the pony phaeton, would not dream of leaving the shelter of the house.

'Homeward' was now the word, but not before the last

beat of the day—reserved as a *bonne bouche*—was made, though noon was past and gloom was gathering speedily.

At the upper end of a little glen a long belt of firs bounded a field beyond which rose another belt, and in the field the guns were posted, while the pheasants could be seen making for the head of the wood.

Nearer and more near came the tapping of the beaters' rods, until one gallant bird rose at the edge and was knocked over by Roland, who was far away on the extreme right of the line. The tapping went gently on lest too many birds should be put up at once. Some rapid firing followed—all the more rapidly that the mist and rain were coming down the hill-slopes together.

In quick succession the birds left the covert, some flying to one flank, some to the other, while others rose high in the air, and some remained grovelling amid the undergrowth, never to leave it alive.

It was no slaughter—no *battue*—however ; about a dozen brace were knocked over and picked up ere the mist descended over the field and its boundary belts of fir trees, and drawing their cartridges, in twos and threes, with their guns under their arms and their coat collars up, for the rain was falling now, the sportsmen began to take their way back towards the house, which was then some miles distant : and all reached it, in the gathering gloom of a prematurely early evening—weary, worn, yet in high spirits, and—save for the contents of their flasks—unrefreshed, when they discovered that Roland Lindsay was *not* with them—that in some unaccountable way they had, somehow, lost or missed him on the mountain side.

CHAPTER XXIX.

ALARM AND ANXIETY.

TIME passed on—the mist and rain deepened around Earls-haugh, veiling coppice, glen, and field, and Roland did not appear.

He must have lost his way; but then every foot of the ground was so familiar to him that such seemed impossible; and the idea of an accident did not as yet occur to any one.

Thus none waited for him at the late luncheon table, and then, as in the smoke-room and over the billiard balls, Jack Elliot and others talked only of the events of the day—how the birds were flushed and knocked over—of hits and misses, of game clean-killed, and so forth; how one gorgeous old pheasant in particular came crashing down through the wiry branches of the dark firs in the agonies of death; and how deftly Roland killed his game, without requiring a keeper to give the *coup de grâce*—there were never many runners before him, and how ‘he looked as fresh as a daisy after doing the ninety acre copse,’ and so forth, till his protracted absence and the closing in of the darkness, with the ringing of the dressing-bell for dinner, made all conscious of the time, and led them to wonder “what on earth” had become of him—what had happened, and whither had he, or could he have gone!

Speculations were many and endless.

‘Some fatality seems surely to attend the shooting here now!’ said Mrs. Lindsay anxiously, as she nervously pressed her large white, ringed hands together.

To some of those present the stately dinner, served up in the lofty old dining-room, was a kind of mockery; and Maude and Hester, who dreaded they knew not what, made but a pretence of eating, while the presence of the servants proved a wholesome, if galling, restraint to them; but not so to the irrepressible Annot, who talked away as usual to the gentlemen present, and displayed all her pretty little tricks of manner as if no cause for surmise or anxiety was on the tapis.

The unusual pallor, silence, and abstraction of Mrs. Lindsay, as she sat at the head of the table, while Jack Elliot officiated as host, were painfully apparent to those who, like Hester, watched her.

But she had her own secret thoughts, in which none, as yet, shared !

An attempt had been made to injure Elliot, perhaps mortally, under cover of a blunder—a mishap. Had the same evil hand been at work again ?

A cloud there was no dispelling began to settle over all ; conversation became broken, disjointed, overstrained, and the cloud seemed deeper as a rising storm howled round the lofty old house, shook the wet ivy against the windows, and grew in force with the gathering gloom of night.

Annot's equanimity amid these influences grieved Maude and annoyed Hester, who recalled her twaddling grief when Roland had been but a few hours absent from her in Edinburgh.

‘How can she bear herself so?’ said Maude.

‘Because she is heartless,’ replied Hester; ‘and to say the least of her, I never could imagine Annot, with all her prettiness and *espèglerie*, at the head of a household, or taking her place in society like a woman of sense.’

Hour succeeded hour, and still there was no appearance of Roland, and the clang of the great iron bell in the *porte-cochère* was listened for in vain.

So the night came undoubtedly on, but what a night it proved to be of storm and darkness !

The rain hissed on the swaying branches of the great trees now almost stripped and bare ; it tore down the flowers from the rocks on which the house stood, and wrenched away the matted ivy from turret and chimney ; the green turf of the lawn and meadows was soaked till it became a kind of bog ; the winding walks that descended to the old fortalice became miniature cascades that shone through the gloom, while the wind wailed in the machicolations of the upper walls in weird and solemn gusts, to die away down the haugh below.

That a tempest had been coming some of the older people about the place, like Gavin Fowler, had foretold, as that

loud and hollow noise like distant thunder that often precedes a storm among the Scottish mountains had been heard among the spurs of the Ochils, and from which in the regions farther North, the superstitious Highlanders, as General Stewart tells, presage many omens, when 'the Spirit of the Mountain shrieks.'

All night long the house-bell was clanged at intervals from the bartizan, to the alarm of the neighbourhood.

London-bred Annot was scared at last by the elemental war, by these strange sounds, and the pale faces of those about her, and with blanched visage she peered from the deeply embayed windows into the darkness without, with genuine alarm, now.

How often had she and Roland rambled in yonder green park, not a vestige of which could now be seen even between the flying glimpses of the moon, or crossed it together, talking of and planning out that future which he seemed to approach with such doubt and diffidence latterly ; or as he went forth with his breechloader on his shoulder and she clinging with interlaced hands on his right arm—he tall, strong, and stalwart, with his dogs at his heels, and looking down lovingly and trustfully into her fair, smiling face.

Now they might never there and thus walk again, yet her tears seemed to be lodged very deep just then.

But softer Hester's thoughts were more acute. Had Roland perished in some unforeseen, mysterious, and terrible manner? Was this the last of *her* secret love-dream, and had all hope, sweetness, glamour and beauty gone out of her heart—out of her life altogether?

Oh, *what* had happened?

Could Hawkey Sharpe—no, she thrust even fear of him on one side ; but, as the time stole on and the midnight hour passed without tidings, she tortured herself with questions, lay down without undressing, and wetted her pillow with tears for the doubly lost companion of her infancy, of her girlhood, and its riper years—thinking all the while that her sorrow, her longing, and passionate terrors were for the affianced of another—of the artful Annot Drummond.

Clinging to the supposition that he must have mistaken

his way in the swiftly descending mist, Jack Elliot and other guests, with serving-men, keepers, and hunters, carrying lanterns and poles, set out more than once into the darkness, rack, and storm to search without avail, and to return wet and weary.

Hour after hour the circle at Earlshaugh watched and waited, trembling at every gust and listening to every sound—shaken and weakened by a suspense that grew intolerable.

From the windows nothing could be seen—not even the tossing trees close by, or the dark outline of the distant mountains. The listeners' hearts beat quick—gust after gust swept past, but brought no welcome sound with it, and they became familiarized with the idea that some catastrophe must have happened or tidings of the absent must have come by that time; and with each returning party of searchers, hope grew less and less, while those most vitally concerned in the absence of Roland began to shrink from questioning or consulting them, as they were already too much disposed by their nature to adopt the gloomiest and most morbid views; and still the storm gusts continued to shake the windows, and dash against them showers of leaves and the wet masses of overhanging foliage.

Without his cheerful presence and general *bonhomie* of manner, how empty and void the great old drawing-room—yea, the house itself—seemed now! All his occasional strange, abstracted, and thoughtful moods were forgotten, and now the hours of the dark autumnal morning wore inexorably on.

A few of the guests had retired to their rooms, but the majority passed the time on easy-chairs, watching and waiting for what might transpire. Now and then a dog whined mournfully, and cocked its ears as if to listen; adding to the eerie nature of the vigil.

'Three,' said Hester to Maude when the clocks were heard striking. Then followed 'four' and 'five.' The fires were made up anew.

'Oh, my God, what *can* have happened!' thought the two girls in their hearts, glancing at Annot, who, overcome by weariness, had dropped into a profound sleep; and ere long

the red rays of the sun, as he rose from his bed in the German Sea, began to tinge the summits of the distant Ochils and the nearer Lomonds, and the storm was dying fast away.

It was impossible now to suppose that he could in any manner have lost himself, or taken shelter in the house of any friend or tenant, as no message came from him, and the last idea was completely dissipated by the final return of Gavin Fowler, who, with his staff of keepers and beaters, had been at every farm and house within miles making inquiries, but in vain.

Nothing had been seen or heard of the lost one.

Gavin, however, had seen something which, though he spoke not of it then, had given him cause for anxious thought and much speculation. This was Mr. Hawkey Sharpe (who for some time past had betaken him elsewhere) rapidly and furtively passing out by the Weird Yett, well muffled up, either to conceal his face or for warmth against the cold morning air ; and by the path he had taken, he had evidently come by the back private door from the house of Earlshaugh !

‘What’s i’ the wind noo?’ muttered the old gamekeeper, with a glare in his dark gray eye, and with knitted brows. ‘But there’s nae hawk, Maister Hawkey Sharpe, flees sae high but he will fa’ to some lure. They were gey scant o’ bairns that brocht you up.’

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE KELPIE’S CLEUGH.

ON the extreme flank of his party, and rather farther out or off than usual, Roland, intent on following his game, took no heed at first of the swiftly down-coming mist, till it fell like a curtain between him and his companions, who had drawn their cartridges and ceased firing. Even the sound of their voices was muffled by the density of the atmosphere, and he knew not where they were ; but, thinking the cloud

would lift, he felt not the least concern, but went forward, as he conceived, in the direction of home, and that which led towards the field where the last beat of the day had been made ; but as he proceeded the ground seemed less and less familiar to him.

Over a high bank, slippery with dead leaves and the thawed rime of the past morning, he went, a nasty place to get across, and in doing so he prudently removed the cartridges from his gun, lest he might slip, trip, or stumble to the detriment of himself or some adjacent companion.

Pausing at times, he uttered a hallo, but got no response. He could see nothing of the belts of firs before referred to ; but he came upon clumps of hazel, nearly destitute of leaves, growing thickly about the roots, and expanding as they rose some nine feet or so above the ground.

There was a dense undergrowth of bracken and intertwined brambles here, a tangle of dead leaves, stems, and thorns, most perplexing to find one's self among in a dense mist. From amid these a rabbit or hare scudded forth ; but he took no heed of it.

Suddenly a bird—a fine golden pheasant—whirred up, and settled down again in the covert very near him. He remembered the request of Annot. Never had the latter seemed brighter, dearer, or sweeter too, than that morning when she playfully asked him to bring a golden pheasant's wing, and secretly returned his farewell caress with such joy and warmth.

Dropping a charge into one of his barrels, he fired, but failed to kill the bird, which, hit somewhere, beat the earth with its wings and rolled or ran forward into the mist. Dropping his gun, Roland darted forward after it—the tendril of a bramble caught his feet, and a gasping cry escaped him as he fell heavily on his face and then downward—he knew not where !

Instinctively and desperately he clutched something ; it was turf on a rocky edge. He felt it yielding ; a small tree, a silver birch, grew near, and wildly he caught a branch thereof, and swung out over some profundity, he knew not what or where, till like a flash of lightning there came upon his memory the Burn Cleugh, a deep, rocky chasm, which

had been the mysterious terror of his boyhood—as the fabled shade of a treacherous kelpie, a hairy fiend with red eyes and red claws—a rent or rift in the low hills some miles from his home, and at the bottom of which, about sixty feet and more below, the burn referred to as passing through the Earl's Haugh, and near the hamlet of the same name, flowed towards Eden.

'Save me—God save me !' rose to his lips, and with each respiration as he clung to the branch and the bead-drops started to his forehead, he lived a lifetime—a lifetime as it were of keenest agony.

He knew well the profundity of the rocky abyss that yawned in obscurity below him, and he heard the slow gurgle of the burn as it chafed against the stones that barred its downward passage, and, mechanically, as one in a dream who fears to fall, he strove to sway his body upward, but could find no rest for his footsteps, and felt that the birch branch to which he clung was gradually but surely—rending !

He had no terror of death in itself—none of death in the battlefield, as we have shown ; but from such a fate as this he shrank ; his soul seemed to die within him, and with every respiration there seemed to come the agony of a whole lifetime.

His nerve was gone, and no marvel that it was so. He might escape instant death ; but not the most dreadful mutilation ; and, sooth to say, he dreaded that a thousand times more than death.

One glance downward into that dark and misty chasm was in itself a summons to death, and he knew well the terrible bed of stones and boulders that lay below.

He became paralyzed—paralyzed with a great and stunning fear. The rending of the branch continued ; his arms were waxing faint and strained ; his fingers feeble ; and it was only a question of moments between time and eternity—fall—fall he must—how far—how deep down—the depth he had forgotten.

The suspense was horrible ; yet it was full of the dire certainty of a dreadful end.

Every act and scene of his past life came surging up to memory—the memory of less than a minute, now.

The branch parted ; but, still grasping it, down he went whizzing through the mist—there was a stunning crash as he fell first on a ledge of rock and then into the stream's stony bed below, and then sight and sense and sound passed away from him !

How long he lay there he knew not. After a time consciousness returned, but he felt himself incapable of action—of motion—almost of thinking.

The ledge or shelf of rock, which was covered by soft turf, had first received him, and thus broken the fall, which ended, we have said, in the bed of the stream, in which he was partially immersed from the waist downwards ; but whether his limbs were broken or dislocated he knew not then, and there he lay helpless, with the cold current trickling past and partly over him, the rocks towering sharply and steeply up on either side of him to where their summits were hidden in the masses of eddying mist, that now began to rise and sink as the wind increased and the afternoon began to close.

How long might he lie there undiscovered in that desolate spot, which he knew so few approached ? How long would he last, suffering as he did then ? And was a miserable death, such as this—there and amid such surroundings—to be the end of his young life, with all its bright hopes and loving aspirations for the future ?

Cold though he began to feel—icy cold—hot bead drops suffused his temples at the idea, and at all his fancy began to picture, and more than once a weak cry for aid escaped him.

The Cleugh became more gloomy ; he heard the bellowing of the wind, and felt the falling rain, the torrents of which were certain to swell and flood this tributary of the Eden, and the terror of being drowned helplessly, as the darkness fell and the water rose, impelled him to exertion, and by efforts that seemed almost superhuman he contrived to drag his bruised body and—as he felt assured—broken limbs somewhat more out of the bed of the stream ; but the agony of this was so great that he nearly fainted.

With all his constitutional strength and hardihood, he

was certain that he could never survive the night ; and even if he did, the coming morning and day might bring him no succour, for save when in search of a lost sheep or lamb in winter, what shepherd ever sought the recesses of the Kelpie's Cleugh ?

As he lay there, with prayer in his heart and on his lips, his whole past life—and then indeed did he thank God that it had been well-nigh a blameless one—seemed to revolve again and again as in a panorama before him ; while a thousand forgotten and minute details came floating back rapidly and vividly to memory.

His boyhood, his dead brother, his mother's face, as he had seen it bending over him tenderly in his little cot, while she whispered the prayer she was wont to give over him every night, till it became woven up with the life of his infancy and riper years ; his roystering, fox-hunting father ; his regiment—the jovial mess—the gallant parade, with familiar faces seen amid the gleam of arms ; his service in Egypt—Tel-el-Kebir, with its frowning earthworks towering through the star-lit gloom and dust of the night-march, till the red artillery and musketry flashed over them in garlands of fire, as the columns swept on and the Highland pipes sent up their pæan of victory !

Then came memories of Kashgate—its bloody and ghastly massacre—the flight therefrom into the desert ; and then sweet Merlwood and Hester Maule, and Annot with her fair and goddess-like loveliness.

Then came the realities of the present again in all their misery, power, and sway—the ceaseless rush of the cold stream, the pouring rain upon his upturned face, the drifting clouds, the occasional glinting of the stars, the rustle of the wet leaves torn from the trees by the gusty wind, and the too probable chances of the coming death through pain, chill, exposure, and utter exhaustion.

Again, exerting all his powers, a despairing cry escaped him, and this time a sound responded. It was only a heron, however, that, full of terror, seemed to flash out from its nest in the rocks, and winged its way out of sight in a moment.

As he lay there it seemed to him as if time had a tortur-

ing power of spinning out its seconds, minutes, and hours that he had never known it to have before.

But to lie there perishing within almost rifle-shot of the roof under which he was born—so near his friends and so many who loved him—Annot more than all—was a terrible conviction—one apparently unnatural, unrealizable !

The mist had gone now, and the dark rocks between which he lay began to assume strange and gruesome forms in the weird light of the occasional stars, still more so when once or twice a weird glimpse of the stormy moon penetrated into the Cleugh.

‘Oh, God!’ cried he imploringly, ‘to perish—to perish thus!’

At that moment, in a swiftly passing gleam of moonshine, he saw a face—a human face—peering over the rocks above as if seeking to penetrate the watery gloom below, and again a cry for help—help for the sake of mercy, for the sake of Heaven, escaped him.

For a moment, we say, the face was there ; the next it vanished, as a dark mass of cloud swept over the silver disc of the moon, and a sound, painfully and unmistakably like a mocking laugh, reached the ears of the sufferer.

The face—if face it actually was—and not that of the fabled fiend, the Kelpie of the Cleugh, appeared no more ; the hours went by ; no succour came, and Roland, as he now resigned himself to the worst, believed that what he had seen, or thought he had seen, was but the creation of his own fevered and over-excited fancy.

CHAPTER XXXI.

'ALL OVER NOW!'

BUT it was no delirious delusion of Roland's that he had seen a human face, or heard a human voice respond mockingly to his despairing cry for aid.

It singularly chanced that about an hour before midnight, and during a lull in the storm, Mr. Hawkey Sharpe, who—as we have said—had been seen hovering about the vicinity of Earlishaugh, was betaking himself thither, intent on seeing his sister, the mistress thereof (whom he also deemed his banker) concerning some of his monetary affairs, and had been passing on foot by the narrow sheep-path that skirted the verge of the dangerous Cleugh, when the occasional cries of the sufferer reached his ear, and on peering down he had speedily discovered by his voice *who* that sufferer was.

He paused for a minute till quite assured of the fact, and though at a loss to conceive how the event had come to pass, he proceeded with quickened steps for some miles, till he reached the private entrance—for which he had a key—but not for the purpose of raising an alarm, or procuring or sending forth succour. Of that he had not the least intention, as we shall show. 'In the place where the tree falleth, there let it lie,' was the text of Mr. Hawkey Sharpe just then.

He found the entire household on the *qui vive*, and heard that Roland Lindsay was missing, thus corroborating to the fullest extent any detail that might be wanting, and obviating all doubt as to the episode at the Cleugh.

'What a fuss,' said he mockingly, 'about a storm of rain!'

It now rested with him, by the utterance of a single word, or little more, to save the missing one from a miserable and lingering death; but that word remained unuttered, and with a grim and mocking smile upon his coarse lips, and a gleam of fiendish joy in his watery gray eyes, he proceeded to his sanctum, up the old turret stair, without the sensation

of his steps going downward according to the household tradition.

‘Lindsay lost in this storm!’ he thought. ‘How came he to tumble or to be thrown down there—thrown, by whom?’ he added mentally, for his mind was ever prone to evil. ‘Then I am not wrong—it *was* his voice I heard at the bottom of the Kelpie’s Cleugh! Ha! ha! let him lie there till the greedy gleds pick his bones to pieces! Well—come what may, I have had no hand in *this*!’ he continued, thinking doubtless of the charge of No. 5 aimed at Captain Elliot.

Roland had often goaded Hawkey to the verge of madness by his cool, haughty bearing and unassailable scorn, even at times when the latter secretly amused him by the ‘society’ airs he strove to assume; but Hawkey’s time for vengeance seemed to have come unexpectedly and all unsought for; and in fancy still he seemed to glare gloatingly down into the dark chasm where the pale sufferer lay in his peril, doubtless with many a bone broken, and the waters of the burn rising fast, for the rain was falling in torrents, and there was a *spate* in all the mountain streams.

Hawkey threw off his soaked coat, invested his figure in a loose, warm *robe de chambre*, and took a bottle of his favourite ‘blend’ from his private cellarette, after which he threw himself into an easy-chair, with his feet upon another, and strove to reflect.

‘I always thought, if I could get rid of that fellow Lindsay by fair means or foul, this place would certainly be mine, unless Deb plays the fool—mine! The girl in my way is nothing, yet I may have her too, and if not, the *other* one with the yellow hair. After what I saw by a gleam of the Macfarlanes’ lantern to-night, the way seems pretty clear now!’

He tugged his straw-coloured moustache, and after fixing his eyes with a self-satisfied glare on vacancy for a full minute, rang the bell for supper imperiously.

Mr. Hawkey Sharpe was one who never troubled himself about the past, and seldom about the future; his enjoyment was in the present, and the mere fact of living well and jollily without having work to do.

Just then he was pretty full of alcohol and exultant hope—two very good things in their way to lay in a stock of. He cared little what he did, but he dreaded greatly discovery in any of his little trickeries.

To him the world was divided into two portions, those who cheat and those who are cheated.

'Rid of Lindsay,' was the ever-recurring thought; 'rid of his presence, local influence, and d——d impudence, I shall have this place again more than ever to myself, if I can only throw a little dust in Deb's eyes, and have, perhaps, my choice of these two stunning girls when I choke off that other snob, Elliot.'

Excitement consequent on this most unlooked-for episode at the Cleugh had nearly driven out of his mind the object which had brought him that night to Earlsbaugh, and his last potations of hot whisky toddy at The Thane of Fife, a tavern or roadside inn on the skirts of the park, had for a time rather clouded his intellect, without, however, spoiling his usually excellent appetite.

Thus when Tom Trotter arrived with a large silver tray—a racing trophy of the late laird's career—covered with a spotless white napkin, and having thereon curried lobster, mutton cutlets, devilled kidneys, and beef kabobs on silver skewers, with a bottle of Mumm, he drew in his chair and made a repast, all the more pleasantly perhaps that he heard at intervals the clang of the great house bell overhead, and saw the lanterns of the searchers like glow-worms amid the storm of rain and wind, as they set forth again on their bootless errand, and then a smile that Mephistopheles might have envied spread over his face.

'Lindsay lost!' he muttered jocularly. 'Well, there was mair lost at Shirramuir when the Hielandman lost his faither and mither, and a gude buff belt that was worth them baith.'

He had a habit, when liquor loosened his tongue, of soliloquizing, and he was in this mood to-night.

'Now, how to raise the ready!' he muttered, as he thrust the silver salver aside, and drew the decanter once more towards him, together with his briar-root and tobacco-pouch.

The money I have lost must go to a fellow who is said to

possess the power of turning everything he touches to gold—to gold! Gad, could I only do that, I wouldn't even sponge on old Deb in Earlshaugh, or wait for a dead woman's shoes. Besides, if I don't please her, she may hand over the whole place to the Free Kirk; and, d——n it, that's not to be thought of!—that body which, as she always says, seceded so nobly, and scorned the loaves and fishes. If I could only get hold of Deb's cheque-book; but she keeps everything so devilish close and secure! When a fellow comes to be as I am,' he continued, rolling his eyes about and lightning his pipe with infinite difficulty—'bravo!—there's a devil of a gust of wind—hope you like it, Lindsay—when a fellow, I say, comes to be as I am, with an infinitesimal balance at the banker's and not much credit with his tailor, he can't be particular to a shade what he does—and so about the cheque-book——'

'What have you been doing *now*?' asked a voice behind him.

His sister Deborah again! He grew very pale and nearly dropped his pipe. 'How much had she overhead?' was his first thought; 'curse this habit of thinking aloud!' was his second.

'You are always stealing on a fellow unawares, Deb,' said he, in a thick and uncertain voice; 'it is deuced unpleasant—startles one so.'

Her face was pale as usual; but her eyes and mouth expressed anger, pain, and a good deal of indignation and contempt too.

'What have you done?' she demanded categorically.

'Nothing,' said he, striving to collect his thoughts; 'but made my way here in a devil of a shower, for want of other shelter.'

'You know what has happened?'

'To Lindsay—yes.'

'You do?' she exclaimed, making a step forward, with a hand on her side, as if her usual pain was there.

'I know that he is absent—missing—that is all,' he replied doggedly.

'Nothing more?'

'Nothing more—and care little, as you may suppose,' he

replied, avoiding her keen searching eye by carefully filling his pipe. 'There is always some row on,' he grumbled; 'what a petty world this is after all—I wonder if the fixed stars are inhabited.'

'That will not matter to you, I should think.'

'Why?'

'You will go some other way, I fear.'

'Deb, your surmise is unpleasant.'

The manner of Hawkey Sharpe to his sister had lost, just then, much of its general self-contained assurance. She detected the change, and it rendered her suspicious.

'Save this poor little dog Fifine,' said she, caressing the cur she carried under an arm, and which was greedily sniffing the *débris* of Mr. Hawkey's supper, 'I do not know a living creature who really cares for me!'

'Oh—come now, Deb—hang it!' said her brother in an expostulatory manner.

'You have some object in coming here to-night,' said she sternly; 'to the point at once, Hawkey?'

'Well, since you force me, Deb—I have been unfortunate in some speculations.'

'Is it thus you describe your losses on the race-course?'

'At the western meeting—yes—backed the wrong or losing horse—*Scottish Patriot*—devil of a mess, Deb!'

'And lost—how much? An unlucky name.'

'Two thousand pounds—must have the money somehow—I'm booked for it, and you know the adage—

"A horse kicking, a dog biting,
A gentleman's word without his writing,"

are none of them in my way.'

'I know nothing of the adage, but this I know—there are bounds to patience.'

'My dear Deb!' said he coaxingly.

'I have lost much—too much, indeed, through you—money that might be put to good and holy uses—and now shall lose no more!'

Turning abruptly, she swept away and left him.

He looked after her with absolutely a red glare of rage in his pale gray eyes.

‘Good and holy uses—meaning the kirk of course!’ he muttered with a savage malediction. ‘We shall see—we shall see. She must have heard me muttering about her cheque-book—ass that I am; but that money I must have before three months are past if I rake Pandemonium for it!’

Again the clanging of the house bell fell upon his ear, and he heard the storm as it rose and died away to rise again. He took another glass of stiff grog and glared at the great antique clock on the mantel-shelf.

‘Three in the morning,’ he muttered. ‘It must be all over with *him* by this time—all over now!’

CHAPTER XXII.

PELION ON OSSA.

THE rain and the wind were over; the storm had passed away into the German Sea, as perhaps more than one luckless craft found to its cost between Fife Ness and the shores of Jutland.

It was over in the vicinity of Earlshaugh; the sluices of heaven seemed to have emptied themselves at last; but the atmosphere, if clear, was damp and laden with rain, and the masses of ivy, rent and torn by the wind, flapped against the walls of the old manor-house.

The hour was early; bright and clear the morning had come from the German Sea, and a freshness lay over all the fields and groves of the East Neuk. After such a terrible night there seemed something fairy-like in such a morning with all its details, but the excitement was yet keen in Earlshaugh.

The horse-chestnuts still wore their changing livery of shining gold, and the mountain ash looked gray, but lime and linden were alike nearly stripped of their leaves; and when the breeze blew through the old oaks of the King’s Wood the pale acorns came tumbling out of their cups—the

tiny drinking-cups of the freakish elves that once abode in the Fairy Den.

Old Jamie Spens, the ex-poacher, now came with startling tidings to Earlshaugh. A shepherd's dog—one of those Scottish collies, of all dogs the most faithful, intelligent, and useful, as they can discover by the scent any sheep that may have the misfortune to be overblown by the snow, had been seen careering wildly in the vicinity of the rocky Cleugh, disappearing down it, to return to the verge barking and yelping loudly, as if he had evidently discovered someone or something there.

Old Spens had looked down, and too surely saw the young laird lying pale, still, and motionless.

‘Dead?’ asked a score of voices.

‘After sic a nicht and sic a fa’ what could ye expect?’ said the old man with tears in his eyes as he remembered Roland’s kindness to himself, adding, as he shook his grizzled head, ‘but I hope no—I hope no.’

Spens had found Roland’s gun, and a golden pheasant, dead, near the edge of the Cleugh, for which a party at once set out in all haste, Hester and Maude, pale and colourless after such a sleepless night, too impatient to wait for the pony phaeton which Jack Elliot offered to drive, preceding them all, for the scene of the catastrophe was at some distance from the house.

‘They laugh longest who laugh last,’ muttered Hawkey Sharpe to himself, as—while pausing on the brow of an eminence beyond the Weird Yett—he saw this party setting forth, a large group of servants and keepers with poles and ropes—and he shook his clenched hand mockingly and threateningly as he added, ‘do your best, but

“In the midst of your glee,
You’ve no seen the last o’ my bonnet and *me!*”

Annot did not accompany this excited party; it might be that her strength was unequal to it at such an hour and over such ground, or it might be that she had not heart enough for it. There is no secret of the latter, says a French writer, that our actions do not disclose; and as Annot’s heart

seemed—well, Hester Maule cared not then to analyze it; she was too disgusted to be angry.

But Annot, in all her selfish existence, had never before been, as she thought, face to face with the most awful tragedy of life—Death—and she shrank from the too probable necessity now.

So she remained behind with Mrs. Lindsay. She was not accustomed to such rough weather and such exhibitions; she would get her poor little feet wet; she was subject to catching cold; the morning was full of rain and wind—it was still quite tempestuous—such was never seen in London; so Maude and Hester swept away in contemptuous silence, leaving her, well shawled and cowering close to the fire in Mrs. Lindsay's luxurious boudoir, and thought no more about her, as she remained motionless, silent, and with her eyes certainly full of tears, fixed on the changing features of the glowing coals, and seeing her hopes of Earlsbaugh too probably drifting far away in distance, now!

Could this calamity be real? was the ever-recurrent thought in the mind of Hester. It seemed too fearful—too horrible to be true! Was she dreaming, and the victim of a hideous nightmare, from which she would awake?

With all their impatience and anxiety to get on, the keepers, servants, and others stepped short in mistaken kindness or courtesy to the two young ladies who accompanied them; but in an incredibly short space of time the yawning Cleugh was reached, where the shepherd's faithful dog was still on guard, bounding to and fro as they approached, barking and yelping wildly; and with hearts that beat high and painfully—every respiration seeming an absolute spasm—Hester and Maude, who clung to Elliot's arm, reached the verge of the chasm, and on looking down saw too surely—as something like a wail escaped the lips of each—Roland lying at the bottom, still and motionless, half in and half out of the burn's rocky bed, as he, by the last efforts of his strength, had painfully dragged or wrenched himself.

Exclamations of commiseration and pity were now heard on every hand.

'This way, lads—round by the knowe foot,' cried old Gavin Fowler.

‘No—by the other way—the descent is easier!’ said Elliot authoritatively; but heedless of both suggestions, Hester Maule, like the gallant girl as she was, took a path of her own, and went plunging down the very face of the rocks, apparently!

A cry of terror escaped the more timid Maude, as Hester seemed to stumble and fall, or sway aside, but rose again and, trembling, sobbing violently, in breathless and mental agony, her delicate hands, which were gloveless, now torn and bleeding by brambles and thorns, her beautiful brown hair all unbound and rolling in a cascade down her back, finding footing where others would have found none, grasping grass and heather tufts; while the more wary were making a circuit, she was the first to reach him, and kneel by his side!

Raising his head, she laid her cheek upon his cold brow, while her tears fell hot and fast, and for a moment she felt that this helpless creature was indeed her own, whom even Annot Drummond could not take from her then.

How pale, cold, sodden, and senseless he seemed! With a moan of horror that felt as if it came from her wildly beating heart, Hester applied to his lips a tiny hunting flask of brandy with which she had, with admirable foresight, supplied herself, and almost unconsciously he imbibed a few drops.

‘Roland!’ said Hester, in an agonized voice.

A litter flicker of the eyelashes was the only response.

‘Thank God, he lives!’ exclaimed the girl.

‘Annot, Annot!’ he murmured.

‘Always—always the idea of that girl!’ sighed Hester bitterly, and she withdrew her face from its vicinity to his as Elliot, Gavin Fowler, Spens, and others came splashing along the bed of the stream from two directions, above and below the Cleugh, and ample succour had come now.

What his injuries were, whether internal or external, or both, none could know then. He seemed passive as a child, weak and utterly exhausted. To all it was but too apparent that had succour been longer of coming it had come too late; but now there was no lack of loving and tender hands to bear him homeward, and into his father’s house.

'Annot's name was the first word that escaped his lips,' said Hester, as with torn and tremulous fingers she knotted up her back hair into a coil, and seemed on the verge of sinking, after her recent toil, and under her present excitement and anxiety.

'That girl has been his evil genius—his weird—I think,' said Maude, who never liked Annot, and mistrusted her; 'and he will never be free so long as this weird hangs on him.'

'She, a Drummond! The town-bred coward!' exclaimed Hester, her dark violet eyes flashing fire, while she coloured at her own girlish energy.

'The sooner she changes it to some characteristic one like Popkins or Slopkins the better,' said Maude; 'but I think she would prefer Lindsay.'

'Telegraph to Edinburgh at once for Professor —— and Dr. ——,' said Mrs. Lindsay, naming two of the chief medical men (as Roland was carried up to his room), and evincing an interest that surprised Maude, and for which her brother, Mr. Hawkey Sharpe, would not have thanked her.

'I'll see to that myself,' said Jack Elliot, betaking himself at once to the stable-yard that he might ride to the nearest railway-station, and meantime send on to Earlshaugh the best local aid that could be obtained in hot haste.

Roland's injuries were serious undoubtedly, but not so much so as had been feared at first.

These were a partial dislocation of the left thigh bone and a strain of the right ankle, both of which bade fair to mar his marching for many a day; with a general shock to the whole system consequent on the fall (which, but for the turfy ledge of rock that broke it, would have proved fatal) and the exposure to the elements for a whole autumnal night of storm and rain. But with care and nursing, the faculty—after pulling him about again and again till he was well-nigh mad, after much tugging of their nether lips, as if in deep thought, consultations over dry sherry and biscuit, and pocketing big fees in an abstracted kind of manner—had no doubt, not the slightest doubt, in fact, that with his naturally fine constitution he would soon 'pull through.'

A crowd of people always hovered about the gate-lodges;

women came from their cottages, weavers, perhaps the last of their trade, from their looms, and the ploughmen from their furrows to inquire after the health of the young laird, for such these kindly folks of the East Neuk deemed Roland still, for of the mysterious will they knew little and cared less; horsemen came and went, and carriages, too, the owners with their faces full of genuine anxiety, for the Lindsays of Earlshaugh were much respected and well regarded as being among the oldest proprietors in a county that has ever been rich in good old historical families; and the veteran fox-hunting laird had been a prime favourite in the field with all his compatriots. So again, as before, during Jack Elliot's mishap, the bell of the *porte-cochère* sent forth its clang in reply to many a kind inquiry.

And many agreed with Maude that none in Earlshaugh were likely to forget the unfortunate shooting season of that particular year, as this calamity seemed to surpass the last. It was grief upon grief, like the classic piling of Pelion on Ossa.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

A TANGLED SKEIN.

NATHELESS the fair promises of the faculty, Roland Lindsay seemed to hover between life and death for days. They were a time of watching, hoping, and fearing, and hoping again, till every heart that loved him grew sick with apprehension and anxiety.

At first he looked like one all but dead; the great charm of his face lay in the earnest and thoughtful expression of his eyes, and in their rich brown colour; both were gone now, and the clearly cut and refined lips, that denoted a brave, gentle, and kindly nature, were blue and drawn; and a slight sword cut upon the cheek, won at Kashgate, looked rather livid just then.

He was exhausted, languid, and passive, but, at times, seemed to awaken into quickened intelligence; then anon

his mind would wander a little, and the names of Hester and Annot were oddly mingled on his feverish tongue.

But there was great joy when he became sensible of the perfume of flowers—the sweetest from the conservatory—culled and arranged by the loving hands of the former, in the vases that ornamented his room, and when he fully recognised the latter in attendance upon him.

‘My little wife—my child-wife that is to be,’ he whispered, ‘you love me still, though I am all shattered in this fashion?’

Then Annot caressed his hand, and placed her cheek upon it.

Guests had all departed, the key was turned in the gun-room door; the dogs were idle in their kennels, and only Elliot, Hester, and Annot remained as visitors at Earlsbaugh. The great house seemed very silent now; but Roland, as strength and thought returned, was thankful that the guests he had invited were gone. The difficulty of their presence had been tided over without any unpleasantness (save the affair of Elliot and Sharpe), and now he felt only a loathing of his paternal home, with an intense longing to be gone—to get well and strong—to keep well, and then go, he cared not where at first, so that Annot was with him, and then back to the regiment as soon as possible, even before his leave was ended.

Annot was now—unlike the Annot who cowered over the boudoir fire on the morning when Roland was rescued—most effusive in her expressions of regard and compassion, though she was perhaps the most useless assistant a nurse could have in a sick room, the air of which ‘so oppressed her poor little head;’ and thus she was secretly not ill-pleased when her services there were firmly, but politely, dispensed with by old Mrs. Drugget, the portly housekeeper, who had nursed Roland and his dead brother many a time in their earlier years, and now made herself, as of old, mistress of the situation.

Annot’s bearing on the eventful morning referred to rankled in the memory of Maude and Hester. They strove to dissemble and veil their growing dislike to, and mistrust of, her under their old bearing and cordiality of habit; but

almost in vain, despite her winning, clinging, and child-like ways and pretty tricks of manner. These seemed to fall flatly now on ear and eye ; and soon events were to transpire with regard to that young lady which gave them cause for much speculation, suspicion, and positive anger.

She was soon sharp enough to discover that there was a growing cloud between them, and took the precaution of giving a hint thereof to Roland. She was somewhat of a flirt, he knew very well ; but there was no one in the house to flirt with, now that Malcolm Skene and all the others were gone ; and he had consoled himself with the reflection that she was devoted to him, and that her little flirtations had been of a harmless nature, and the outcome of a spirit of fun and *espièglerie*.

And if Hester and Maude were somewhat disposed to be severe on Annot and reprehend this, he knew by experience that ladies who adopt the *rôle* of pleasing the opposite sex are rarely appreciated by their fair sisters.

Mrs. Lindsay when she visited Roland from time to time, as he thought to watch his progress towards health and departure, felt thankful, though of course she gave no hint thereof, that her brother had at least no active hand in the misfortune that had befallen him.

‘The guests I somewhat intrusively invited here are all gone, Mrs. Lindsay,’ said he on one occasion, ‘and I shall soon relieve you, I hope, of the trouble my own presence gives you.’

‘Captain Lindsay—Roland—do not talk so,’ she replied, either feeling some compunction then for the false position of them both, or veiling her old constitutional dislike of him, which, Roland cared not now. Calm, cold, self-contained, and self-possessed, Mrs. Lindsay, as usual, was beautifully and tastefully dressed in rich black material, with fine lace lappets over her thick, fair hair, and setting off her colourless and lineless face. Her expression, we have said elsewhere, was not ill-tempered but generally hard and unsympathetic, and now it was softer than Roland had ever seen it, and something of a smile like watery sunshine hovered about her thin and firm lips, and to his surprise she even stroked his hair with something of maternal kind-

ness as she left him, pleased simply because he had uttered some passing compliment to the effect that he was glad to see her looking so well and in such good health. But she and Maude were not, never were, and never could be, friends.

'I should like to know precisely the secret of this prison house,' thought the observant Annot, as she saw this unusual action.

If a 'prison house,' it suited her tastes admirably; but she was fated to learn some of the secrets thereof sooner perhaps than she wished.

A month and more had passed now; Roland was becoming convalescent; he could even enjoy a cigar or pipe with Jack Elliot, and had been promoted from his bed to a couch in a cosy corner of his room; and he felt that now the time had come when he ought to break to Annot the true story of how monetary matters stood with him at Earls-haugh.

A heavy feeling gathered in his heart as this conviction forced itself upon him—a sensation as of lead; yet he scorned to think that he would have to cast himself upon her generosity, or ask for her pity.

Compared with what might and ought to have been, his prospects now were, in many respects, gloomy to look forward to; but he had fully taken breathing time before breaking to her news which, he greatly feared, might be testing and grievously disappointing.

But it would be unmanly to trifle longer with Annot, or dally with their mutual fate. Yet how was he to preface the most unwelcome intelligence that he was no longer—indeed, never was—laird of that stately mansion and splendid estate, with all its fields, wood, and waters?

How he dreaded the humiliating revelation—yet why so, if she loved him?

Taking an opportunity when they were alone, and the two other girls, escorted by Elliot, had gone for a 'spin' on horseback, he drew her tenderly towards him, with one arm round her slender waist and one hand clasping hers, which still had his engagement ring on a baby-like finger, while gazing earnestly down into her sunny eyes, which were uplifted to his with something of inquiry in them, he said:

‘I have news, darling—terrible news to reveal to you at last.’

‘News?’ she repeated in a whisper.

‘Of a nature, perhaps, beyond your imagining,’ said he in a voice that became low and husky despite its tenderness.

‘What do you mean, Roland? You frighten me, dearest!’

He pressed her closer to him, and she felt that his hands were trembling violently.

‘Annot, I have a hundred times and more heard you say that you loved me for myself, and would continue to love me were I poor—poor as Job himself.’

‘Of course I have often said so, and I do love you; but why do you ask this question now? What has happened? Why are you so strange?’ she asked, changing colour and looking decidedly restless in eye and manner. ‘Are you not well? How cold your poor hands are, and how they tremble!’

She drooped her fairy-like head, with all its wealth of shining golden hair, upon his shoulder, and looked upward keenly, if tenderly, into his downcast eyes.

‘Has any new calamity occurred to distress you?’

‘Nothing that is new—to me.’

‘Why, then——’

‘It is this. I am not Lindsay of Earlshaugh—not the owner of the estate I mean. I am poor, poor, Annot, yet not penniless; I have my old allowance and my pay—but this beautiful estate is not mine.’

‘Not yours?’

‘No—not a foot of it—not a tree—not a stone!’

Her lips were firmly set, and the rose-leaf tint in her delicate cheeks died away.

‘Whose, then, is it?’

‘My father—weakly—my father——’

‘To whom did he leave the property?’ she asked, lifting her head from his shoulder and speaking with a sharpness he did not then notice; ‘is it as I have heard whispered?’

‘To my stepmother—yes. You knew of that—you suspected it, my darling?’ he added, with a sudden access

of hope and joy—hope in her unselfishness and purity of love.

She made no immediate reply.

‘Is this unjust will tenable?’ she asked, after a time.

‘It is without flaw, Annot. My father left her all he possessed, with the power of bequeathing it to whom she pleases, without hindrance or restriction.’

‘Cruel and infamous! And who, my poor Roland, is her heir?’

‘That reptile, Hawkey Sharpe, I presume.’

Something between a gasping sigh and a nervous laugh escaped Annot, who said, after a little pause, during which he regarded her fair face with intense and yearning anxiety:

‘I thought you as prosperous a gentleman as the Thane of Cawdor himself; but this is terrible—terrible!’

And as she spoke there was something in her tone that jarred painfully on his then sensitive and overstrung nerves.

Annot assured him of her unalterable love, whatever lay before them—whatever happened or came to pass—was he not her own—her very own! She wound her arms about his neck; she caressed him in her sweet, and to all appearance, infantile way, striving to reassure him; to soothe, console, and implant fresh confidence in his torn and humbled heart; but with all this, there was a new and curious ring in her voice—a want of something in its tone, and erelong in her eye and manner, that stung him keenly and alarmed him.

What did this mean? Did she resent his supposed duplicity as to his means and position? But he consoled himself that he would soon have her away from Earlsbaugh, with all its influences, associations, and the false hopes and impressions it had given her, and then she would be his own—his own indeed.

‘How loving, how true, gentle, and good she is! Do I indeed deserve such disinterested affection?’ were his constant thoughts.

He disliked, however, to find that Annot had begun to

cultivate the friendship of Mrs. Lindsay—"Deb Sharpe" as she was uncompromisingly called by Maude, who was always on most distant terms with that personage; and to find that she was ever in or about her rooms, doing little acts of daughter-like attention such as Maude, with all her sweetness of disposition, had never accorded; even to fondling, feeding, and washing her snarling pug Fifine; and Mrs. Lindsay, of whom other ladies had always been rather shy, and towards whom they had always comported themselves somewhat coldly and with that cutting hauteur which even the best bred women can best assume, felt correspondingly grateful to the little London beauty for her friendship and recognition.

The splendour of the house, the richness of the ancient furniture and appurtenances, the delicacies of the table, the attendance, the comfortable profusion of everything, had been duly noted and duly appreciated by Annot, and she felt that it was with sincere regret she would quit the flesh-pots of Earlsbaugh.

More than once, when promenading about the corridors with the aid of a stick, Roland had surprised her in tears.

'Tears—my darling—why—what?' he began.

'It is nothing,' she replied, with a little flush. 'I am oppressed, I suppose, by the emptiness and size of this great house. I am such an impressionable little thing you know, Roland.'

'We can't amend the size of the house,' said he, smiling, 'but a cosier and a smaller one awaits us elsewhere, when you are my dear little wife, and we quit this place, once so dear to me, as I never thought to quit it in disgust—for ever!'

Seeing the varying moods of Annot, and the occasional petulance, even coldness, with which she sometimes ventured to treat Roland now, Hester, remembering that young lady's confidences with reference to Mr. Bob Hoyle and other 'detrimentals,' her avowed passion for money, and how a moneyed match was a necessity of her life, and knowing Roland's changed position and fortunes—Hester, we say, was not slow in putting 'two and two together,' to

use a common adage, to the detriment of Annot in her estimation.

'I would that I were a strong-minded woman,' said the latter reproachfully, as she and Roland lingered one evening in a corridor that was a veritable picture gallery (for there hung the Lindsays of other days, as depicted by the brushes of the Jamesons, the Scougals, De Medinas, Raeburns, and Watsons in the striking costumes of their times), and Roland had been taking her a little to task for some of her petulant remarks.

'A strong-minded woman,' he repeated. 'Nonsense! But why?'

'Then I should cease to annoy you, and join an Anglican Sisterhood, to nurse the poor and all that sort of thing.'

She pouted prettily as she spoke—sweetly, with all her softest dimples coming into play.

'Are you not perfectly happy, Annot?'

'Oh, yes—yes!' she exclaimed, and interlaced her fingers on his arm; yet he eyed her moodily, and lovingly, ignorant of the secret source of her discontent or disquietude.

'How can I take her to task,' thought he; 'already too! so fair, so bright, with her hair like spun gold!'

He tried to catch and retain her loving glance, but the corners of her pretty mouth were drooping, and her eyes of pale hazel looked dreamily and vacantly out on the far extent of sunlit park and the white fleecy clouds that floated above it; but he thought he read that in her face which made him long for health and strength to take her away from Earlshaugh to the new home he had now begun to picture, and seldom a day passed now without something occurring to increase this wish.

'Roland,' said Maude on one occasion, as she drove him out through the pleasant lanes in her pretty pony phaeton, 'that odious creature Hawkey Sharpe is still, I understand, hovering about here.'

'Bent on mischief, you think?'

'Too probably.'

'Well, I am powerless to prevent him. He is, you know, his sister's factotum and now all but Laird of Earls-haugh.'

Though possessing no brilliant beauty, the face of the sunny-haired Maude was one usually full of merriment, and capable of expressing intense tenderness—one winning beyond all words; but it grew cloudy and stern at the thought of ‘these interlopers,’ as she always called them—Deborah Sharpe and her obnoxious brother.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE PRESENTIMENT.

AMONG her letters one morning—though her chief correspondent was her father, the old Indian veteran at Merlwood, whose shaky caligraphy there was no mistaking—there came one which gave Hester a species of electric shock. It bore the postmarks ‘Egypt’ and ‘Cairo,’ with stamps having the Pyramids and Sphinx’s head thereon.

‘From Malcolm Skene!’ she said to herself; ‘Malcolm Skene, and to *me*!’

She hurried to her room that she might read it in solitude, for it was impossible that she could fail to do so with deep interest after all that Malcolm Skene had said to her, and the knowledge of all that might have been—yea, yet perhaps might be; but the letter, dated more than a month before at Cairo, simply began:—

‘MY DEAR MISS MAULE,

‘My excuse for writing to you,’ he continued, ‘is—and your pardon must be accorded to me therefore—that I am ordered on a distant, solitary, and perilous duty, from which I have, for the first time in my life, a curious, yet solemn, presentiment that I shall never return.

‘This emotion may, please God, be a mistake; and I hope so, for my dear mother’s sake. It may only be that superstition which some deem impiety; but we Skenes of Dunnimarle have had it in more than one generation—a kind of foreknowledge of what was to happen to us, or to

be said or done by those we met. As some one has it, the map of coming events is before us, and the spirit surveys it, and for the time we are translated into another sphere, and re-act, perhaps, foregone scenes. Be that as it may, the unbidden emotion of presentiment seems to have some affinity to that phenomenon.'

'What a strange letter; and how unlike Malcolm—thoughtful and grave as he is!' was Hester's idea.

'I read a few days ago that some calamity had occurred at Earlshaugh; that my dear old friend and comrade Roland had met with an accident—had *disappeared*! What did that mean? But too probably I shall never learn now, and, as I have not again seen the matter referred to in print, hope it may all be a canard—a mistake.

'You remember our last interview? Oh, Hester, while life remains to me I shall never, never forget it? I think or hope you may care for me now in pity as we are separated—or might learn to care for me at a future time. Tell me to wait that time; if I return from my mission, Hester, and I shall do so—yea, were it seven years, if you wish it to be—if at the end of those seven years you would lay your dear hand in mine and tell me that you would be my wife.

'The waiting would be hard; yet, if inspired by hope, I would undergo it, Hester, and trust while life was spared to me. We are told that "the meshes of our destiny are spinning every day," silently, deftly, and we unconsciously aid in the spinning—scarcely knowing that—as we stumble through the darkness to the everlasting light—the dangers we have passed by, and the fires we have passed through, are all, in different ways, the process that makes us godlike, strong and free.'

Much more followed that was a little abstruse, and then he seemed to become loving and tender in spite of the manner in which he strove to modify his letter.

'I depart in an hour, and tide what may, my last thoughts will ever be of you—my last wish a prayer for your happi-

ness ! My life's love—my life's love, for such you are still—once more farewell !

‘MALCOLM SKENE.’

Certainly the gentle-hearted Hester could not but be moved by this letter, coming as it did under all the circumstances from the writer in a remote and perilous land. She looked at the date after perusing the letter more than once, and her spirit sank with a dread of what might have transpired since then.

She recalled vividly the face of Malcolm Skene, and his eyes, that were soft yet full of power, more frequently grave than merry, and his firm lips. He was a man whose features and bearing would have been remarkable amid any group of men, and the first to arrest a woman's attention and arouse her interest.

But as she re-read his expressions of love she shook her handsome head slowly and gravely, and thought with Collins :

‘Friendship often ends in love,
But love in friendship never !’

To this letter a terrible sequel was close at hand. This she found in the newspapers of the following day, and while her whole mind was full of that remarkable and most unexpected missive to which she could send no answer :

‘Captain Malcolm Skene, who with a native guide quitted Cairo some weeks ago, has not been heard of since he entered the Wady Faregh, at a point more than ten Egyptian *shoni*, or thirty miles British, beyond Memphis, which was not in his direct way.

‘This energetic and distinguished young officer is the bearer of despatches to the Egyptian Colonel commanding a Camel Battery and Black Battalion near Dayer-el-Syrian, which district he certainly had not reached when the latest intelligence came from that somewhat desolate quarter.

‘Doubts are now—when too late—entertained as to the fidelity of Hassan Abdullah, his guide. A camel supposed to have been his has been found dead of thirst in the

desert, and as there have been some dreadful sand-storms in that district, the greatest fears are entertained at headquarters that Captain Skene has perished in the wilderness—dying in the execution of his duty to his Queen and country, as truly and as bravely as if he had met a soldier's death in battle.'

The paper slipped from Hester's hands, and she sank forward till her forehead rested on the sill of a window near which she sat. She knew this paragraph meant too probably a terrible and unknown death, the harrowing details of which might—nay, too surely, never would—be revealed—death to one who had loved her but too well, and thus all her soul became instinct with a tender and fearful interest in him.

'Poor Malcolm—poor Malcolm Skene!' she murmured again and again, while her face, ashy white, was hidden in her hands.

Few women can fail to take a tender interest in the fate or future of any man who has been *interested* in them.

For a long time she sat still—nay, still as a statue, but for the regular and slow rising and falling of the ribbons and lace at her bosom, and the ruffling of her dark brown hair in the breeze that came through the open window, kissing her white temples and cooling her eyelids.

Then she recalled her father's strange and weird story of his father's dream, vision, or presentiment, before the storming of Jhansi, where the latter fell; and thought with wonder, could such things be?

She confided the letter and its contents to her bosom friend Maude; but she could not—for cogent reasons—bring herself to say a word on the subject to Roland, whose mind, however, was full enough of the newspaper report of his old friend's misfortune, or as he never doubted now—evil fate!

CHAPTER XXXV.

LOST IN THE DESERT.

NATHELESS his somewhat gloomy letter to Hester Maule, Malcolm Skene, though feeling to the fullest extent the influence of the presentiment of evil therein referred to, was too young, and of too elastic a nature, not to feel also a sense of ardour, enterprise, and enthusiasm at the confidence reposed in him by his superiors. With an inherent love of adventure and a certain recklessness of spirit, he armed himself, mounted, and quitted his quarters at Cairo just when the first red rays of the morning sun were tipping with light the summit of the citadel or the apex of each distant pyramid, and rode on his solitary way—solitary all save Hassan, the swarthy Egyptian guide provided for him by the Quartermaster-General's Department.

He had been chiefly selected for the duty in question—to bear despatches to the *Amir-Ali*, or Colonel, commanding the Egyptian force at Dayr-el-Syrian, in consequence of his proficiency in Arabic—the most prevailing language of the country.

He and his guide were mounted on camels. Skene's was one of great beauty, if an animal so ungainly can be said to possess it, with a small head, short ears, and bending neck. Its tail was long, its hoofs small, and it was swift of action. The rider was without baggage; he wore his fighting kit of Khakee cloth and tropical helmet with a pugaree. He had his sword and revolver, with goggles, and a pocket compass for use if his guide in any way proved at fault.

Unnoticed he traversed the picturesque streets that lay between the citadel and the gate that led by a straight road towards the castle and gardens of Ghizeh, passing the groups and features incident to Cairo: a lumbering train of British baggage waggons, escorted by our soldiers in clay-coloured khakee with bayonets fixed; an Egyptian officer in sky-blue uniform and red tarboosh 'tooling' along on a circus-like Arab; a whole regiment of darkies, perhaps with rattling drums and French bugles; strings of maimed, deformed,

and blind beggars; private carriages with outriders in Turkish costumes of white muslin with gold embroideries, and bare-legged grooms; 'the gallant, gray donkeys of which Cairo is so proud, and which the Cairenes delight in naming after European celebrities, from Mrs. Langtry to Lord Wolseley;' singers of Nubian and Arabian songs and dealers in Syrian magic, all were left behind, and in the cool air of the morning Malcolm Skene found himself ambling on his camel under the shadows of the lebbek trees, with wading buffaloes and flocks of herons on either side of the road as he skirted the plain where the Pyramids stand—the Pyramids that mock Time, which mocks all things.

He was too familiar with them then to bestow on them more than a passing glance, and rode forward on his somewhat lonely way. Hassan, his guide, like a true Arab, uttered a mocking yell on seeing the vast stony face of the Sphinx—an *efrit*—fired a pistol, and threw stones at it, as at a devil, and then civilization was left behind.

Trusting to his guide Hassan, Skene was taken a few miles off his direct route southward down the left bank of the Nile, and while riding on, turning from time to time to converse with that personage, who was a typical Fellah—very dark-skinned, with good teeth, black and sparkling eyes, muscular of form, yet spare of habit, and clad simply in loose blue cotton drawers with a blue tunic and red tarboosh—it seemed that his face and voice were somehow not unfamiliar to him.

But where, amid the thousands of low-class Fellaheen in Cairo, could Malcolm Skene have seen the former or heard the latter? Never before had he heard of Hassan Abdullah even by name. But 'strange it is, for how many days and weeks we may be haunted by a *likeness* before we know what it is that is gladdening us with sweet recollections, or vexing us with some association we hoped to have left behind.'

Memphis, with its ruins and mounds, in the midst of which stand the Arab hamlets of Sokkara and Mitraheny, was traversed with some difficulty, though the site is now chiefly occupied by waste and marshes that reach to the sand-hills on the edge of the desert; but from Abusir all

round to the west and south, for miles, Skene and his guide found themselves stepping from grave to grave amid bones and fragments of mummy cloth—the remains of that wondrous necropolis which, according to Strabo, extended half a day's journey each way from the great city of Central Egypt.

‘Ugh!’ muttered Malcolm Skene, as he guided the steps of his camel and lighted more than one long havannah, ‘this is anything but lively! What a dismal scene!’

‘The work of the Pharaohs,’ said Hassan, for to them everything is attributed by the Fellaheen, who suppose they lived about three hundred years ago.

But Memphis was ere long left in his rear, and night was at hand, when—according to Hassan Abdullah's statement, on computation of distance—they should reach and halt at certain wells, about ten *shoni* distant therefrom, in the direct line to the Wady Faregh.

Memphis was, we say, left behind, and the two rode swiftly on. His former thoughts recurring to him, Malcolm Skene, checking his camel to let that of his guide come abreast of him, said to the latter:

‘Your face is singularly familiar to me. Did we ever meet in Cairo?’

Hassan grinned and showed all his white teeth, but made no reply.

‘Your face *has* some strange mystery for me,’ resumed Skene, with growing wonder, yet fearing he might make the man think he possessed the evil eye; ‘it seems a face known to me—the face of the dead in the garb of the living.’

‘And it is so, *Yusbashi* (captain), so far as *you* are concerned,’ was the strange reply of the Fellah as his black eyes flashed.

‘What do you mean?’

‘We met in the roulette saloon of Pietro Girolamo.’

‘Right! I remember now; you are one of the fellows I fought with. I thought you were killed in that row!’

‘Nearly so I was, and by *you*.’

This was an awkward discovery.

‘But you escaped?’

‘Yes; thanks to an amulet I wear—a verse of the Koran bound round my left arm.’

To trust such a rascal as Skene now supposed this fellow must be was full of peril. To return and seek another guide, when he had proceeded so far upon his way, would argue timidity, and tempt the ‘chaff’ of the more heedless spirits of the mess; thus it was not to be thought of.

He could but continue his journey with his despatches, and watch well every movement of his guide; but to have as such one of the ruffians and bullies of Pietro Girolamo was certainly an unpleasant discovery—one with whom he had already that which in these parts of the world is termed a *blood feud*, seemed to be the first instalment of his gloomy presentiment.

Hassan Abdullah had been—he could not conceive how or why—chosen or recommended as a guide by those in authority; and if false, or disposed to be so, he veiled it under an elaborate bearing of servility and attention to every wish and hint of Skene. Thinking that he could not make any better of the situation now, Malcolm was fain to accept that bearing for what it might be worth, and, to veil his mistrust, adopted a new tone with Hassan, and instead of listening to directions from him, began to give orders instead. But, ignorant as he was of the route, this system could not long be pursued.

As he rode on he thought of Hester Maule, and how she would view or consider his letter. Would she answer it? He scarcely thought she would do so—nay, became certain she would not. Under the circumstances in which they had parted after that interview in the conservatory at Earls-haugh, and with the grim presentiment then haunting him, it was beseeching enough in him perhaps to have written as he did to her; but not for her to write him in reply unless she meant to hold out hopes that might never be realized.

What amount of ground they had traversed when the sun verged westward Malcolm scarcely knew, as the way had been most devious, rough, and apparently, to judge of the guide’s indecision more than once, very uncertain; but the former judged that it could not have been more than thirty miles from Memphis as the crow flies.

Dhurra reeds, date, and cotton-trees had long since been left behind, and before the camel-riders stretched a pale yellow waste of sand, strewed in places by glistening pebbles. Malcolm Skene thought they were now entering the lower end of the Wady Faregh, between El Benat and the Wady Rosseh, and on consulting his pocket-compass supposed the Dayr Macarius Convent must be right in his front, but distant many miles, and the post of Dayr-el-Syrian, for which he was bound, must be about ten miles further on; but Hassan Abdullah knew better; and when near sunset that individual dismounted and spread his dirty little square carpet whereon to say his orisons, with his face towards Mecca, his head bowed, his beads in his dingy hands, and his cunning eyes half closed. None would have thought that a Mussulman apparently so pious had only hate and perfidy in his heart for the trusting but accursed infidel, or *Frenchi*, as he called Skene—the general name in Egypt for all Europeans—as the latter seated himself by the side of a low wall half buried in the drifted sand—the fragment of some B.C. edifice—and partook of his frugal meal, supper and dinner combined.

Far, far away in the distance Memphis and the Valley of the Nile were lost in haze and obscurity; westward the sun, like a ball of fire—a blood-red disc of enormous proportions—shorn of every ray, was setting amid a sky of gold, crimson, and soft apple-green, all blending through each other, yet with light strong enough to send far along the waste they had traversed the shadows of the two camels of Skene and of Hassan.

The former recalled with a grim smile Moore's ballad:

‘Fly to the desert, fly with me!’

and thought the desert looked far from inviting.

His only table appurtenance was the jack-knife hung from his neck by a lanyard, and as issued to all ranks of our troops in Egypt, and with that he cut his sandwiches, now dry indeed by this time, and opened a tiny tin of preserved meat, which he washed down by a mouthful from the hunting-flask, carried in his haversack.

As he sat alone eating his frugal meal, which from religious scruples Hassan declined to share with him—or indeed anything save a cigar—Skene, though neither a sybarite nor a gourmand, could not help thinking regretfully of the regimental mess-table in the citadel of Cairo, possessing, like other such tables, all the ease of a kindly family circle, without its probable dulness; of the dressing bugle, and the merry drums and fifes playing the ‘Roast Beef of Old England;’ the quiet weed after dinner, a stroke at billiards, a rubber of short whist while holding good cards; and just then civilization and all the good things of this earth seemed very far off indeed!

When he and Hassan started again to reach the wells—where they were to procure water for themselves and their camels, and were to bivouac for the night, no trace of these could be found, though the travellers wandered several miles in different directions; and, as the sun set with tropical rapidity, Skene—his water-bottle completely empty—with his field-glass swept the horizon in vain for a sight of those gum-trees which were said to indicate the locality of the springs in question; and then he began more than ever to mistrust the good faith, if not the knowledge, of Hassan Abdullah.

So far as their camels were concerned, Skene had no cause as yet for any anxiety, as these animals, besides the four stomachs which all ruminating quadrupeds possess, have a fifth, which serves as a reservoir for carrying a supply of water in the parched and sandy deserts they are so often obliged to traverse.

A well—one unknown to Hassan, apparently—they certainly did come upon unexpectedly, but, alas! it was dry. Malcolm Skene looked thirstily at the white stones that lined or formed it, glistening in the light of the uprisen moon, and with his tongue parched and lips hard and baked he thought tantalizingly of brooks of cool and limpid water, of iced champagne and bitter beer!

He haltered his camel, looked to his arms and laid them half under him, and resting his head against the saddle of his animal, strove to court sleep, against the labours of the

morrow, thinking the while that the labours of Sisyphus were almost a joke to the toil of the duty he had undertaken.

At a little distance on the other side of the dried-up fountain, Hassan, whom he watched closely for a time, took his repose in a similar fashion.

The night in the desert was not altogether unpleasant, for that rarefied clearness of sky which renders the heat of the sun so intolerable by day, makes the sky of night surpassingly beautiful, and that is the time when, if he can, the traveller should really make his way over the sandy waste.

With early morning, and while the red sun was yet below the hazy horizon, came full awakening after a somewhat restless night, broken by periods of watchfulness and anxiety, and tantalized by dreams of flowing and sparkling water, which left the pangs of growing thirst keener than ever.

Hassan, however, seemed 'fresh as a daisy,' having, as Malcolm strongly suspected, some secret store of his own selfishly concealed about him.

They gave their camels a feed of their favourite food, the twigs of some thorny mimosa that grew near the dried-up well—scanty herbage of the desert—and then Malcolm, who distrusted the skill or fealty, or both, of Hassan Abdullah, while the latter was kneeling on his prayer carpet, turned to consult his pocket compass with reference to the direction in which to steer through the waste of sand which now spread in every direction around them.

It was gone !

Nervously, with fingers that trembled in their haste, he searched his haversack, turning out its few contents again and again, and cast keen glances all around where he had been overnight, but no sign or trace of that invaluable instrument, on which too probably his life depended, was there !

Fiercely he turned to Hassan, then just ending his morning prayer and folding up his carpet, suspecting that the soft and swift-handed Egyptian must have filched it from him during sleep—yet he had felt so wakeful that such could scarcely be the case.

‘My compass !’ he exclaimed.

‘What of it, *Yusbashi* ?’

‘Have you seen it ?’

‘I—not I ; and if I did, do you think I would touch it ?’

‘Why not ?’

‘It is *ifrit*—the work of the devil—an affair of which I, as a true Mussulman, can know nothing.’

‘But how about the way to go now ?’ said Malcolm Skene in genuine perplexity and alarm, looking all around the vicinity of the stony hole, called a well, for the twentieth time.

‘The *Frenchi* will be told all of the way that his servant knows,’ replied Hassan with a profound salaam, while bending his head to hide the leer of his stealthy and glittering eyes.

Skene thought for a moment. Should he take this fellow at his word ; threaten him with death if he did not produce the pocket compass, or knock him down with the butt-end of his pistol and then search his pockets ?

An open quarrel was to be avoided. Skene felt himself to be a good deal, if not wholly, at the fellow’s mercy. The latter could only delude him so far, at the risk of perilling himself ; but he might, on the other hand, lure and betray him into the hands of the enemy, several of whom, under a leader named Sheikh Moussa Abu Hagil, were hovering on the skirts of the desert in various directions—a man known to have been a faithful adherent and kinsmen of the captive Zebehr Pasha.

Nothing seemed to remain for Skene but to accept as before the guidance of Hassan Abdullah, so, after the latter had breakfasted on a few dates and the former on a simple ration from his haversack, once more they headed their course into what seemed to be an endless and markless waste of sand.

Apart from the bodily pangs of thirst, anger, doubt, and anxiety were gathering in the mind of Malcolm ; but he sternly resolved that the moment he became assured of Hassan Abdullah deluding or betraying him he would shoot that copper-coloured individual dead, as if he were a reptile or a wild beast. And Hassan no doubt knew quite enough

of life in his own country to be aware that he rode on with his life in his hands.

So another night and day passed away.

And now, as we have referred to the desert here and elsewhere in the Soudan, it may seem the time to give a description of what such a waste is, and the scene that now spread before the anxious and bloodshot eyes of Malcolm Skene ; for it has been justly said that he who has never travelled through such a place can form no idea of a locality so wondrous—one in which all the ordinary conditions of human life undergo a complete change.

Once away from the valley of the Nile, all between the fourteenth degree and the shore of the Mediterranean, a tract of more than eight hundred thousand square miles *is desert*, treeless, waterless, without streams or rivulets, and almost without wells, which, when they exist, are scanty, few, and far apart. 'The first thing after reaching a well,' says a recent writer, 'is to ascertain the quantity and quality of its water. As to the former, it may have been exhausted by a preceding caravan, and hours may be required for a new supply to ooze in again. The quality of the desert water is generally bad, the exception being when it becomes worse, though long custom enables the Bedouins to drink water so brackish as to be intolerable to all except themselves and their flocks. Well do I remember how at each well the first skinful was tasted all round as epicures sip rare wines. Great was the joy if it was pronounced *moya helwa*, "sweet water ;" but if the Bedouins said *moosh tayib*, "not good," we might be sure it was a solution of Epsom salts.'

The desert now traversed by Skene was composed of coarse sand, abounding in some places with shells, pebbles, and a species of salt. In some parts the soil was shifting, and so soft that the feet—even of his camel—sank into it at every step ; at others it was hard as beaten ground. Here and there grew a few patches of prickly plants, such as he remembered to have seen in botanic gardens at home, with small hillocks of drifted sand gathered round them ; and as he rode on he felt as if he had about him the awful sensations of vastness, silence, and the sublimity of a calm and

waveless ocean—but an ocean of sand, arid, and gloomy, dispiriting and suggestive of death—but to the European only ; as the Bedouins, whose native soil it is, are, beyond all other nations and races, gay and cheerful.

During August and September the winds in Egypt retain a northerly direction, and the weather is generally moderate ; but Malcolm Skene was in the desert now, and under the peculiar influences of that peculiar region.

Then at times is to be encountered the mirage, or Spirit of the Desert, as the Arabs call it, when the eyes of the wanderer there are deluded by the seeming motion of distant waves ; of tall and graceful palms tossing feathery leaves in the distance, when only the sun-scorched sand is lying, mocking him with the false show of what his soul longs for, and his overheated brain depicts in glowing colours.

Riding mechanically on—uncomfortably, too, all unused as he was to the strange ambling action of a camel—oppressed by thirst which he could see no means of quenching, and knowing not when he might be able to do so—oppressed, too, by the glare of a cloudless sun growing hotter and hotter—more mighty than ever it seemed to be before—Malcolm Skene was soon to become conscious that the sense of vision was not the only one by which the mysterious desert mocks its sojourner with fantastic tricks ; and once he became sensible of that strange and bewildering phenomena referred to by the author of ‘*Eöthen*’ in his experiences of Eastern travel.

He seemed, overpowered by the heat, to fall slowly asleep—was it for moments or minutes?—he knew not ; but he seemed also to be suddenly awakened by the familiar but far-off sounds of drums beating, to the wailing of a bagpipe playing ‘*The March of Lochiel*,’ as he had often heard it played by the Queen’s Own Cameron Highlanders, in the citadel of Cairo.

He started and listened, his first idea being naturally that he was partly under the power of a dream ; but it seemed as if minutes passed ere these sounds, in steady marching cadence, became fainter and then died away.

Utterly bewildered, he was quite awake now. Under the

same influence, and in the same place, it was the bells of his native village that were heard by the writer referred to, and who says : ' I attribute the effect to the great heat of the sun, the perfect dryness of the clear air through which I moved, and the deep stillness of all around me. It seemed to me that these causes, by occasioning a great tension and susceptibility of the hearing organs, rendered them liable to tingle under the passing touch of some new memory that must have swept across my brain in a moment of sleep.'

And so doubtless it was with Malcolm Skene, who, sunk in thought and lassitude, was pondering deeply over the strange dream—if dream it was—when he was roused by the voice of Hassan Abdullah, as it amounted to something like a shriek.

'The *Zobisha*—the *Zobisha* !' he exclaimed, with a terror that was too genuine to be affected in any way.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

ALONE !

It was about noon, now, and with a start, roused from his day-dream and half-apathy, Malcolm Skene looked about him and saw that he had then to face one of the most appalling, yet sublime, sights of the desert—a sand-storm—at that season when the Egyptian winds approach the Southern tropic, and they are more variable and tempestuous than during any other season of the year—a state in which they remain till February.

Distant about two miles, he suddenly saw the *Zobisha*, as Hassan called it—several lofty pillars of sand travelling over the waste with wondrous swiftness. The tallest was vertical, the others seemed to lean towards it, and, at the bases of all, the sand rose as if lashed by a whirlwind into a raging sea, amid which tough mimosa bushes were uprooted and swept away like feathers.

The whirlwind subsided, but the mighty cloud of sand and small pebbles which it had raised high in the darkened heavens, almost to the zenith, continued to tower before the two sojourners in the desert for more than an hour—purple, dun, and yellow in hue at times, and anon all blended together.

Brave though he was, a nameless dread such as he had never felt before possessed the soul of Skene at a sight so unusual and terrific; and there flashed upon his mind the recollection of his letter to Hester, and how true his presentiment seemed to be proving now, for he felt on the verge of suffocation.

Hassan Abdullah, who in his prayers usually sighed for the Paradise of the Prophet, with his seventy hours awaiting him in their couches of hollow pearl, the fruits of the Tree of Toaba, and springs of unlimited lemonade, now prayed only for his own safety, while both their camels forgot their usual docility, and became well-nigh unmanageable with terror.

The air was full of impalpable dust. To avoid suffocation or blindness therefrom, Skene dismounted, tied his gauze pugaree tightly over his face, and placing his camel between him and the skirt of the blast, which now developed into a wind-storm, sweeping the column of sand with wondrous speed before it, stooped his head close to the saddle and held on to a stirrup-leather.

On came the wind-storm, and before he had time to think, to express wonder to Hassan as to what it could be, the tornado swept over the desert, carrying before it mimosa bushes and cacti, clouds of shining pebbles, the withered fragments of an old gum-tree, and the white bones of a dead camel.

How his animal withstood the sharp and sweeping blast that darkened all around them, Malcolm Skene knew not; but he found his hands torn from the stirrup-leather, and himself flung furiously and helplessly amid the sand, which half covered him.

After a time, gasping, with his throat, nostrils, and ears full of dust, he struggled to his feet and looked around him,

and saw, already far distant, the sand-cloud borne away by the mighty wind, then in its wild career to some other quarter of the desert.

Above him the sky was again cloudless ; the air all still and clear ; the awful and angry rush of the wind-storm was past.

But where was Hassan Abdullah ?

A speck vanishing away in the far distance showed but too plainly where he had gone with all the speed his camel could achieve—a natural swiftness now accelerated by the extremity of fear ; and in another minute even that moving speck disappeared, and Malcolm Skene found himself alone—guideless and ignorant of which way to turn his steps in the appalling solitude of the desert.

What was he to do now ?

Follow in the route Hassan had taken, and which that wily personage no doubt knew led to some haunt of men, or abode of such civilization as existed there ?

Even that he could not do. The horizon showed no point to indicate where the speck he knew to be Hassan and his camel had vanished.

Malcolm's alarm for the future exceeded his just anger and indignation for the present at this sudden and unexpected desertion ; but action of some kind became necessary, and though apparently he could not be worse off than where he was, every step he took might be leading further from the path he should pursue to Dayr-el-Syrian—further from a well or succour, and nearer to 'dusty death.'

After glancing at the trappings of his camel, he remounted and rode forward slowly, fain to suck for a moment even a hot pebble of the desert in hope to produce a little moisture in his mouth, while consulting a small pocket map he possessed.

If Hassan had not misled him wilfully, and they had not overshot the proper distance, to judge by the position of the sun, he supposed that Dayr-el-Syrian, where the Amir-Ali's command was encamped, should be somewhere on his right ; but, if so, ere this he should have come to the

sequestered Macarius Convent—so called from St. Macarius the Elder, of Egypt, a shepherd of the fourth century, who (so runs the story) dwelt for sixty years in the desert; but of that edifice he saw no sign or vestige, and he saw, by the same map, that if he had *passed* it and gone through the extreme end of the Wady Faregh, then before him must lie the ‘Petrified Forest,’ of which he knew nothing, and of which he had never heard before, lying apparently more than a hundred miles westward of Cairo—a distance which it seemed almost incredible he had so nearly travelled, and the very name of which was suggestive of something of horror and dismay.

Again and again, with hollow and haggard eyes, he swept the desert through his field-glass, seeking to note a bush or tree that might indicate where a fountain lay; but in vain, and the pangs of thirst increased till they became gnawing and maddening.

He would certainly die soon!

More than once he looked, too, in the desperate hope of seeing Abdullah returning; but equally in vain.

As he rode on under the scorching sun—scorching even while setting—with his head nodding on his breast through weakness, there came before him day-dreams of runnels of gushing water—their very sound seemed to be in his ears—of ‘a wee burnie wimpling under the lang yellow broom,’ in the shady woods of Dunnimarle, and the rustle of their leaves seemed overhead!

The poor old mother there, to whom he was as the apple of her eye—Hester too—would never know of all he endured and would have to endure inexorably till the bitter end came; and just then, more than even his mother, dove-eyed Hester Maule seemed all the world to him!

Well—‘Time and the hour run through the roughest day.’

With that appreciation of trifles peculiar to us all in moments of dire perplexity or intense excitement, he was remarking the vast length of shadow thrown across the level waste, by the light of the now nearly level sun—the shadow of himself and his camel—when a sudden accelera-

tion in the speed of the latter attracted his attention; it began to glide over the desert sand more swiftly than ever, guided by some instinct implanted in it by nature, and in a few minutes it brought him to a little spot of green—an oasis—amid which, fenced round by stones and large pebbles, lay a pool of water!

‘A well—a well—water—water at last!’ exclaimed Skene with a prayer on his lips, as he threw himself beside it. Forgetting thoughts of all and everything, past and future, in the mingled agony and joy of the present, he crawled towards it on hands and knees, tossed aside his tropical helmet and drank of it deeply, thirstily, greedily, laving his face and hands in it often, and he was not sure that his tears did not mingle with the water as he did so—tears of gratitude.

By nature and its physical formation, less athirst than his rider, the camel drank of the pool too, but scantily. Skene then filled his water-bottle with the precious liquid, as if he feared the well might dry up, even as he watched it; and then (after tethering his camel) he stretched himself beside it, and, utterly worn out by all he had undergone in mind and body, fell into a deep and dreamless slumber, undisturbed alike by flies or mosquitoes.

How long he slept thus he knew not, but day had not broken, and the waning moon was shining brightly when he awoke. He was already too much of a soldier to feel surprise on awaking in a strange bed or place; but some of his surroundings there were sufficiently strange to startle him into instant wakefulness and activity.

‘It is the Frenchi—the Infidel!’ he heard the voice of Hassan exclaim, and he found himself surrounded by a crowd of armed Arabs, foremost among whom stood Pietro Girolamo—the rascally Girolamo of Cairo, who, having made even that city too hot to hold him, had, for the time, sought refuge with the denizens of the desert.

Partly clad and partly nude, with plaited hair, forms of bronze colour, their teeth and eyes gleaming bright as the swords and spears with which they were armed, Malcolm Skene saw some twenty or more Soudanese warriors, on foot

or camel-back, around him, and gave himself up for lost indeed, as his sword and revolver were immediately torn from him.

Uttering a yell, Girolamo was rushing upon him with up-raised knife, when he was roughly thrust back by a tall and towering Arab, who dealt him a sharp blow with the butt-end of his Remington rifle—so much as to say, ‘I command here.’

Clearly seen and defined in the light of a moon which was silvery, yet brilliant as that of day, Skene saw before him in this personage an Arab of the Arabs.

His bronzed face was nearly black by nature and exposure to the scorching tropical sun. His arms, legs, and neck were bare, and their muscles stood forth like whipcord. His nose was somewhat hawk-like; his eyes were keen as those of a mountain eagle, and his shark-like teeth were white as ivory, in contrast to the skin of his leathern visage.

His hair, which flowed under a steel cap furnished with a nasal bar, was black as night, and shone with an unguent made from crocodile fat by the fishers of Dongola; and save for his shirt of Dharfour steel and Mahdi tunic and trousers, he looked like a mummy of the Pharaohs resuscitated and inspired by a devil.

His arms were a long cross-hilted sword, a dagger, and a Remington rifle.

Such was the Sheikh Moussa Abu Hagil, kinsman of Zebehr Pasha—like Zebehr, almost the last of the great slave-dealers—and whose prisoner Malcolm Skene now found himself—whether for good or for evil, he could not foresee; but his heart too painfully foreboded the *latter*!

‘Sheikh,’ said he, ‘you will consider me as a prisoner of war, I trust?’

‘We shall see—there are things that are as bad as death, and yet are not death,’ was the grim and enigmatical reply of Moussa Abu Hagil, which Skene knew referred to torture or mutilation, by having his hands struck off, like those of some prisoners he had seen.

For many a day after, the friends of Malcolm Skene

searched the public prints in vain for further tidings of him than we have given three chapters back.

Applications to the War Office and telegrams to headquarters at Cairo were alike unavailing, and received only the same cold, stereotyped answer—that nothing was known of the fate of Captain Malcolm Skene but what the newspapers contained.

His supposed fate and story were deemed as parallel with the Palmer tragedy on the shore of the Red Sea ; but more especially with that of his countryman, Captain Gordon, an enthusiastic soldier, who, missing Colonel Burnaby's party which he was to accompany with the desert column, perished in the wilderness, far from the Gakdul track—but whether at the hands of the Arabs, or by the horrors of thirst, was never known.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE FIRST QUARREL.

IN his anxiety to leave Earlshaugh, Roland writhed under his convalescence, thus retarding in no small degree his complete recovery, and keeping him chained to a sofa in his sitting-room, when otherwise he might have been abroad in the grounds, though the brown foliage and the falling leaves, with the piping of the autumn winds, were not calculated much to raise the spirits of the ailing.

The partridges had become wild ; the pheasants were still in splendid order, and cub-hunting was beginning in those districts where it was in vogue ; but no one in Earlshaugh House thought of any of these, yet cub-hunting, as an earnest of the coming season, had been one of Roland Lindsay's delights.

However, he had other more serious and bitter things to think of now ; and for cub-hunting or fox-hunting, never

again would he set out from Earlsbaugh and feel the joyous enthusiasm roused by seeing the hounds 'feathering' down a furrowed field with all their heads in the air, or find himself crossing the fertile and breezy Howe of Fife, from meadow to meadow, and field to field, over burns, hedges, and five-foot drystone dykes, then standing erect in his stirrups and galloping as if for life after the streaming pack, as they swept over 'the Muirs of Fife' which merge in the rich and extensive plains of the famous East Neuk.

Hunt he might elsewhere in the future, but never again where he and his fathers before him had hunted for generations, though Mr. Hawkey Sharpe was then actually doing so, and with horses from 'his sister's' stables at Earlsbaugh!

During this period of convalescence and enforced idleness Roland became conscious of a kind of change—subtle and undefinable—in Annot. She—in a spirit of maidenly reserve—was apparently in no hurry for the completion of arrangements about their marriage.

She left all these *pro tem.* in the hands of 'mamma' in South Belgravia; and the old lady's letters—changed in tone—were full of suggested delays, doubts, and difficulties in finally fixing a period to her daughter's engagement with Roland; the said letters, of course, bearing on the all-important matter of settlements, which—as circumstances now stood at Earlsbaugh—he was utterly at a loss how to make without the advice, more than ever, of the family agent, old Mr. M'Wadsett of Thistle Court.

Meanwhile, full of themselves and their own affairs, and of their marriage, which was now fixed for an early day, and before Jack Elliot's return to Egypt, Maude and the latter were less observant than Hester of what transpired at Earlsbaugh during Roland's convalescence.

Attended by old Buckle, Annot had gone to see the hounds throw off, and in following the field for some little way contrived to lose her venerable groom, whom no doubt she deemed a bore; and while he was searching for her hopelessly over a Fifeshire muir she came home to one of the park gates attended by a gentleman in hunting costume,

with whom she seemed on pretty intimate terms—a circumstance which, when mentioned, she laughingly explained away.

But at a subsequent period she was seen by Maude and Hester riding in the park with one supposed to be the same stranger, but at a considerable distance.

The two girls could see that the pair were going slowly together—perhaps their cattle were tired, but, as Maude said, that was no reason why they should ride so near each other that his right hand could rest on her saddle-bow.

‘Who is he? I don’t like this,’ said Maude.

But Hester remained silent and full of her own thoughts.

Other meetings between these two became whispered about, rather intangibly, however, and then rumour gave the gentleman the name of Hoyle.

‘Hoyle?’ thought Hester, and she remembered Annot’s confidence about her Belgravian admirer, ‘the Detrimental’ Bob Hoyle.

Annot blushed deeply and painfully with a suffusion that dyed her snowy neck and face to the temples, and which was some time in passing away, when questioned on this matter by Maude, who she knew mistrusted her, and falteringly she asked:

‘How did you learn his name?’

‘It dropped from you incidentally when speaking to Elliot.’

‘Did it?’ said she, with a pallid lip.

‘Yes, when hunting, at a house in the neighbourhood.’

‘I—I know no one—I mean no harm—and Roland cannot ride to hounds just now,’ urged Annot, a little piteously, and adopting her child-like manner.

‘Then neither should you, Annot.’

‘I will do so no more, Maude—and I give you my word,’ she added emphatically, and with an air of perfect candour, ‘that I shall never again see Mr. Hoyle!’

Then Maude kissed her, but, as she did so, it scarcely required so close an observer as Hester to detect the actual dislike—all sweet and lovely as her face was—that lurked under her cousin’s affected cordiality.

But the latter's indignation returned when the pledge was broken.

Deeming all this most unfair to Roland, his sunny-haired sister consulted with Hester, but that young lady nervously declined to involve herself in the matter, though Roland nearly took the initiative one day (when Hester was arranging some fresh flowers in his room) with reference to Annot's now frequent absences and seeming neglect of him.

'Does the dear girl shrink from me, Hester,' said he, 'because I am pale and thin—wasted and feeble—after that cursed accident?'

'Surely not, Roland!'

'It seems very like it, by Jove!' he grumbled almost to himself.

In the dark violet eyes of Hester there shone at that moment, as she bent over the flower-vases, a strange light—the light that is born of mingled anger and love.

Maude thought it very strange that in all reports of the meets, hunting and county packs, etc., the name of Mr. Hoyle never appeared among others, nor were her suspicions allayed by the idea of Jack Elliot, that 'he was probably a duffer whose name was not worth mentioning.'

But gossip was busy, and Roland's loving and tender sister's complaints of Annot seemed to become the echo of his own secret and growing thoughts, which rose unpleasantly now on Annot's protracted absences from his society, and a new and undefinable something in her manner that, in short, he did not like.

The half-uttered hints of Maude—uttered painfully and reluctantly, trembling lest she should become a mischief-maker—stung him deeply, more deeply than he cared to admit.

'What has Annot done now?' he asked on one occasion, tossing on his sofa and flinging away a half-smoked cigar. 'It seems to me that if a woman is popular with our sex she becomes intensely the reverse with her own.'

'Roland,' urged Maude, 'you are unnecessarily severe, on me at least.'

‘Well—perhaps the atmosphere of this place is corrupting her; I don’t wonder if it is so; we live here in one of deceit,’ said he bitterly. ‘Poor little Maude,’ he added more gently, ‘home is no longer home to you now.’

‘I shall soon have another,’ said Maude, with brightness dancing in her eyes of forget-me-not blue.

‘But I must have this matter out with Annot—ask her to come to me.’

And when Annot came, with all her strange and flower-like fairness of colour and willowy grace, how fragile, soft, and *petite* she looked, with her minute little face and wealth of golden hair, her bright inquiring eyes, their expression just then having something of alarm mingled with coyness in them!

How could he be angry with her? What was he to say—how to begin?

We say there was alarm in her expression, for she saw near Roland’s hand his powerful field-glasses, with which he was in the habit of amusing himself in viewing the far stretch of country extending away to the distant hills. He could also view the park, which was much nearer.

She knew not *whom* he might have seen there, and the little colour she had died away.

‘What is it, Roland?’ she asked; ‘you wish to speak with me.’

How terrible it is, says someone, to confront direct and apparently frank people! ‘To state in precise terms the offences of all those who incur our displeasure would occasion a good deal of humming and hawing, and, it is to be feared, invention on the part of most of us in the course of twelve months. We have wrought ourselves up to the pitch of a very pretty quarrel, and it is dreadfully embarrassing to be called upon to state our grounds for it.’

So it was with Roland. He had worked himself up to a point which he failed just then to sustain, while in her manner there was a curious mixture of the caressing and the defiant; but when she tried some of her infantile and clinging ways, Roland became cold and hard in the expression of

his mouth and eyes, though she hastened to adjust the sofa-cushion on which his head reclined.

‘You wish to speak with me, Maude said,’ remarked Annot, in a low voice, while looking down and somewhat nervously adjusting a flower in her girdle.

Roland did not reply at once. She eyed him furtively, and then laughed.

‘I do not understand your mirth,’ said he coldly.

‘Nor I your gloom, Roland dear ; but then you are far from well.’

He sighed, as if deprecating her manner.

‘Am I to be scolded, like a naughty child ?’ she asked.

‘You seem to feel that you deserve it.’

‘But I won’t be scolded—and for what ?’

‘Acting as you ought not to do.’

‘How ?’

‘Riding to see the hounds throw off, without my knowledge, and escorted only by an old groom, whose place another has taken more than once.’

He paused, loth to say more. His proud soul revolted at the idea of being jealous—vulgarly, grotesquely jealous of anyone ; yet he eyed her with pain and anger mingled.

‘Oh, you refer to Bob Hoyle—poor Bob ! Hester knows about him,’ said Annot, after a little pause, in which she grew, if possible, paler, and certainly more confused.

‘He is not a visitor here—and yet you have been seen with him in the park and lawn.’

‘Yes. Can I be less than polite when he escorted me home from the meet—in the dusk, too ?’

‘And who the deuce is Bob Hoyle ?’

‘I have mentioned him to Hester,’ replied Annot, still evasively.

‘But who is he visiting in this locality ?’

‘I do not know.’

‘Not know—how ?’

‘Simply because I never asked him.’

‘Strange !’

‘Not at all, Roland dear, when I think and care so little about him.’

She tried a tiny caress, but he turned from her, embittered and humiliated.

Disappointment, shame, sorrow, and mortification were all gathering in his heart, as doubts of Annot grew there too ; and in his then weak and nervous state he actually trembled to pursue a subject so obnoxious. Was it to be the old story :

‘Of one that loved, not wisely, but too well ;
Of one not easily jealous, but, being wrought,
Perplexed in the extreme.’

A little silence ensued, during which, as he looked upon her in all her fair beauty, so unstable of purpose, and so humble in heart is one who loves truly that he felt inclined to throw himself upon her affection for him, and only beseech her to be careful.

She was—he thought—young, artless, rash, and perhaps knew not how unseemly, especially in a censorious country place, were these mistakes of hers. But her manner repelled him. The half-grown sensation of softness died away, and irritation came instead. So he said bluntly :

‘Annot, I tell you plainly that there must be no more of this sort of thing.’

Her usually sweet little lips curled defiantly, and she eyed him inquiringly now.

‘Dare you try to make me believe that what you admit is all that has occurred?’

‘I do not wish to try and make you believe anything,’ she replied sullenly, yet in a broken tone.

‘This is worse and worse,’ said Roland in a husky voice.

‘Are you jealous of him?’ she asked, with a laugh that had no mirth in it. ‘Surely not ; he is but a boy.’

‘I am, and shall be, jealous of no one, Annot !’

‘He speaks to me ; it is not my fault—and is always polite. Do not let us squabble, dearest Roland—I do so hate squabbling,’ said she, selecting a white bud from among the flowers at her waist and pinning it in his button-

hole ; but Roland's blood was too much up to be propitiated by a white bud, so Annot had recourse to a few tears ; but, so far from there being peace between them, matters waxed more unpleasant still.

'Why has this Mr.—ah—Hoyle—as you name him, never called here, nor left even a card?'

'I cannot tell.'

'Yet he is an old London friend, and has come almost to the house door !'

'I cannot tell,' repeated Annot.

'You have met him on the skirts of the park?'

'By the merest chance.'

'These chances would seem to have occurred too often,' interrupted Roland, greatly ruffled now, yet feeling sick at heart ; 'so let us come to an end !'

'By—by parting?' she asked, with pale lips.

'It is easily done ; I am going back to the regiment in a little time, and gossips will soon cease to link my name with yours, when you——'

'How cruel of you, Roland !' she said, and she looked at him entreatingly for a moment with her small hands clasped, and then turned away her face.

'It may be merely flirtation or folly that inspires you ; but beware, Annot, how you treat me thus, and remember that lovers' quarrels are not *always* love renewed.'

He felt and feared that a gulf which might never be bridged over was widening suddenly between them. Had she asked him just then, with all his anger, to kiss her once and forgive her, he would have yielded too probably ; but the little beauty, all unlike her usually pliant, soft, and clinging self, held haughtily aloof and said :

'Am I to give you back your ring, and relinquish all that it involves?'

'No, Annot, no, no,' exclaimed Roland, not yet prepared for such a climax.

With an angry sob in her slender throat she tried to twist it off, but in vain ; and they regarded each other with a curiously mingled expression which they never forgot—he sorrowfully and indignantly ; she saucily and defiantly.

‘Have you anything more unpleasant to say to me, Roland?’ she asked.

‘Only that I begin to wish, Annot—oh, my God—that we had never, never met!’

‘Indeed! Good-bye.’

‘Good-bye.’

She swept away. What a change—was it witchcraft?—had come over the once playful, childlike, and winning little Annot! Roland’s heart was sick and crushed, and he began to have a growing and unpleasant suspicion that he had made, as he thought, ‘a confounded fool of himself.’

‘Thank Heaven, Hester! I shall soon have the sea rolling between me and this place,’ said he, when, after a time, he told his cousin, the early playmate and sweetheart of other days, the story of this interview and his complaint against Annot. ‘Regrets are useless; we cannot change the past; but I have neither the inclination nor the capacity to face all the circumstances that seem to surround me in Earlsbaugh now.’

‘Why has he addressed me in his distress, and on this subject?’ thought Hester almost angrily; ‘how can I sympathize with him in the matter? And he comes to me at a time, too, when I know we may be soon parted for ever, and when my thoughts are as full of him as they were in that old time that can return no more.’

Piqued at and disappointed with Annot, a curious and confusing emotion came more than once into the mind of Roland—one described by a Scottish writer as feeling ‘that had he not, and had he been, and if he could he might—in fine, he thought the medley which many a man thinks when he knows that he loves one, and only *one*; but under suasion and pressure would find it just possible to yield to *other* distractions.’

Annot did not afford him many opportunities of recurring to their first quarrel or effacing its memory; and from that hour she kept indignantly and sullenly aloof, as much as she could in courtesy do, from Maude and Hester—to their surprise—spending most of her time in the apartments and society of Mrs. Lindsay.

But once again, in the long shady avenue near the Weird Yett, when Maude was idling there, under the cold blue sky of an October evening, with Jack Elliot—idling in the happiness a girl feels when on the brink of her marriage with the man she loves with all the strength of her warm heart—the man whose voice and the mere touch of whose hand gives joy—she felt that heart turn cold when she detected Annot—her brother's *fiancée*—bidding a hasty adieu to the stranger before referred to—clad in a red hunting coat, and leading his horse by the bridle.

So a crisis of some kind was surely at hand now !

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE CRISIS.

WHAT did, or what could, Annot mean by this studied duplicity and defiance of propriety ? thought Maude ; but ere she could reflect much on the subject, or consider how to speak to Roland about it, or whether she should simply let him discover more for himself, the crisis referred to in our last chapter came to pass, and the possible '*other* distractions' that had occurred, in his irritation, to Roland's mind were forgotten by him then.

Notwithstanding what had passed between them, the charm of Annot's manner, her graceful and piquant ways, impelled or allured him again, and his passionate love for her swelled up at times in his breast. Was he not to make one more effort, or was it too late to win her love again ?

Like one who when drowning will cling to a straw, Roland, with all his just indignation at Annot, clung to his faith in her ; but they had parted with much apparent coldness ; and, as we have said, in that huge old rambling mansion of Earlshaugh, as it was easy for people to avoid each other if they wished to do so, he had not again met her alone.

Thus any explanation was deferred, and, with all his love, he felt painfully that if he once began fully to doubt her and surrendered himself to that idea, all would be lost ; and yet he had little cause for confidence now, apparently.

From her own lips again he resolved—however galling to his pride—to hear his fate, of her wishes and of her love, if the latter still was his ; and thus he asked her by note to meet him in the library, at a time when they were sure to be undisturbed, as Mrs. Lindsay was usually indisposed at the hour he selected, and Maude, Jack, and Hester would be, he knew, absent riding.

From his own lips Annot had been fully informed of how his father's will was framed, but her ambition went far beyond that of Becky Sharp when the latter thought she would be a good woman on five thousand a year, would not miss a little soup for the poor out of that sum, and could pay everybody when she had it.

Annot, though apparently passive no longer, feigned a desire to continue 'the entanglement,' for such she deemed it—this engagement to Roland, begun at Merlwood. She had a secret gratitude for the information that had come to her in time of his future prospects. She could have continued to love him after a fashion of her own, and perhaps as much as it was in her selfish nature to love anyone ; but it must be as proprietor of Earlsbaugh, of which she had an overweening desire to be mistress, and, moreover, she never meant to form or face 'a moneyless marriage.'

And now in this meeting with Roland she felt that a crisis in her fate had come ; that the sooner it was over and done with the better ; and with a power of will beyond what anyone could have conceived a girl so soft and fair, so small in stature and lovely in feature might possess, she kept her appointment ; but, without referring even to Lucrezia Borgia, who was a golden-haired little creature, with a feeble and vapid expression of face (as Mrs. Jameson tells us), does not history record how often fair little women have been possessed of iron will and nature ?

Annot accorded her soft cheek to Roland's lip so coldly that he scarcely touched it !

Both looked pale, though they stood, when regarding each other, in the red light of the October sunset, that streamed like a crimson flood through a deeply embayed old window near them.

Annot wore a dark dress, and round her slender throat a high ruffle of black lace, which, like the jet drops in her tiny ears, enhanced the marvellous fairness of her skin, as Roland remarked, for even such trifling details failed to escape him in that time of doubt and exceeding misery.

‘You have not kept me waiting,’ said she with a smile, and as if feeling a dire necessity for saying something.

‘Was it likely I should do so, Annot, when I have counted every moment of time since I sent my little note to you?’ replied Roland, feeling instinctively from what he saw in her eye and manner that the dreaded time had come!

‘How silly—useless I mean, such impatience, when we meet daily somewhere—at meals and so forth!’ said she, looking out upon the far expanse of green park, steeped in the hazy sunshine of one of the hot evenings of October.

‘Annot,’ said Roland impatiently, and striking a heel on the floor as he spoke, ‘after what passed between us last—a conversation alike distasteful and painful—I can no longer endure the suspense, the agony your conduct and bearing cause me. Do you really wish all to be at end between us?’

His eyes were bent eagerly upon her face, the muscles of which certainly quivered with emotion—either love or shame, he knew not which—and he took her hands in his, but relinquished them; his own were hot and trembling as if he had an ague, while hers were firm and cold as they were white and beautiful.

‘It was a joke—a petulant joke, your proposal to give me back your ring and break our engagement—was it not, darling?’ he asked after a brief pause.

‘It was *no* joke,’ replied Annot, with still averted eyes, in which, however, there was not a vestige of those sympathetic tears, which, for effect, she had usually so near the surface on trivial occasions; ‘it cost me much to utter the few words I said—but I meant them.’

‘You did?’

‘Yes—Roland.’

‘And that was to be your only reply to my remonstrances?’

‘Made as these remonstrances were—yes. You are too exacting, Roland; and—and—’ she added with a bluntness that jarred on his ear, ‘it is so tiresome being long engaged, mamma says.’

‘I am sorry you quote her; but we can end it without an unseemly quarrel, surely.’

She shook her head, and all her hair shone like a golden aureole in the sunlight; and with all his just anger Roland looked at her as if his mind were leaving him.

‘In short, mamma also says——’

‘Mamma again!—says what?’

‘That we are evidently unsuited for each other.’

‘When did she discover this? Her letters to me have never breathed a suspicion of it.’

Annot did not reply, but continued to trace the pattern of the carpet with a foot like that of Cinderella.

‘When did she adopt this new view?’ asked Roland, almost sternly.

‘Recently, I suppose.’

‘We know our own minds, surely, so what can her capricious ideas matter to us? If you love me, Annot, they can make no difference.’

She only winced a little, and averted her face still more, as if she dared not meet his dark, earnest, and inquiring eyes.

‘Speak!’ he exclaimed.

‘Women change their minds often, it is said—why may not I, by advice?’

‘God keep me, Annot! Then the change is with yourself? Has our past, so far as you are concerned, been all duplicity and falsehood?’

‘As when last we spoke on this matter, your language is unpleasant, Roland,’ said Annot, as if seeking a cause for indignation or complaint.

‘Is this a time to mince matters? Surely you loved me?’

'You—you were so fond of me, that I could not help liking you in return, Roland,' said she, trembling and confusedly; 'we were thrown so much together, and—and you see——'

'That I have been befooled!' he interrupted her with bitterness and a gust of anger.

'Do not use such a rough expression,' said she, recovering herself; 'and please don't allow listeners to think we are rehearsing for amateur theatricals.'

For a moment concentrated fury flashed in Roland's dark eyes.

Then he regarded her wistfully again, and his gust of anger gave way to an emotion of infinite tenderness.

'Annot,' he exclaimed, caressing her hands, on which, truth to tell, his hot tears dropped. 'Oh, my darling, tell me that you do not mean all this—that you are not in cruel earnest and oblivious of all the past.'

'I never loved you——'

'Never loved me?' said he hoarsely.

'As you wished to be; it was to serve my own ends—my own purpose that I simulated—then—so hate me if you can!'

'Hate you,' he faltered, utterly crushed and bewildered by her words. His eyes were lurid now, for anger again mingled with love in them. 'Surely this is all some bad dream, from which I must awaken.'

'It is no dream,' said Annot, turning with an unsteady step as if she would pass him; but he barred her way.

'Do you mean that you loved some one else?' he asked.

'Do not ask me.'

'I have the right to do so!'

'No, Roland—you have not.'

'You surely did at one time love me, Annot, or your duplicity is monstrous, till—till this fellow Hoyle came upon the tapis? Was it not so?' he asked, almost piteously, for his moods varied quickly.

'Not quite; and I can't be poor, that is the plain English of it; I can't be a struggling man's wife, as I now know yours must be, as Earlishaugh——'

‘Belongs to another, and not to me, you mean?’

She was silent. Selfish though she was to the heart’s core, a blush crossed her cheek, a genuine blush of shame at her own blunt openness, and it was but too evident that she had schooled herself for all this—had screwed her courage to the sticking point.

‘Then I have only been a cat’s-paw, and you have loved, if it is in your nature to love, another all the time?’ said Roland hoarsely, as he drew back a pace with something of horror and disgust in his face now.

Almost pitifully did this cruel girl regard his face, which had become ashy gray, the wounded and despairing love he felt for her passing away from his eyes, while his figure, she could not but admit, was straight, handsome, and proud in bearing as ever, when compared with that of the *other*, who was in her mind now.

‘All is over, then, and there is no need to torture or humiliate me further,’ said he.

‘All is over—yes,’ she replied, with a real or affected sob; ‘and you will, I hope, bless the day when I left you free to win a richer bride than I am, Roland. Forgive me, and let us part friends.’

‘*Friends!*’ he exclaimed, in a low voice of reproach, bitterness, and rage curiously mingled.

Resolute to act out the scene to the last detail, she slowly drew her engagement ring off her finger—like the marriage ring, the woman’s badge of servitude according to the old English idea, but of eternity with every other people, past or present—laid it on a table near him, and gliding away without another word or glance, they separated, and Roland stood for a minute or so as if turned to stone.

Then, like one in a dream, he found himself walking slowly to and fro, forgetful even of his temporary lameness, on the terraced path beneath the towering walls of the old house.

The engagement ring—how tiny it looked!—was in his hand, and with something like a malediction he tossed it into a sheet of deep ornamental water that lay thereby, and there too, perhaps, he would have tossed all the other

beautiful and valuable presents he had given her ; but these the fair Annot did not as yet see her way to returning, and, sooth to say, he never thought of them.

So—so he was ‘thrown over’ for one who seemed most suddenly and unaccountably to have come upon the tapis, but chiefly because he was a kind of outcast—a disinherited man. Had she not told him so in the plainest language ?

The situation was a grotesquely humiliating one.

‘Oh, to be well and strong and fit to march again !’ he sighed.

In the expression of his dark eyes there was now much of the bitterness, keenness, and longing of a prisoner looking round the cell which he loathed, and from which he desired to be gone ; and more than once, in the solitude of his room, he closed his eyes and rested his head upon his arms, as if he wished to see and hear of his then surroundings no more.

Even the caresses of Maude—even Hester’s gentle voice and soft touch failed to rouse him for a time.

Some days elapsed before Roland—after thinking over again and again all the details of this most singular episode, the strangest *crisis* in his life—could realize that it was not all a dream, and that the relations between himself and Annot had undergone such a complete revolution that their paths in life must lie apart for ever, now.

But he was yet to learn the more bitter sequel to all this.

Roland naturally thought that as the doctors would scarcely yet permit him to quit Earlshaugh and travel, now Annot Drummond would take her departure to Merlwood or London ; but this she did not do, and seemed, with intense bad taste, to adopt the rôle of being his stepmother’s guest, while sedulously avoiding him, so he began to make his arrangements for decamping without delay.

In bidding adieu, out of mere courtesy to Mrs. Lindsay, Roland never referred to the existence of Annot.

Neither did she.

Was this good feeling, or was she endorsing the new situation adopted by Annot ?

He cared not to canvass the matter even in his own mind ; but ere he quitted Earlsbaugh he was yet, we have said, to learn the sequel to all this.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

TURNING THE TABLES.

HIS sword and helmet cases, his portmanteau and travelling rugs were duly strapped and placed in the stately old entrance-hall in readiness, as Roland was to be off by an early morning train, and never again would he break bread in the home of his forefathers. Every link that bound him to Earlsbaugh was broken now, and he felt only a feverish restlessness to be gone !

Ere that came to pass, Roland's eyes were fated to be somewhat roughly opened.

All that day the nervous quivering of his nether lip, his unusual paleness—notwithstanding his apparent calm—showed to his sister that he was deeply agitated, and was suffering from passionate, if suppressed, emotion.

In the deepening dusk of his last evening at Earlsbaugh he had, cigar in mouth, strolled forth alone to con over his own bitter thoughts, and nurse his wrath 'to keep it warm,' or inspired by a vague idea that he would sort his mind, which was then in a somewhat chaotic condition.

The evening—one of the last in October—was cool, and the wind wailed sadly in the task of stripping the trees of their withered leaves, though at no time of the year do they look so beautiful in the Scottish woods as in autumn, save, perhaps, when they first burst forth in their emerald greenery.

Round the tall old mansion, down the terraced walks, past the lakelet and through the grounds he wandered till he reached a kind of kiosk or summer-house, built of fantastic, knotty branches, roofed with thatch, and furnished with a

rustic seat—a damp and gloomy place just then. He threw himself upon the latter, and, resting his head upon his hand, proceeded to chew the cud of bitter fancy that had no sweet in it.

The period had vanished when existence seemed full of joyous dreams and a course of glowing scenes. The world was still as beautiful, no doubt, but it sparkled no more with light and colour for him ; idols had been shattered—ideals had collapsed, and it seemed very cold and empty now.

How long he had been there he scarcely knew—perhaps half an hour—when in the gloom under the half-stripped trees he heard voices, and saw two figures, or made out a male and female lingering near the summer-house, which he dreaded lest they should enter, when he discovered them to be Annot—Annot Drummond, muffled in a cosy white fur cloak of Maude's—and, Heaven above !—of all men on earth—Hawkey Sharpe !

For a moment or two Roland scarcely respired—his heart seemed to stand still. Intensely repugnant to him as it was to act as eavesdropper on the one hand, on the other he was proudly and profoundly reluctant to confront those two. There he remained still, hoping every moment they would move on and leave the pathway clear ; but they remained, and thus he heard more than he expected to hear from such a singular pair.

He had now a clue to the reason of Annot's reluctance to leave Earlshaugh, of her protracted visit as the guest of Mrs. Lindsay, and why latterly she had so mysteriously and sedulously cultivated the friendship of that lady.

The question, was it honourable to remain where he was, flashed across Roland's mind ! It was not incompatible with honour under the peculiar circumstances, so he heard more.

'That nonsense has surely come to an end, or are you still engaged to him ?' said Hawkey, who held her hands in his.

Annot was silent. Could she be temporizing yet ?

'Do you think he loves you as well as I do ?' urged Hawkey Sharpe, bending over her.

Still she was silent.

‘If so, why has he ever left you, even for an hour, to shoot and so forth, as he has often done? Speak, Annot. Surely I may call you Annot now.’

Still there was no reply. It seemed as if she was thinking deeply—thinking how best to reply, to play her cards or to temporize; but to what end, when all was over between her and Roland now?

‘You *were* engaged to him?’ said Hawkey again, with a little impatience of manner.

‘By a chain of circumstances over which I had no control,’ replied Annot in a faltering voice; ‘in his uncle’s house at Merlwood I was——’

‘Was—is it ended?’

‘Yes—for ever.’

‘Thank God for that! Did you think you loved him?’ asked Hawkey with a grin.

‘I believe that I did—or ought—I was so silly—so simple—so——’

‘There—there—I don’t want to worry you.’

‘But he loves me, I know that,’ said Annot in a low voice—true to her vanity still.

‘That I can well believe—who could see you and not love you?’ said Hawkey gallantly.

‘I could never marry a poor man,’ said Annot candidly.

‘Well—he is poor enough.’

‘And live on, eating my heart out in struggles such as some I have seen,’ continued Annot as if to herself.

‘Though here in Earlsbaugh just now, what is he, this fellow Lindsay, but a penniless pretender!’ exclaimed Sharpe, fired with animosity against Roland; who thus heard his name, his position, and the dearest secrets of his heart openly canvassed by this presumptuous and low-born fellow, and with Annot too—she who, till lately—but he could not put his thoughts in words—they seemed to choke him; and the whole situation was degrading—maddening!

‘Well,’ chuckled Sharpe, ‘he is out of the running now; and then you and I understand each other so well, my little golden-haired pet! so true it is that “when a woman of the

world and a man of the world meet, whatever the circumstances may be, or the surroundings, in a moment there is *rapport* between them, and all flows along easily." I thought when Lindsay fell into the Cleugh,' he added, with a coarse laugh, 'that he had betaken himself off to something that suited him better than fighting the Arabs. But it is long ere the deil dies—now he is well and whole again, and looks every inch like the Lindsay in the gallery, with the buff coat and a dish-cover on his head, that led a brigade of horse against the English at Dunbar. Well, the old place has done with that brood now; and after Deb, Earlshaugh must be mine—mine—shall be *ours*, Annot, for ever and aye!'

The breeze caught the lace of her sleeve, and, lifting it, showed the perfect and lovely contour of her soft white arm, on which Hawkey Sharpe fastened his coarse lips with a fervour there could be no doubting.

Kissed by him? Roland felt perfectly cured. The desecration, the dishonour, seemed complete! It is but too probable that Mr. Hawkey Sharpe felt the exultation of revenge and triumph in every kiss he took, even though he believed them to be unseen.

Though it was now apparent that she had thrown 'dust' in Roland's eyes by using the name of *another*, and had thus doubly lied to him, the blow did not fall so unexpectedly, yet the degradation of it was complete.

Hoyle was a myth—a blind to throw him off the right track—and he had been discarded, not for that personage, but for Hawkey Sharpe. This was truly to find

'In the lowest deep a lower deep'

of utter humiliation!

At last they passed onward, and he was again alone.

'I have undergone something like the torture of the rack,' said he with a bitter laugh, when he related to Maude and Hester what he had been compelled to overhear in the summer-house, and the latter thought of that eventful evening at Merlwood, when she so unwittingly had in like manner

been compelled to lurk in the shrubbery and hear a revelation that crushed her own heart to the dust.

Thus, though he knew it not, the tables were turned on Roland with a vengeance.

Like Hester, he could not agree with Romeo—

‘How sweet sound lovers’ tongues by night,’

when the said tongues addressed all their sweetness to others.

‘She is an ungrateful, selfish, horrible girl—I’ll never forgive her—never!’ said Maude, almost sobbing with anger.

‘How filthy lucre rules the world now!’ exclaimed Roland. ‘Do such girls as she ever repent the mischief they make—the hearts they have broken?’

‘As if hearts break nowadays? she would ask,’ said Hester with something of a smile.

‘Likely enough—it is her style, no doubt. But can you, Hester, or anyone, explain this cruel duplicity? To me it seems as if I were still in the middle of a horrid dream—a dream from which I must suddenly wake. That she, so winsome and artless apparently—so gentle and loving, should become so cold, so calculating, so mercilessly cruel now!’

‘I always mistrusted her,’ said Maude bitterly. ‘People call her eyes hazel—to me they always seemed a kind of vampire-green.’

Roland made no reply, but he was thinking with Whyte-Melville:

‘Who shall account for the fascination exercised by some women upon all who approach their sphere? The peculiar power of the rattlesnake, whose eye is said to lure the conscious victim unresistingly to its doom, and the attractive properties possessed by certain bodies, and by them used with equal recklessness and cruelty, are two arrangements of Nature which make me believe in mesmerism.’

‘Well—to-morrow I quit this place without beat of drum!’ exclaimed Roland.

‘For Edinburgh?’

‘Yes—to the Club.’

‘And then?’

‘For Egypt. There I shall live every day of my life as if there were no to-morrow.’

‘Nonsense!’ said Jack. ‘You’ll get over all this in time—a hit in the wing, that is all!’

Old Johnnie Buckle, who had forebodings in the matter of Roland’s departure, had tears in his eyes as he drove him in the drag to the railway station next morning, and as he wrung his hand at parting he said—showing that he knew precisely of the double trouble that had fallen on the young Laird:

‘Better twa skaiths than ae sorrow, Maister Roland,’ meaning that losses can be repaired, but grief may break the heart; ‘and mind ye, sir,’ he added, as the train started, ‘a’ the keys o’ the country dinna hang at ae man’s belt, and ye’ll wear your ain bannet yet!’

And on this *bouleversement* we need scarcely refer to the emotions of those who loved Roland best.

Jack Elliot, as he selected a cigar to smoke and think the situation over, deemed that Roland was well out of the whole affair; Maude, who was preparing for her departure from Earlshaugh, like Hester, was furiously indignant; but, for reasons of her own, the thoughts of the latter were of a somewhat mingled nature.

CHAPTER XL.

THE NEW POSITION.

THOUGH, by her own admission, not entirely ignorant of Annot's secret springs of action, that social buccaneer, Mr. Hawkey Sharpe, was exultantly defiant about his victory over, and revenge on, Roland Lindsay, for such he deemed the new position to be; and in his pale gray eyes, as he thought over it, there gleamed a savage light, such as it is said 'men carry when the thirst for blood possesses them.'

Roland, whom latterly Mrs. Lindsay had learned to like better than was her wont, was now gone, and would nevermore, she was assured, repass the door of Earlshaugh, and she actually felt as much regret for him as it was in her hard, cold nature to feel. He had been kind, her heart said to herself, and his soft, gentle, and polished manners contrasted most favourably with those of the few men she met now, and especially with those of her brother Hawkey.

'The self-contained bearing, the habitual repose of one who mixes in good society, invariably displays,' it is said, 'a striking dissimilarity to those who, immersed in the business of life, have not such opportunities. Women note these things keenly; especially do they regard the carriage of those whom they believe to move in circles above their own.'

With regard to Annot, as one connected by marriage with the Lindsay family, she was not sorry at the turn affairs had taken with regard to that enterprising young lady and her brother, Hawkey Sharpe. Socially, Annot was far beyond, or above, the bride he could ever have hoped to win, and she might be the means of raising him, steadying and curing him of his horsy, low, and gambling propensities, which had made him prove a great anxiety in many ways, with all his usefulness to herself, since, on her husband's death, she became mistress of Earlshaugh.

'Thanks, Deb, old girl,' said he, as he pocketed a cheque of hers for fifty pounds, and thought gloomily over the two

thousand that would in time become inexorably due and must be paid, or see him stigmatized as a *welsher*!

‘Little does the outer world know of all I have to put up with from you, Hawkey,’ said she, with a sigh, as she locked away her cheque-book, and he surveyed her with a cool and discriminating stare through his eyeglass—the use of which he affected in imitation of others—screwed into his right eye.

‘It is too bad of you to talk to me in that way, Deb,’ said he, ‘when I have cut out and relieved you of the presence of that impudent beggar, Lindsay. Miss Drummond, as an only daughter, must, I suppose, be the heiress to something or other.’

‘I thought she would never look with favour on you—but treat you as Maude did,’ said Mrs. Lindsay, slowly fanning herself with a large black lace fan.

Hawkey laughed maliciously; then he suddenly set his teeth together and exclaimed:

‘Maude! I’ll pay *her* out yet—she and I have not squared our accounts—I shall be even with her before long. As for little Annot not looking at me—by Jove, she has looked and said all I could have wished. She is not so “stand-off” and unapproachable as you may think all her set to be, when a fellow knows the way to go about it—as I rather flatter myself I do,’ he added, caressing his straw-coloured and tenderly-fostered moustache, and pulling up his shirt-collar.

‘But where have you and she met, since you ceased to occupy your rooms here?’

‘Oh—with the hounds—in the park—wherever I wished, in fact. You and she, Deb, will get on excellently together, if we all play our cards well now—I marry one of the family, don’t you see? Then, I haven’t a doubt that Annot has money.’

‘Did she give you reason to suppose she has?’

‘N—no—not exactly—well?’

‘She will succeed to whatever her mother may have—little, probably.’

‘Will have, or *may* have—shady that! Well, unlike

most heiresses, she's a deuced pretty little girl, Deb, and suits my book exactly. So, with your assistance, we shall be all right.'

'My assistance?'

'Of course.'

'Bright, soft, and girlish as she seems, I suspect there is not a more artful damsel in London,' said Mrs. Lindsay shrewdly.

'Oh bosh, Deb! Well, if it be so, two can do the artful game; but does not your own knowledge of human nature lead you to see,' he added sententiously, 'that art and prudence too give place when love comes on the scene?'

'Love—yes—are you quoting a play? Will this fancy of hers last—if fancy it is?'

'Why not?'

'You are not a gentleman in her sense of the word.'

'You are deuced unpleasant, Deb!' said he, contemplating his spiky nails.

'And her sudden quarrel with Roland Lindsay—if quarrel it was—I do not understand.'

'I do. He is a poor beggar—dropped out of the hunt—and I—I am——'

'What?'

'Supposed to be your heir,' said he, putting the suggestion gently; 'long, long may it be only supposition, Deb; but a few thousands yearly—say five—would make us all right, and then we have the run of the house here—what more do we want? So all will be right, even with the county, I say again, if we only play our cards well.'

She had played *her* cards well in the past time, she thought, as Hawkey, whom conversation always made thirsty, left her in quest of a brandy and soda.

Seated in her luxurious boudoir, her memory went back to the days of her early life, as an under-paid and hard-worked governess; and then to those when she became the humble and useful companion to Roland's mother, and, after her death, a kind of guardian to Maude on the latter leaving school. Then came the accident that befel the old

Laird in the hunting-field at Macbeth's Stank—a wet ditch with a 'yarner' on each side, the terror of the Fife Hunt, but said to have been leapt by the usurper's horse when he returned from Dunnimarle after slaying the family of Macduff; and how necessary she made herself to the suffering invalid; how (artfully) she seemed to anticipate his thoughts, to understand all his wants, his favourite dishes and so forth; and how grateful he became to her, and how she clung to him like a barnacle or octopus, without seeming to do so. How necessary he soon found it to have a clever, sensible, and loving woman—one rather handsome, too—to look after him, when his two sons—especially that spendthrift in the Scots Guards—seemed to regard him as only a factor or banker to draw upon without mercy; and so he married her one morning when the weather was very cold; when the early snow was on the Ochil summits and powdering the Lomonds of Fife, and *then* she knew that she was the wife of a landed gentleman of old and high descent—Colin Lindsay, Laird of Earls-haugh!

She was, of course, to be a second mother to Maude (who declined to view her as such) and to his two sons if they became careful; and meantime, ere dying, he handed over to her, by will, as stated, beyond all hope of disputing it at law, every wood, acre, and tree he possessed, causing much uplifting of hands and shaking of heads in ominous wonder throughout the county, and more especially in the East Neuk thereof.

But she bore herself well, dressed richly as became her age and new station—kept a handsome carriage with her late husband's arms—the fesse chequy argent and azure for Lindsay—thereon in a lozenge; but was rarely seen in the company of Maude, who did not, would not, and never could, approve of the position so ungenerously assigned to herself and her only surviving brother Roland, who had been much less to blame than his senior of the Household Brigade.

And Mrs. Lindsay was just then beginning to discover that she was likely to have—in the person of her brother, as

an intrusive, if sometimes necessary factotum—something of a skeleton in her cupboard at Earlshaugh.

Since the Laird's death, Hawkey Sharpe had loved well to pose as a man of influence and importance—more than all, as the probable and future proprietor of Earlshaugh; and liked to imagine how all would look up to him then and seek his favourable notice.

His sister's secret and deadly ailment was to him a constant source of anxiety that was *not* borne of affection; he dreaded, also, her 'kirk proclivities,' and the influence possessed over her 'by that old caterpillar, the minister.' 'I'll have to look sharp now after my own interests—old Deb is getting rather long in the tooth for me,' he would think at times.

Treated as she had been by Maude and others of the family since her marriage, she could not have a very kindly feeling to the Lindsay line. 'Blood is warmer than water,' says our Scottish proverb; and Hawkey was the only kinsman she had in the world that she knew of; but, a scapegrace, a spendthrift, and toady to herself, as she knew him to be, some of her sympathies were just then rather more with the disinherited Roland Lindsay than Mr. Hawkey Sharpe would have relished, had he in the least suspected such a thing.

And Annot's thoughts on reviewing her new position were rather of a mingled sort, and something of this kind:

'I am going to marry this man Hawkey Sharpe. Odious man! I cannot pretend, even to myself, to be much in love with him—if at all; yet I am going to marry him—and why? Because I love the splendid patrimony that, in time, will become his; this beautiful estate, this grand old house, the parure of family diamonds, and the settlements that must be made upon me. I always meant to marry the first wealthy man who asked me, and now I am only true to my creed—the creed mamma taught me. Can anyone blame me for that? Of course I would rather a thousand times have had poor Roland with Earlshaugh, because he is a man that any woman might love and be proud of; but failing him, I must put up with the person and name of—Hawkey

Sharpe. Can anyone think it very wicked that I—a penniless little creature—should prefer such a well-feathered nest as this to that gloomy and small poky house in South Belgravia, with its one drab of a servant, cold meat, shabby clothes, and all its sordid concomitants? No; give me the ease, the prosperity, the luxury, and the flesh-pots of Earls-haugh, with its manor and lands, wood, hill, and field.'

But it was a considerable relief to her mind—shamelessly selfish though she was—when within twenty-four hours after Roland's departure her two cousins and Jack Elliot (whose faces she cared never to see again) also left for the capital, and she remained behind the guest of—Mrs. Lindsay.

'As for Roland,' Annot thought, '*he* will get over our little affair easily. He loved me, no doubt, but love we know to be only a parenthesis in the lives of most men.'

CHAPTER XLI.

THE CAPTIVE.

WE must now change the scene to the Soudan—*Beled-es-Soudan*, or 'The Land of the Blacks,' so called by ancient geographers—whither a single flight of imagination will take us without undergoing a fortnight's voyage by sea to Alexandria, *viâ* the Bay of Biscay, with its long, heavy swells, and the Mediterranean, which is not always like a mill pond; and then a long and toilsome route across the Lower and Upper Provinces to where the Sheikh Moussa Abu Hagil was journeying towards his remote home, with the luckless Malcolm Skene in his train—a place on the borders of the Nubian Desert, not far from the Nile, in the neighbourhood of the third cataract, and situated about midway between Assouan, the name of which had not, as yet, become a 'household word' with us, and Khartoum, where then the well-nigh despairing Gordon was still waging his desperate defence against the Mahdi.

By this time how weary had the eye—yea, the very soul

—of the luckless captive become of the desert scenery, in a land visited only by a few bold travellers, who in times past had accompanied the caravans from one valley to another. There the desert sand is deep and loose, with sharp flinty stones, in some places sprinkled with glistening rock salt, and showing here and there a grove of dwindled acacias or tufts of colocynth and senna, to relieve the awful dreariness of its aspect.

The water in the pools, even in the rainy season, is there black and putrid ; hence the Arabs of the district remove with their flocks to better regions, where the higher mountains run from Assouan to Haimur.

Steering, as it were, unerringly by landmarks known to themselves alone, the Sheikh Moussa Abu Hazil and his followers made progress towards his home—or zereba—in the quarter we have mentioned.

Malcolm Skene had now been conveyed so far inland by his captors that escape seemed hopeless ; yet, buoyed up by the secret chance that such *might* come, he struggled on with the party day by day, ignorant of the fate that awaited him, though he could never forget that of Palmer and his companions on the shore of the Red Sea.

More than once Hassan Abdullah mockingly held before him the pocket compass, which, of course, he had contrived to abstract on some occasion. Its loss did not matter much now, but it was eventually appropriated by the Sheikh Moussa, whether it were *efrit* or not ; and Hassan, who seemed inclined to resent this, received in reward a blow from their leader's lance.

The latter, who, in some respects, was not unlike the published portraits of his kinsman Zebehr, was at the head of a body of Bedouins, not Soudanese. Each tribe of these wild horsemen is considered to have an exclusive property in a district proportioned to the strength and importance of the tribes, but affording room for migration, which is indispensable among a people whose subsistence is derived from cattle, and the spontaneous produce of the sterile regions they inhabit. Thus they often join neighbouring tribes, Emirs and Sheikhs, in the hope of an advantageous change.

In this manner were this Bedouin troop under the banner of Sheikh Moussa.

All were thin and hardy men, with the muscles of their limbs more strongly developed than the rest of the body; their strength and activity were great, and their power of abstinence such that, like their own camels, they could travel four or five days without tasting water. Their deep black eyes glared with an intensity never seen in Northern regions, and gave full credence to the marvellous stories Skene had heard of their extraordinary powers of discriminating vision and the acuteness of their other senses.

Unlike the nearly nude warriors of the Mahdi, these Bedouins under their floating burnous wore shirts of coarse cotton with wide and loose sleeves—a garment rarely changed or washed. Over this some had a Turkish gown of mingled cotton and silk, but most of them wore a mantle, called an *abba*, like a square, loose sack, with slits for the arms, woven of woollen thread and camel's hair, girt by a girdle, and showing broad stripes of many colours; but trousers of all kinds seemed superfluities unknown. Picturesque-looking fellows they were, and reminded Skene of the descriptive lines in Grant's 'Arabia':

'Freedom's fierce unconquered child,
The Bedouin robber, nursling of the wild,
With whirlwind speed he guides his vagrant band,
Fire-eyed and tawny as their subject sand :
On foam-flecked steeds, impetuous all advance,
Whirl the bright sabre, couch the quivering lance,
Or grasping, ruthless, in the savage chase,
The belt-slung carbine and spike-headed mace,
Ardent for plunder, emulate the wind,
Scorn the low level, spurn the world behind ;
While the dense dust-cloud rears its giant form,
And, rolled in spires, revealed the threatening storm.'

Malcolm Skene found that he was rather a favourite with these wild fellows from the facility with which he could converse with them in Arabic; and though he knew not the *thousand* names that language is said to possess for a sword, he could repeat to them the *Fatihah*, or short opening

chapter of the Koran, called that of prayer and thanksgiving; and they accorded him great praise accordingly. And, sooth to say, any Christian may repeat it without evil, as it simply runs thus in English:

‘Praise be to God, the Lord of all creatures; the Most Merciful; the King of the Day of Judgment! Thee do we worship, and of Thee do we beg assistance. Direct us in the right way of those to whom Thou hast been gracious; not of those against whom Thou art incensed, nor of those who go astray.’

But he knew the hostility of the slimy and savage Greek, Pietro Girolamo, and of the cowardly and false Egyptian, Hassan Abdullah, was undying towards him, and that they only waited for the opportunity to take his life, if possible unknown to the Sheikh, and then achieve their own escape from the latter.

On every occasion that suited they reviled him, spat on him, and hurled pebbles at him; but if their hands wandered instinctively to pistol or poniard he had but to utter the magic words to the Sheikh Moussa, ‘*Ana dakheilak*!’ (I am your protected), and the lowering of the lance-head in threat sufficed to send them cowed to the rear.

Moussa now made Skene acquainted with a fact which, though explanatory as to the reason why his life was spared, did not prove very soothing or hopeful; that he meant to retain him at his zereba as a hostage for his kinsman Zebehr Pasha, ‘then under detention at Cairo by those sons of dogs the English—*Allah bou rou Gehenna*!’

Hence, as yet, Malcolm knew that his life was deemed of some value to his captors, who did not then foresee the future deportation of the king of the slave dealers, by Lord Wolseley’s orders, to Gibraltar.

To escape, on foot or horseback, or in any way elude the Bedouin guard, seemed to him a greater difficulty than to achieve the same thing from Soudanese, so well were the former mounted, so amply armed, so fleet and active in movement, and every way so acute, eagle-eyed, serpent-like in wile and wisdom and relentless as a tiger in fury and bloodshed.

Even if he could successfully elude them, what lay before him—what behind, the way he must pursue, if ever again he was to reach the world he had been reft from ! The desert—the awful, trackless desert he had traversed in their obnoxious company, but could never hope to traverse it alone—the desert, where water is more precious to the traveller than would be the famous Emerald Mountain of Nubia itself ! It barred him out from civilization as completely as if it had been the waves of a shoreless sea.

The Sheikh often rode by his side, and asked him many perplexing questions about Europe and the land of the French, of which the inquirer had not the most vague idea, or of how the red soldiers of the mysterious Queen reached Egypt, or where they came from ; of Stamboul, which he thought was in Arabia ; of India, which he thought was in Russia—of who were the English, and who the British that always aided them ; adding, as he stroked his great beard, that ‘it mattered little, as they must all perish—*Feh zebil Allah !* (for the cause of God).

He hated them with a bitterness beyond all language, as interferers with the traffic in *djellabs*, as the slave-dealers term their human wares ; and for the losses he had sustained at their hands, like Osman Digna, when some of his dhows were captured on their voyage to Jeddah by British cruisers ; and ultimately even Suakim became so closely watched by the latter that his caravan leaders had to deposit their captives by twos and threes at lonely places on the shore of the Red Sea, to transmit them across it when occasion served. Then when he came to speak of the Anglo-Egyptian slave convention, which was the ruin of the traders in human flesh, he gnashed his teeth, his black eye-balls shot fire, and he looked as if with difficulty he restrained himself from pinning Skene to the sand with his lance.

It was the ruin of the Soudan, he declared, as the Christians only wished to liberate all slaves that they might become their property. He had struggled against this, he said, with voice and sword till the summer of 1881, when the Mahdi, Mahommed Achmet Shemseddin, issuing from his cave on the White Nile, proclaimed himself the New

Prophet. Then he cast his lot with the latter, and in two years after served with him at the capture of El Obeid, and the slaughter of the armies of Hicks and Baker, when they won together a holy influence and a military reputation, which were greatly enhanced by subsequent conflicts and events.

Such was the stern, unpleasant, and uncompromising individual in whose hands Malcolm Skene found himself retained as a hostage, in a trifling way it seemed, for Zebehr-Rahama-Gymme-Abel, better known as Zebehr Pasha, whilom the friend of General Gordon, but in reality the most slippery, savage, and bitter enemy of Britain in the present time.

And full of the heavy thoughts his entire circumstances forced upon him, somewhere about the first of November he found himself, with his escort, approaching a zereba which had been one of the headquarters of Zebehr, but latterly assigned to his kinsman, Sheikh Moussa, and the very aspect of it made even the stout heart of Malcolm Skene sink within him, as he had been prepared for a tented camp, or wigwam-like village, but not for the place in which he found himself, and which was one of those described by Dr. Schweinfurth, the great German traveller, when he visited Zebehr Pasha a short time before.

CHAPTER XLII.

THE ZEREBA OF SHEIKH MOUSSA.

AT some little distance from the Nile, but what distance, whether one or ten *shoni*, Skene could not then discover, stood the zereba to which the Sheikh had lately fallen possessor after Zebehr (who had been lord of thirty exactly similar), in a strip of green, where a few palms, lupins, and beans grew in an amphitheatre of small mountains—rocky, jagged, volcanic in outline and aspect. A few camels and

donkeys grazed spectral-like in the vicinity amid a silence that was intense, and in a district where there were no flights of birds as in Egypt, and no wide reaches of valley covered with green and golden plenty.

Through a gorge in the steep rocky mountains, whose sides were blackened by the sun of unknown ages, and broken into fragments by some great convulsion of nature, the zereba was entered.

It was a group of well-sized huts, enclosed by tall hedges, in the centre of which stood the private residence of Sheikh Moussa, having various apartments, wherein usually armed sentinels, black or swarthy, half-nude, with glowing eyes and bright weapons—swords and spears or Remington rifles—kept guard day and night.

Through these, as one who was to be treated, as yet, with hospitality at least, Malcolm Skene was conducted by a couple of handsomely attired slaves (for here the power of the Anglo-Egyptian Convention was *nil*), who gave him coffee, sherbet, and a tchibouk, all most welcome after the last day's toilsome march; and, throwing himself upon a carpet and some soft skins, he strove to collect his thoughts, to calculate the distance and the perils that lay between him and freedom, and to think what was to be done now!

Meanwhile the Bedouins were grooming their horses outside, laughing, chatting, smoking, and drinking long draughts of *bouza* from stone jars—a kind of Nubian beer made from dhurra.

'People always meet again,' said Pietro Girolamo with a savage grin, showing all his sharp, white teeth beneath a long and coal-black moustache. 'The world is round, you know, Signor, though the Sheikh thinks it flat—flat as my roulette-table at Cairo. Ah, Christi! we have not forgotten that; sooner or later people always meet again, and so shall we.'

And with these words, which contained a menace, the Greek withdrew to some other part of the zereba; where he seemed to be somewhat at home, as he was—Skene afterwards discovered—father of the third and favourite wife of Sheikh Moussa.

The chambers, or halls—for such they were—seemed silent—save a strange growling and the rasping of iron fetters—and empty now, though there sometimes, in the palmy days of the slave trade, as many as two thousand dealers in *djellabs* gathered with their chained and wretched victims every year.

‘The regal aspect of these halls of State,’ says Dr. Schweinfurth, ‘was increased by the introduction of some lions, secured, as may be supposed, by sufficiently strong and massive chains.’

It was the rattle of the latter and the growling of the lions that Malcolm Skene heard with more bewilderment than curiosity on the subject.

Here in his favourite abode, Zebehr, says the doctor, was long ‘a picturesque figure, tall, spare, excitable, with lions guarding his outer chamber, and his court filled with armed slaves—smart, dapper-looking fellows, supple as antelopes, fierce, unsparing, and the terror of Central Africa; while around him gathered in thousands infernal raiders, whose razzias have depopulated vast territories. Superstitious, too, was Zebehr, for in his campaign against Darfour, he melted down two hundred and fifty thousand dollars into bullets—for no charm can stay a silver bullet—and cruel as death itself! A word from him here raised the Soudan in revolt against Gordon in 1878; and it was only after some fierce fighting that Gessi Pasha succeeded in breaking the back of the revolt. After hunting the slave raiders like wild beasts, he captured and shot eleven of their chiefs, including Suleiman, the son of Zebehr. Hence the blood-feud between Gordon and Zebehr which led the latter to refuse to accompany the former to Khartoum. The slave-dealers were slain in hundreds by natives whom they had plundered. Zebehr’s letters were found, proving that he had ordered the revolt; but no action was taken against him, and he continued to live in luxurious detention at Cairo.’

When Baker Pasha was organizing his forces to relieve Tokar, he asked that Zebehr might go with him at the head of a Nubian division. Zebehr and Sheikh Moussa Abu

Hagil raised the blacks, but the Anti-Slavery Society protested against the employment of the former as improper and in the highest degree perilous. Sir Evelyn Baring pleaded for Zebehr and Moussa, but Lord Granville was inexorable. He wrote : ' The employment of Zebehr Pasha appears to her Majesty's Government inexpedient both politically and as regards the slave trade.'

Thus far some of the history of yesterday, which, nevertheless, may be new to the reader.

On his first entering the zereba Skene had returned the formal welcome or greeting of Sheikh Moussa—touching his forehead, lips, and breast—a symbolic action signifying that in thought, word, and heart he was his.

Pietro Girolamo, the Greek Islesman from Cerigo, was—we have said—the father-in-law (at least one of them) to Moussa Abu Hagil.

Malcolm Skene came to the knowledge of that connection through a stray copy of the now pretty well-known Arabic newspaper, the *Mubashir*, which he found in the zereba; and the columns of which contained a memoir of that enterprising Sheikh, and in retailing some startling incidents in his life gave a little light on certain habits of the dwellers in the desert.

Girolamo had been the skipper of one of his slave dhows, or armed brigs, in the Red Sea, during the palmy times, when as many as five thousand head of slaves were exposed annually in the market place of Shendy—a traffic in which Moussa, like his kinsmen, Zebehr Psaha, had grown enormously rich; and, for a suitable sum, he bought a daughter of Girolamo, a beautiful Greek girl. She became his third wife, and died in giving birth to a daughter, the inheritor of her pale and picturesque beauty, though shaded somewhat by the Arab mixture in her blood; but in her fourteenth year—a ripe age in those regions of the sun—her charms were said to surpass all that had seen before and had become the exaggerated theme of story-tellers and song-makers, even in the market places and the cafés of Damanhour and Cairo.

The girl was named Isha (or Elizabeth) after her mother,

and educated in such accomplishments as were deemed necessary to the wife of a powerful and wealthy Emir, for such Moussa destined her to be, if not perhaps of his friend and leader the Mahdi Achmet when the time came; but the old brigand—for the slave dealer was little better in spirit or habit when not absent fighting, plundering, and raiding in search of *djellabs*—seemed never happy save when in the society of this daughter, his only one, his other children being sons, four of whom had fallen in battle against Hicks on the field of Kashgate.

Notwithstanding all the care with which the women of the East are secluded in the *Kah'ah*, or harem, Isha had a lover, a young Bedouin warrior named Khasim Jelalodeen, who, though he had no more hope of winning her to share his humble black tent than of obtaining the moon, loved her with all the wild passion of which his lawless Arab nature was capable.

To have whispered of this passion to the Sheikh Moussa, whom we have described as resembling a mummy of the Pharaohs' time resuscitated, would have ensured the destruction of Khasim, who had only his sword, his rifle, and a horse with all its trappings.

Yet Isha was not ignorant of the love the Bedouin bore her, as he had a sister named Emineh, who was a kind of companion and attendant of the former, and went between the lovers as carefully and subtly as any old *Khatbeh*, or betrother in the Abdin quarter in Cairo in the present hour—thus freely bouquets, symbolically arranged—the simple and beautiful love-letters of Oriental life, were exchanged between them through the kind agency of Emineh.

Sheikh Moussa loved his brilliant little daughter, but he loved money more; and when a caravan, under an old business friend of his named Ebn al Ajuz (or 'the son of the old woman,' obtained by his mother's prayers in the mosque of Hassan at Cairo) passed *en route* from Darfour for the capital and Assiout, laden with ivory, gum, and slaves—chiefly women and girls, the dealer, having heard of the beauty of Isha, applied to the Skeikh, and made him an

offer which, as both were in the trade, he found himself—filial regard and affection apart—bound to consider.

Moussa, to do him justice, had no great inclination to sell his daughter, the light of his household, though he had remorselessly sold the daughters of others by the thousand; yet he was curious to know her value, as prices had gone down even before the arrival of Gordon at Khartoum, especially when Ebn al Ajuz spoke of the sum he was prepared to give, and that the purse-holder was no other than that generally supposed misogynist, the Khedive himself.

He introduced the merchant to her apartments in order to show her merits and discover the price, of which he could judge, however, by his own business experience.

Her rooms, covered with soft carpets, having luxurious divans, decorated ceilings, and tiled floors, with beautiful brackets supporting finely wrought vessels, and having large windows of lattice work, others of stained glass, representing floral objects, bouquets, and peacocks, Arabic inscriptions and maxims written in letters of gold and green, received no attention from the turbaned and bearded slave-dealer, whose attention was at once arrested by Isha, who had been clad, she knew not why, in her richest apparel, with her eyebrows needlessly blackened and her nails reddened by henna.

Ebn al Ajuz, whom long custom had rendered a dispassionate judge of beauty in all its stages, from the fairest Circassian with golden hair to the dark and full-lipped woman of Nubia, was struck with astonishment by the many attractions of the half-Greek girl.

‘Allah Kerim!’ he exclaimed. ‘With her face, form, and entire appearance I have not the slightest fault to find,’ he frankly acknowledged; ‘every motion, every attitude, every feature display the most beautiful grace, symmetry, and proportion. Allah! she should be named Ayesha, after the perfect wife of the prophet!’

On hearing this a blush burned in the face of the girl, and she pulled down her yashmac or veil.

The merchant pressed Moussa to name her price, as they sat over their pipes and coffee; and so greatly did avarice exceed affection, that Moussa, who—said the writer in the

Mubashir—it was thought would not have exchanged his daughter for the Emerald Mountain itself, was so dazzled by the offer made that he agreed to sell her, and preparations even were at once made for her departure, despite her tears, her entreaties, and her despair.

Khasim Jelalodeen was filled with grief and consternation. Oh for Jinn or Efrits, the spirits born of fire, to aid him !

He had his fleet horse corned, refreshed by a bitter draught of *bouza* (not water), saddled, and in constant readiness for any emergency ; and in the night, well armed, with his heart on fire and his brain in a whirl, he made his way secretly and softly to that part of the zereba in which the *Kah'ah*, or women's apartments, were situated—an act involving his death if caught, and caught he was by the guards of Moussa, who were about to slay him on the spot ; but immemorial usage has established a custom in the Desert that if a person who is in actual danger from another can in anticipation claim his protection, or touch him barehanded, his life is saved.

He passed himself as a *Karami*, or mere robber, and as such was made a close prisoner, destined to await the pleasure of Moussa, who had just then a good deal to occupy his mind.

Meanwhile Emineh, having ascertained exactly where her rash, bold brother was in durance, contrived to introduce herself there next night with a ball of thread, and tying an end thereof to his right wrist she withdrew, winding it carefully off as she went, till she penetrated to the sleeping apartment of Moussa, and applying the other end to his bosom woke him, saying in Arab fashion :

'Look on me, by the love thou bearest to God and thy own self, for *this* is under thy protection !'

Then the startled and angry Sheikh arose, took his sword, and followed the clue till it guided him to where Khasim, the supposed *Karami*, was confined, and he was compelled to declare himself 'the protector of the latter. His bonds were taken off ; the thongs with which his hair, in token of degradation, had been tied were cut with a knife ; he was entertained as a newly-arrived guest, and was then set at liberty.

Emineh gave him his horse and arms, and he took his departure from the vicinity of the zereba, but only to watch in the distance.

In due time the caravan of Ebn al Ajuz came forth from the gates and boundaries of thorny hedge, and the lynx-eyed Arab, Khasim, with his heart beating high, watched it from the concealment of a mimosa thicket, and knew the curtained camel litter which contained the object of his adoration, as the flinty-hearted Moussa was seen to ride beside it for a time.

The love of Khasim was not that of the educated, the cultivated, as it is understood in other parts of the world—the cultivated in music, art, and literature—but of its kind it was a pure, ardent, and passionate one, and in its fiery nature unknown to ‘the cold in clime and cold in blood.’

He would bear her away, he thought; she would yet be his bride, won by his spear and horse, like the bride of many an Arab song and story; they would have a home among the fairy-like gardens of Kordofan and beyond the mountains of Haraza. Was he not invulnerable? Had he not an amulet bound to his sword-arm by the Mahdi himself—an amulet before which even the bullets and bayonets of the British had failed?

So the caravan with Isha wound on its way towards the Desert!

How dark the red round sun had suddenly become. Khasim looked up to see if it still shone, and it was setting fast, amid clouds of crimson and gold, throwing long, long purple shadows far across the plain, and there in its sheen the Nile was running swiftly as ever—swift as life runs in the Desert and elsewhere!

Out of the latter arose a cloud of dust, with many a glittering point of steel! The caravan was suddenly attacked, its column broken and pierced by a band of wild Kabbabish Arab horsemen, fifty in number at least, and led by that slippery personage, the Mudir of Dongola, on whom the British Government so grotesquely bestowed the Cross of St. Michael and St. George—a gift ridiculed even by the *Karakush*, or Egyptian *Punch*.

A conflict ensued ; revolvers and Remington rifles were freely used ; saddles were emptied, and sabres flashed in the moonlight. General plunder of everything was the real object of the Mudir and his Kabbabishes ; to rescue Isha was the sole object of Khasim, who charged in among them.

Amid the wild hurly-burly of the conflict, the shrieks of the women, their incessant cries of *walwalah !* the grunting of the camels, the yells of the Arabs, and amid the dense clouds of dust and sand raised by hoofs and feet, Khasim Jelalodeen speedily found the litter in which the daughter of Moussa was placed, and was in the act of drawing forth her slight figure across his saddlebow — horror-stricken though the girl was, albeit she had seen death in more than one form before—when the merchant, Ebn al Ajuz, exasperated to lose her after all the treasure he had spent, shot her dead with his long brass pistol ; but ere he could draw another Khasim clove him to the chin, through every fold of the turban, by one stroke of his long and trenchant Arab sword, and, with a wild cry of grief and despair, spurred his horse into the desert and was seen no more, though rumour said he joined the banner of Osman Digna before Suakim.

So this was a brief Arab romance of the nineteenth century as acted out in a part of the world which changes not, though all the world seems to change elsewhere.

Most wearily passed the time of Malcolm Skene's captivity in the zereba of Moussa Abu Hagil. Weeks became months, and the closing days of the year found him still there, and necessitated to be ever watchful, for both Pietro Girolamo and Hassan Abdullah had, he knew, sworn to kill him if an opportunity were given them ; and nothing had as yet stayed their hands but the influence of the Sheikh, who protected him for purposes of his own.

Thus his life was in hourly peril ; the bondage he endured was maddening, and he could not perceive any end to it or escape from it save death. As for escape, a successful

one seemed so hopeless, so difficult to achieve, that it gradually became useless to brood over it—without arms, a horse, money, or a guide.

He knew that he must now be deemed as one of the dead by his regiment, by the authorities, and, more than all, by his widowed mother and dearest friends, and have been mourned by them as such.

Rumour had said ere he left Cairo that a relieving column was to start for Khartoum. How that might affect his fate he knew not ; it might be too late to help him in any way, and to be *too late* was the order of our affairs in Egypt now.

So time passed on, and he was in darkness as to all that passed in the outer world.

At last there came tidings which made the Sheikh Moussa eye him darkly, dubiously, and with undisguised hostility—tidings which Malcolm Skene heard with no small concern and alarm.

These were the close arrest of Zebehr Pacha as a traitor to the Khedive Tewfik, and his sudden deportation from Cairo beyond the sea to Gibraltar, by order of Lord Wolseley.

This event, thought Skene, must seal his own fate as an enforced and most unwilling hostage now !

The golden grain, the full-eared wheat and bearded barley had been gathered in every field and on every upland slope around his home ; the year had deepened into the last days of autumn ; the woods and orchards of ancient Dunnimarle were odorous of autumnal fruit and dying leaves ; the skies were gray by day and red and gloomy at eve.

White winter had come, and every burn and linn been frozen in its rocky bed ; the thundering blasts that swept the bosom of the Forth had rumbled down the wide chimneys of Dunnimarle and swept leaves and even spray against the window panes ; while the aged trees in the glen below had shrieked and moaned ominously in the icy winds till winter passed away, and people began hopefully to speak of the coming spring, but still a lone mother

mourned for her lost son—her handsome soldier son, ever so good, so tender, and so true to her, now gone—could she doubt it?—to the Land of the Leal!

CHAPTER XLIII.

A MARRIAGE.

WHILE Malcolm Skene was counting the days wearily and anxiously, and, in common parlance, ‘eating his heart out,’ in that distant zereba, near the Third Cataract of the Nile, time and events did not stand still with some of his friends elsewhere; among these certainly were Roland Lindsay and Hester Maule, and the latter did indeed mourn for the hard and unknown fate of one whose love she never sought but surely won.

Roland did not start immediately for Egypt after turning his back in mortification and disgust on Earlshaugh, but for a brief time took up his quarters at the United Service Club in Edinburgh with Jack Elliot. The speedy marriage of the latter and Maude, who had gone to Merlwood with Hester, was then on the tapis, and fully occupied the attention of all concerned.

It was impossible for anything like love to exist long, after the rude shock—the terrible awakening—Roland had received; yet ever and anon he found himself rehearsing with intense bitterness of spirit the memory of scenes and passages between himself and Annot—drivelling scenes he deemed them now! How had he said to her more than once:

‘My darling—my darling! Be true to me; the day when I cease to believe in you will kill me—you are such a child—you know so little of the world, sweet one!’

‘So little of the world—a child!’ thought he. ‘What an ass I was! I am not killed by it, and she has been false as the devil. How came I to say things that seemed so prophetic?’

Thus, as he thought over all the love and blind adoration he had lavished on her, he felt only rage and sickness at his own folly. He saw it all now, when it was too late—too late!

What human heart has not learned the bitterness of these two bitter words, in many ways, through life?

Yet, tantalizingly, she would come before him in dreams, and thus recall him to the words of an old sonnet—

‘Half pleading and half petulant she stands;
Her golden hair falls rippling on my hands;
Her words are whispered in their old sweet tone,
But neither word nor smile can move me now—
There is an unseen shadow on her brow.
I cannot love, because all trust is gone!’

It was a very awkward subject for Hester to approach, yet, seeing him so moody, so silent and trist, when first again he came to Merlwood, she said to him timidly and softly:

‘Forget the past Roland. She made no real impression on your heart, but affected your imagination only.’

And now he began to think that such was indeed the case; while to Maude it seemed strange indeed that Annot Drummond should be at Earlshaugh, posing as the future mistress thereof, while she and her disinherited brother were a species of outcasts therefrom.

Earlshaugh—the old house of so many family traditions and memories—was very dear to Maude in spite of all the dark and mortifying hours she had lately spent under its roof. What races and frolics and fun had gone on there in the past time, when she, her brothers, and Hester Maule were all happy children, in the long corridors and ghostly old attics, under the steep roofs and pointed turrets where the antique vanes creaked in the wind; and how greater seemed their fun when the rain storms of winter or spring came rattling down on the old stone slates, and they all nestled together under the slope, with a sense of protection and power unknown in future years—so the girl’s heart clung

to the old roof-tree with a love that nothing in the future could destroy.

There was no use thinking of all these and a thousand other things, as her home was now to be wherever that of Jack Elliot was.

Some of her regrets at times were shared by Roland, for they were a race peculiar to—but not alone in—Scotland, these Lindsays of Earlshaugh.

They had ever been high in pride and strong in self-will, lording it over their neighbours in the Howe and East Neuk of Fife, in the days when many a barbed horse was in stall, and many an armed man, ‘boden in effeir of weir,’ sat at the Laird’s table ; proud of their ancient pedigree and many heroic deeds, all unstained by timidity in war, and foreign gold in time of peace—a stain few Scottish noble families are without ; proud of the broad lands that had come to them not by labour or talent certainly, but by the undoubted right to be lords of the soil by inheritance, when the soil was not held by a mere sheepskin, but by the sword and knight-service to the Scottish Crown.

And now to return to more prosaic times. We have said that there was a chronic antagonism between Maude and her stepmother, Mrs. Lindsay ; then, when Roland hurried to quit Earlshaugh, she and Jack resolved to get married, and married they were, quite quietly, as Roland was in haste to be gone to Egypt, and they were to pass a brief honeymoon ere Jack followed him—as he had inexorably to take his turn of service there too.

Of the Earlshaugh will, and Maude’s small inheritance under it, Jack made light indeed.

‘What matters it?’ said he ; ‘I am Elliot of Braidielee, and there will be our home-coming, when we have smashed up the Mahdi, and I can return with honour!’

At this marriage Annot Drummond was not present—no invitation was given to her, and Mrs. Lindsay excused herself through illness. Maude laughed at her apology.

‘Though we were grown up, and so beyond her reach in some respects, she has been like the typical stepmother of the old fairy tales,’ said the girl, who, sunny-haired, blue-

eyed, and bright, looked wonderfully beautiful, apart from that strange halo which surrounds every bride on her marriage day.

'All weddings are dull affairs, and we are well out of this one—don't you think so?' said Annot coyly to her new lover.

'Perhaps, but ours won't be so,' replied Hawkey Sharpe with a knowing wink. 'I expect it will be rather good fun.'

She shivered a little at his bad style. The visits that are usually paid and received, the letters that are usually written, the choosing of much useless millinery, furniture, plate, and equipages, and the being 'trotted out' for the inspection of mutual friends were all avoided or evaded by the quiet mode in which Jack Elliot and Maude were made one, and their nuptials a fact accomplished; but there was no time for 'doing' Paris, Berlin, the Riviera, or Rome, as Jack was bound for Egypt within a tantalizingly short period, so he secured a charming little villa for his bride in the southern and perhaps most pleasing quarter of the Modern Athens till he could return—if he ever did return—from that land of disease and death, where so many of our young and brave have found their last home.

Mr. Hawkey Sharpe at Earlshaugh laughed viciously when he read the announcement of the marriage in the newspapers. It was not a pleasant laugh, even Annot thought, and boded ill to some one.

Maude seemed beyond his reach now, so far as he seemed concerned; but there remained to him still hatred and revenge, as we may have to show.

CHAPTER XLIV.

THE TROOPSHIP.

So while Jack and Maude were absent on their brief honeymoon Roland bade adieu to Hester, his old uncle Sir Harry, and to pleasant Merlwood ere turning his steps to the East.

As he looked on the refined face of the girl, with her long-lashed gentle eyes, for the last time, something of the old tenderness that Annot had clouded, warped, or won away, came into his heart again, and he longed to take her kindly in his arms ere he went, but stifled the desire, and simply held forth his hand when she proffered her pale and half-averted cheek. He dared not kiss away the quiver he saw upon her lips.

‘Good-bye, dear Hester,’ said he. ‘Have you not a word or two that I may take with me—such as a dear sister might give?’

But her still quivering lips were voiceless; the forced smile on them was gone, and the soft light of her violet-blue eyes was quenched as if by recent tears; sweet eyes they were, dreamy and languid, their white lids fringed by lashes long and dark.

Roland noted this with a heavy heart, and thought his gentle cousin never looked so beautiful or attractive as then, when her little hand, which trembled, was clasped for the last time in his, and she withdrew to the end of the room.

‘Good-bye, nephew,’ said Sir Harry, propping himself on a stout Indian cane. ‘God keep you from harm, and may every good attend you; but,’ he added, his keen eyes glistening angrily through the film that spread over them, ‘does your conscience quite absolve you?’

‘In what, uncle?’

‘What? Why, your conduct to my girl—your cousin Hester,’ said Sir Harry, in a low voice.

‘Uncle?’

‘Did you make no effort when last at Merlwood here to

win her admiration, her regard, her love? Did you not simply play with her heart, and deem it perhaps flirting?—hateful word! In all her anguish—and I have seen it—she has never had a word of reproach for you, whatever her thoughts, poor child, may be; but please to think another time, Roland, and not attempt your powers of fascination and to act the lady-killer, lest you crush a heart that might be a happy one.’

Roland felt himself grow pale as he listened wistfully, half mournfully, to these merited but most unexpected remarks from the abrupt old gentleman, to whom he was sincerely attached. Knowing their truth, an emotion of shame, with much of reproach or compunction, gathered in his heart, and he muttered something apologetic—that he had no longer the position or prospects he once had—that Earlshaugh was no longer his—and felt in some haste to be gone, though he was shocked to see that the old man appeared to be suddenly and sorely broken down in health. The Jhansi bullet had worked its way out at last, but left a wound that would neither heal nor close; and hence, perhaps, the irrepressible irritability that led to these reproaches, some part of which reached the ear of Hester, and covered her with the deepest confusion, and made her welcome the moment of Roland’s final departure; and then she said:

‘Oh, papa, how could you speak as you did? Roland made me no proposal, asked me for no regard, and I gave him—no promise. I have known him, you are aware, all my life, and I do love him very dearly—but as a brother—nothing more,’ added poor Hester with a very unmistakable sob in her slender throat. ‘You do him injustice—he has not wronged me; but you know well how others have wronged him.’

But her father only resumed the amber mouthpiece of his hookah, and continued to smoke in uncomfortable silence.

So Roland was gone, and apparently out of her life more than ever now.

Notwithstanding that he certainly had not treated her well at Merlwood, Hester was for a time quietly inconsolable for his departure, which he had taken in a mood of

mind rendered so stern and reckless by the episode of Annot, that she pitied him.

He would, she knew, court danger and wounds ; seek perhaps every chance of being killed—dying far away from friends and kindred — dying a soldier's death without getting, perchance, even a grave in the hot sands of the desert.

He would, she feared, rush on his fate ; 'but men often make their own fate ; they are weak who are blindly guided by circumstances,' she had read. 'It is given us to distinguish right from wrong ; and if men persist in wrong when the right is before them, then be the consequences on their own head.'

The necklet—the gift he had given her at Merlwood—was clasped lovingly round her throat now, and its pendant nestled in her breast.

'The future is vague !' thought Hester ; 'but one thing is sure, we shall never be as we have been—what we were to each other at one time—he and I. Shall we ever meet again—who can say ? The sea is treacherous with its storms and other perils—the war is too dreadful to think of ! We may never, never see each other more, and the last hour he passed here may have been the last we shall have spent together in this world.'

If he survived everything and came back again, could she be like the Agnes of 'David Copperfield' ? She feared not. Therein she had read the story of a noble woman who had secretly loved a man all her life—even as she had loved Roland, and who yet showed no sign of sorrow when he married another woman. Agnes was David's counsellor and friend until he was nearing middle age, and it was only when he asked her to be his wife that she made the simple confession of her lifelong love.

She pondered over all these things as she wandered alone by the wooded Esk, the placid murmur of whose flow as it lapped among the pebbles was the only sound that broke the silence of the rocky glen, while at the same hour Roland was amid a very different scene—one of high excitement, noise, and bustle, almost uproar.

Alongside a great jetty in Portsmouth Harbour H.M. troopships *Bannockburn* and *Boyne* were taking troops and stores on board for Alexandria, and on the poop of the former, a floating castle of 6,300 tons, Roland stood amid a group of officers, whose numbers were augmenting every few minutes, and the interest and excitement were increasing fast, as it was known that when the great white-hulled trooper cleared out the Queen had sent special orders that the ship was to keep well to the westward, that she might meet her in her own yacht and pay farewell to the troops on board, mustering about six hundred men of various arms of the service, and a host of staff and other officers, including some of Roland's regiment.

A handsome fellow the latter looked in his blue braided patrol-jacket, and white tropical helmet, with his sword clattering by his side.

'When shall I be again in mufti?' thought he with a laugh (using that now familiar term that came back from Egypt of old with the soldiers of Abercrombie), and hearty greetings met him on every hand.

'Lindsay—it is! I didn't know you were rejoining,' exclaimed a brother officer, whose wounded arm was still in a sling. 'I thought your leave was not up till March.'

'I have resigned more than two months of it, Wilton,' replied Roland.

'What an enthusiast, by Jove!'

'Not more than yourself, whose wound must be green yet.'

'Welcome—Roland,' cried another, a cheery young sub. with a hairless chin like an apple; 'you are just the man we want for the work before us.'

'That is right—jolly to see you again!' said a third.

'We missed you awfully, old fellow!' exclaimed a fourth.

Flattering were the greetings on every side as he stood amid the circle of Hussars, Lancers, Artillery, and others, neither perhaps the handsomest nor the tallest amid that merry and handsome group, but looking a soldier every inch in his somewhat frayed and faded fighting kit, which had seen service enough a short time before

'Here comes Mostyn of ours,' said Wilton, as a very devil-may-care-looking young fellow, in the new khakee uniform, with a field-glass slung over his shoulder, came up. 'How goes it, Dick?—heard you had committed matrimony.'

'Not such a fool, Wilton.'

'We heard you were rather gone with that elderly party at Dover—the lass with all the rupees,' he added in a would-be *sotto voce*.

'On the War Office principle that an old girl makes a young widow? No, Wilton, my boy,' said Mostyn as he lit a cigarette, 'I leave these little rollies for such as you. Her rupees were all moonshine, and her *poudre de riz* was a little too plain; but I shouldn't like to have a wife who pays her milliner's bills out of her winnings at Ascot.'

'Ah, Lindsay,' said an officer of another corps who had just marched his little detachment on board, and gave Roland, familiarly, a slap on the shoulder, 'how are you—going out again to the land of the Pyramids? Just keep your eye on my fellows for a minute, will you, while I get some tiffin below—hungry as a hawk—tore through London to reach the Anglesea Barracks to-day; had only time to get a glass of sherry and a caviare sandwich at the Rag, then to get goggles and gloves, etc., in Regent Street—ta-ta—will be on deck in a minute.'

The old familiar rattling society was delightful again, even with its rather exaggerated gaiety and banter, and all about him were so heedless, so happy, and full of the highest spirits, that it was impossible not to feel the contagion.

The bustle, though orderly, was incredible, and the shipment of stores of all kinds seemed endless, including ammunition, carts and waggons, draught and battery horses, with thousands upon thousands of rounds of Martini-Henry ball-cartridges, and innumerable rounds of filled shells for thirteen and sixteen-pounder guns.

As senior officer of the mixed command going out, Roland certainly found that he had work cut out for him

just then, and no time for further regretting or thinking of the past, amid all the details consequent on embarkation for foreign service.

The medical examinations were over elsewhere ; but there were 'returns,' endless, as useless apparently, to be made up and signed in duplicate ; inspection of equipments ; extra kits at sea to be seen to, and dinner provided for the embarking soldiers, the arms racked and two men per company told off to look after them, extra dogs on the upper deck to be pursued, caught, and sent ashore despite the remonstrances of owners, with the excess of baggage ; chests piled upon chests were being sent down below, with bedding, valises, uniform cases, bullock trunks, and tubs ; the knapsacks to be stowed away over the mess-tables, sentries posted on the baggage-room and elsewhere.

Amid all this a buzz of conversation was in progress at the break of the poop among soldiers and their friends, some of whom had contrived to get on board, and to one of these in which there was something absurd he could not help listening.

'Sorr, is Tim Riley aboard?' asked a young Irish labourer, looking anxiously and with a somewhat scared look about him.

'Who the devil is Tim Riley?' asked a petty officer in charge of the gangway.

The Irishman slunk back and addressed a somewhat *insouciant*-looking English recruiting sergeant, with ribbons fluttering from his cap, and whose business then could only be to get a few stray 'grogs' before the bell sounded for 'shore.'

'Sergeant, dear, may be you know Tim Riley who inlisted into the sogers?'

'Tim Riley? How do you spell his name?'

'Devil a one of me knows, but he was a boy from Dublin.'

'Oh, I knewed him well. He's a colonel now,' replied the sergeant.

'A colonel—oh, glory be to God! Is it Tim, whose ears I've warmed many a time for stealing the ould man's Scotch apples? Where is the shilling, sergeant?'

‘Now be off and make an *omadhaun* of yourself,’ said one of the 18th. ‘I knew Thady Boyle; he ’listed as a captain—devil a less—in the Royal County Down, and when he joined he was put in the black-hole by a spalpeen of an English corporal.’

The bustle of the embarkation seemed endless, but at last the bugle sounded, and a bell clanged for all visitors to quit the ship; the various gangways were run ashore, the screw began to revolve, and H.M.S. *Bannockburn* was off.

While the air seemed to vibrate with cheers, the great white trooper, slowly and stately in aspect, came out of the harbour between the Blockhouse Fort and the Round Tower, and steamed abreast of the crowded Clarence Esplanade, which was gay with people even at that season, and there the soldiers, as they clustered like red bees on the vessel’s side and in the lower rigging, could see the troops of jolly children with frocks and trousers tucked up paddling in the water, so far as they dared venture, or making breakwaters and fortifications of sand as actively as if they had to defend the shores of old England.

Portsmouth, its spires, batteries, and ultramural line of magnificent, but now obsolete, batteries and casemates, its masts and shipping, was becoming shrouded in the golden haze of evening, and the farewell greetings of the women on board the harbour craft and those of the youthful tars of the old *St. Vincent* had died away astern; but cheers rose in volleys, if we may use the term, when the *Bannockburn* neared Cowes, where the Queen—the Queen herself—was known to be in the *Alberta* yacht, which had the Royal Standard floating at her mainmast head, and every heart beat high as the vessels neared each other, and the Queen—a small figure in black—was seen amid a group waving her handkerchief.

Roland had only two buglers on board, but these poured forth the Royal Anthem with right good will from their perch in the foretop, while instead of the boatswain’s shrill whistle the steam siren was sounded. The Royal yacht steamed round the towering trooper, which slackened speed, and the signal fluttered out, ‘You may proceed.’

Once more the hearty cheers responded to each other over the water ; again the little white handkerchief was seen to wave as the yacht led the way down the Solent and through Spithead, that famous reach and roadstead, the rendezvous of our fleets in time of war.

‘Farewell, God speed you !’ came the signal from the yacht once more, and the *Bannockburn* stood out to sea under the lee of the beautiful Isle of Wight.

The boats were all finally secured ; the anchors hauled close up to the cat-heads by the cat-fall ; the forecourse and maintopsail were set to accelerate her speed, and the troopship stood on her voyage down the Channel.

The high excitement of the last few hours had now completely passed away. On deck the half-hushed groups of soldiers in their gray greatcoats were lingering, watching the occasional twinkling of the shore lights, taking their last look of old England ; and when night had completely fallen, and the bugles had blown tattoo, the Mother of Nations had faded out in the distance as the ship gave the land a wide berth.

Weary with the unintermitting toil and bustle of the day, Roland, after mess, betook himself with a cigar to his own little cabin ; a small substitute certainly for the luxuries of Earlshaugh, as was his sole retinue now, for the staff there ; his single soldier-servant by this time had made his bed, arranged his toilette and sea-going kit, and put the entire place in the most perfect order ; and of old, Roland knew well how invaluable a thorough soldier-servant is.

‘What cannot he do with regulation pipe-clay ?’ it has been asked. ‘In his hands it is omnipotent over cloth. He can charm stains and grease-spots thereout, even as an Indian juggler charms snakes ; and what sleight of hand he exercises over your garments generally. The tunic, grimed and mud-bespattered, he can switch and cane, and, when folded away, it comes out as from a press. Trousers baggy at the knees as the historical parachute of old Mrs. Gamp, are manipulated into their former shape. Compared to the private valet, always expensive and frequently mutinous, he is a pearl of the greatest price. His cost is a dole, and,

thanks to the regimental guard-room, he can always be kept within control.'

In the great cabin, which was brilliantly lighted still, Roland heard the loud hum of many voices where the jovial fellows he had left were lingering over their wine and talking unlimited 'shop'—discussing everything, from Lord Wolseley's supposed plan of the Soudan campaign to the last fashion in regimental buttons.

How he envied the jollity and lightheartedness of his brother-officers—Dick Mostyn in particular.

Dick had not lost an inheritance nor a false love to boot, certainly ; but it was nothing to him that his pockets were well-nigh empty, his banker's account over-drawn, and that he had debts innumerable, all but paid by the proverbial 'a roll on the drum ;' his talent for soothing irate tailors had failed him ; still his wardrobe was faultless ; he still wore priceless boots and irreproachable lavender kids as steadily as he retained his step in the waltz and his seat in the saddle, which would be of good service to him if he joined the Mounted Infantry. He could take nothing deeply to heart, and even now, leading the van in Bacchanalian noise and jollity—a verse of his song—it was from poor 'Tilbury Nogo,' ran through the cabin, and just then it seemed exactly to suit Roland's frame of mind as he lounged on a sofa with his uniform jacket unbuttoned :

'I sigh not for woman, I want not her charms—
The long waving tress, the melting black eye—
For the sting of the adder still lurks in her arms,
And falsehood is wafted in each burning sigh ;
Such pleasure is poisoned, such ecstasy vain—
Forget her ! remembrance shall fade in champagne !'

CHAPTER XLV.

THE DEATH WRESTLE.

TIDINGS had come, as stated, to the zereba of Sheikh Moussa of the deportation of his kinsman Zebehr in a British ship of war as a State prisoner to Gibraltar, and Malcolm Skene—no longer cared for as a hostage—found himself in greater peril than before among his unscrupulous captors.

He was conscious that his movements by day were watched more closely than ever now, and by night he was always placed in a close prison beyond the court wherein the lions were chained.

Other Sheikhs came and went, with their standard-bearers and horsemen; conferences were evidently held with Moussa Abu Hagil; Skene found himself an object of growing hostility, and suspected 'that something, he knew not what,' was in progress; that Gordon had actually been victorious or rescued at Khartoum, or some great battle had been lost by the Mahdi.

He could gather from his knowledge of the language, and the remarks that were let fall unwittingly in his hearing that the zereba was to be abandoned for a general movement on Khartoum, or for another fortified post farther up the country—a move worse for him; and the consequent preparations, therefore, packing tents, provisions, and spoil, had begun.

To save further trouble, and gratify the lust of blood which forms a part of the Oriental nature, he might be assassinated after all—after having found protection under the roof and eaten the salt of Moussa—killed as poor Hector MacLaine was killed after the battle of Candahar, two or three years before this time.

The expression of Moussa's face as he regarded him occasionally now, was neither pleasant nor reassuring; his deep set eyes, when he was excited, glared with fire, like lights in the sockets of a skull: and Malcolm Skene never knew when the supreme moment might come.

In the morning he had no assurance that he should see night—in the night that he would be a live man in the morning.

Anything—death itself—were better than this keen and cruel suspense.

One evening about sunset there was a vehement beating of tom-toms, and a body of Baggara Arabs, some on horseback, others on camels, but many on foot—a fierce and jabbering mob, all but nude—though well-armed with bright-bladed Solingen swords and excellent Remington rifles, passed the zereba, bound for some point of attack; and the Sheikh Moussa, with every man he could muster, joined them in hot haste.

So great had been the bustle and hurry of their departure that Malcolm Skene, to his astonishment, found himself forgotten, overlooked; and, full of hopeful thoughts, he lay quiet and still in the poor apartment allotted to him, watching the strange constellations and stars unknown to Europe through the unglazed aperture that served as a window, and listening to the silence—if we may use such a paradox—a silence that seemed to be broken only by the pulsations of his own heart, as hope grew up in it suddenly, and he thought that, considering a kind of crisis that had come in his fate, now or never was the time to make a stroke for liberty, and to elude, if possible, the few Arabs who were left to watch the gates in the dense mimosa hedge that surrounded the zereba.

To elude them—but how?

The stars were singularly bright even for that hemisphere; but there was no moon as yet, fortunately, and softly quitting his hut, he looked sharply about the ‘compound,’ as it would be called in India, and found himself alone there, unnoticed and unseen. He drew near the hedge in the hope of finding, as he ultimately did, an opening in that barrier, a thinner portion of its dense branches, close to the ground, and at once he proceeded to creep through.

How easy it seemed of accomplishment just then; but when the zereba was full of armed men, and watchers and sentinels were numerous, the attempt would have been useless.

Slowly, softly, and scarcely making a twig or a thorn crack, he drew himself through on his hands and face ere many minutes passed ; minutes ? they could not have been more than five, if so many ; but with life trembling in the balance, to poor Skene they seemed as ages.

At last he was through !

He was outside that hated place of confinement, every feature of which he knew but too well, and every detail of which he loathed ; and yet he was not quite free. Keen eyes might see him after all, and every moment he expected to hear an alarm.

He thanked Heaven for the absence of the moonlight, and, favoured by the obscurity, crept on his hands and knees for a considerable distance ere he ventured to stand erect, to draw a long breath, and with a prayer of hope and thankfulness on his lips, set out at a run towards the Nile.

By the oft-studied landmarks he knew well in what direction the great river lay, a few miles off, however.

A boat thereon, could he but find one, might be the means of ultimate escape, by taking him lower down the stream to more civilized regions.

Anyway, he could not be worse off, be in greater hourly peril, or have a more dark future, than when in the zereba, unless, too probably, thirst and starvation came upon him.

While the darkness of night lasted, he had a certain chance of safety and concealment, and he dared scarcely long for day and the perils it might bring forth in a land where every man's hand was certain to be against him.

He was totally defenceless, unarmed—oh, thought he, for a weapon of any description, that he might strike, if not a blow for liberty or life, at least one in defiance and for vengeance !

So, full of vague and desperate yet hopeful ideas, he pushed in the direction to where he knew the river lay. On its banks he hoped to obliterate or leave behind all trace of his footsteps, for he knew but too well the risk he ran of recapture on his flight or absence being discovered ; and

that there were Arabs in the zereba who had applied themselves diligently to the study of tracking or tracing the human foot.

So acute are these men of vision that they can know whether the footsteps belong to their own or to another tribe, and consequently whether a friend or a foe has passed that way ; they know by the depth of the impression whether the man bore a load or not ; by the regularity of the steps whether the man was fatigued or fresh and active, and hence can calculate to a nicety the chances of overtaking him ; whether he has trodden in sand or on grass, and bruised its blades, and by the appearance of the traces whether the stranger had passed on that day or several days before.

Malcolm Skene knew all this, and that with dawn they would be like scenting beagles on his trail, hence his intense anxiety to reach the river's bank.

Swiftly the dawn came in, red and fiery, and his own shadow and the shadows of every object were cast far behind him. He looked back again and again ; no sign of pursuit was in his rear. In the distance he saw a few Arab huts with *sakias* or water-wheels, and then with something like a start of joy that elicited an exclamation, he got a glimpse of the river, rolling clear and blue, its banks a stripe of narrow green, between the rocky, rugged, inexorable black mountains ; but there no boat floated on and no sail whitened the yellowish blue of the Nile. But the morning light was vivid, the breeze from the river was pleasant and exultant, the glories of Nature were around him, yet anxiety made him gasp for breath as he struggled forward.

Not a bird or other living thing was visible. The silence was intense, and not even an insect hummed amid the scrub mimosas ; the hot, red sun came up in his unclouded glory. All seemed sad, solitary, yet intensely sunny.

Ere long he did hear a sound of life ; it was the shrill cry of a little naked boy attending on a *sakia* wheel. Irrigation is done by the latter, which is driven by oxen turning a chain of water-jars, which admits of being lengthened as the river falls. It is usually enclosed in an edifice like an old

tower, green with creeping plants, and as the boy drives the oxen, his cry and the creaking of the great wheel are sounds that never cease, day or night, by the Nile.

To avoid this *sakia* and its too probable surroundings or adjuncts, Malcolm Skene turned aside into a rocky chasm that overhung the river at a considerable height, and then, far down below, on the blue surface of the stream and between its banks, which in some places were barred in by rocks, blackened by the sun and rent by volcanic throes into strange fragments, and which in others, where the desert touched the stream, was bordered by level sand, he saw a sight which, were he to live a thousand years, he thought he could never, never forget !

There, about half a mile distant, was a regular flotilla of boats, manned by redcoats, with sails set and oars out—broad-bladed oars that flashed like silver as they were feathered in the sunshine, pulled steadily against the downward current of the river, and all apparently advancing merrily within talking distance—a sight that made his heart leap within his breast, for he knew that this was a relieving column, or part of it, *en route* for Khartoum !

For a minute he stood still, as if he could scarcely believe his senses, or that he was not dreaming—paralysed, as it were, with this sudden joy and sight—one far, far beyond his conception or hope of ever being realised.

He stretched his tremulous hands towards these advancing boats ; he fancied he could hear the voices and see the faces of the oarsmen in their white helmets and red coats ; and never did ‘the old red rag that tells of Britain’s glory’ seem more dear to his eye and more dear to his heart than at that supreme moment !

What force might already have passed up ?

How many days had they been passing, and if so, how narrowly had he escaped being left behind ? This was assuredly the Khartoum Expedition, or part of it, and the recent bustle, consternation, and excitement at the zereba of Moussa Abu Hagil were quite accounted for now.

The sight of his comrades imbued him with renewed strength of mind and purpose, and his whole soul became

inspired with new impatience, hope, and joy—hope on the eve of fulfilment.

While looking about for a means of descent to the river bank, from whence to attract the attention of the nearest crew, he heard a sound like a mocking laugh or ironical shout. He turned and looked back, and—with what emotions may be imagined, but not described—he beheld a man clad like an Arab, and covering him with a levelled rifle, at about a hundred yards' distance.

The condition of his uniform—in tatters long since—had not been improved by the thorns of the prickly zereba hedge in his passage through it; his helmet had since given place to a tarboosh, and, all unkempt and unshorn, his aspect was somewhat remarkable now, but quite familiar to Pietro Girolamo—for Girolamo it was—who knew him in an instant.

Whether the revengeful Greek had tracked him or not, or whether Moussa's followers were within hearing of a musket-shot, Skene might never know; the fact was but too evident that, intent on death and dire mischief, the Ionian Isleman and *ci-devant* gambling-den keeper was there, with his white, pallid visage, fierce hawk nose, long jetty moustache, and gleaming black eyes.

Every detail of his tantalising and most critical position flashed on the mind of Malcolm Skene.

On one hand were the boats of the River Column—life and freedom!

On the other, death—no captivity, but death, certain and sure; for even if he escaped Girolamo, in the direction where the zereba lay he could now see a cloud of dust, and amid it the dusky figures of men and camels, with the gleam of burnished steel, and then within almost his grasp, was Girolamo, rifle in hand, arresting his path to the boats.

With another mocking laugh, the Greek levelled his weapon more surely, took aim, and fired.

Skene heard—yes, felt—the bullet whiz past his ear. Powerless, defenceless, unarmed, his heart burned with rage and desperation at the narrow escape his life had; but discretion and scheming were then the better part of valour,

and, with thought that came upon him quick as a flash of lightning, instead of risking another discharge, he resolved to feign death, and, after reeling round as if shot, he fell on the ground.

Then he heard the steps of his would be assassin approaching him slowly and steadily, to give a *coup de grace* if requisite with his knife, perhaps, rather than to seek plunder, as Skene, he knew, would possess nothing worth taking.

Restraining his breath till the Greek was close upon him, Skene lay still; and then, as the former was about to stoop, he sprang to his feet and confronted him. So startled was Girolamo by this unexpected movement that the rifle dropped from his hand, slipped over the rocks, and the two enemies were face to face on equal terms, for Girolamo was minus knife or poniard.

He clenched his teeth; his glittering eyes blazed; his long, lean fingers were curled like the claws of a kite; and he uttered strange, guttural sounds of astonishment and rage; but Skene had no time to lose.

Straight out from the shoulder he planted his left fist, clenched, with a dull thud on the hooked beak of Girolamo, followed by a similar application of his right, and knocked him with a crash on the rocks.

Agile as a tiger and blindly infuriated like one, the Greek sprang again to his feet, and was rushing forward like a mad thing to get Skene's throat in the grasp of his long and powerful fingers, which would speedily have strangled the life out of him, but the latter bestowed upon his antagonist another 'facer,' which sent more than one of his sharp teeth rattling down his throat and loosened many of the rest, covering his pale face with blood; but, blinded by fury—a fury that endowed his wiry form with double strength—he closed in, and contrived to encircle Skene in his grasp—an iron one; for, long accustomed to a seafaring life, his muscles and nerves were like bands of steel, and now came the tug of war, even while distant cries came to the ears of the wrestlers.

No sound escaped either now, but hard and concentrated breathing; it was a struggle for death or for life, and each

scarcely paused a moment to glare into the other's eyes. Fiercely as the first of his race and name is said to have grappled with the wolf in the wilds of Stocket Forest, did Skene grapple with his athletic adversary.

Near the edge of the rocks that overhung the river at the end of the chasm, backwards and forwards they swayed, locked in a savage and deadly grasp. Finding that every effort to uproot Skene, to get him off his legs and throw him, so that he might resort to strangulation, proved unavailing, he strove to drag him towards the Nile, in the hope of flinging him down the bank ; but whether the said bank was a precipice of a hundred feet or only the drop of a few yards Skene knew not, and in the blind fury of the moment, with pursuers coming on, never thought of it.

Nearer and nearer the verge, by sheer strength of muscle and weight of limb, the Greek was dragging him, and already some shouts in English ascending from the bosom of the river evinced that the struggle was visible from the boats ; but Skene now gave up all hope of being able to conquer his opponent or free himself from his terrible grasp, and had but one thought—that if he perished, Pietro Girolamo should perish too !

Now they were at the edge, the verge of what was evidently a precipice of considerable height, and more fiercely and breathlessly than ever did they wrench, sway, and grasp each other, their arms tightening, as hatred, rage, and ferocious dread grew apace together—the clamorous dread that one might escape the doom he meant to mete out to or compel the other to share with him.

As last a species of gasping sigh escaped them. Both lost their footing at once and fell for a moment through the air ; they then crashed upon bushes and stones, and without relaxing their grasp rolled over and over each other with awful speed down a precipitous steep, sending before and bringing after them showers of gravel and little stones, crashing through mimosa bushes and other scrub, maimed, bruised, and covered with each other's blood, for some forty feet or so.

Mad was the thirst for each other's destruction that inspired these two men ; for Malcolm Skene, by the peril and circumstances of the time, was reduced to the level of the Ionian savage with whom he fought—if fighting it could be called.

Another moment and they had rolled into the Nile—a fall, ere it was accomplished, that in a second seemed to compress and contain the epitome of life, and down they went under the surface, cleaving the water at a rate that seemed to take all power out of heart and limb, and, parting, they rose at a little distance from each other.

Faint and breathless Skene went down again, water bubbling in his eyes, choking in his throat, and all breath had left him ere he rose to the surface again, and saw Girolamo clinging to a rock round which swept the beginning of a rapid. He was visible for a moment only ; exhaustion made him relax his hold. He sank, rose again only to sink ; then a hand was visible once or twice above the water as he was swept away into eternity by the fierce current that bubbled round the sun-baked rocks.

Then Skene felt hands laid upon him, and while English voices and exclamations came pleasantly to his half-dulled ears, he was dragged by soldiers on board one of the boats, where he lay so completely exhausted as to be almost insensible ; and he had not fallen into the river a moment too soon, for, just as he did so, a group of armed Arabs, the followers of Moussa Abu Hagil, crowned with a spluttering fire of musketry, and with wild gesticulations, the rocks above the Nile.

CHAPTER XLVI.

MAUDE'S VISITOR.

'THE lives of some families,' it is said, 'are exactly like a pool in which—without being exactly stagnant—nothing occurs to ruffle the surface of the water from year's end to year's end, and then come a series of tremendous splashes, like naughty boys throwing stones.'

So it was with the Lindsays of Earlshaugh latterly, as we will soon have to show.

The few weeks of his leave of absence that intervened before Jack Elliot would have inexorably to start for Egypt, glided happily and all too swiftly away, when he and Maude took up their residence at the pretty villa in the southern quarter of Edinburgh, near the ancient Grange Loan; and often if they sat silent, or lingered hand in hand amid the faded flower-beds of the garden, they seemed to be only listening—if one may say so—to the silent responses of their own hearts, and that language of instinct understood only by kindred souls.

'We have not exactly Aladdin's lamp in the house, Maude,' said Jack laughingly, 'nor have we all the luxuries of our future home at Braidielee, where now conservatories are springing up, a billiard-room being built, and gardens laid out, all for you; but we are happy as people can be——'

'Who have a coming separation to face and to endure, Jack,' she interrupted, with a break in her voice.

In the newspapers they read the announcement of the marriage, at Earlshaugh, of 'Hawkey Sharpe, Esq., to Miss Annot Drummond, of South Belgravia,' at which Jack laughed loud and long.

'Well, Roland *is* lucky to be out of the running there!—Sharpe, Esq.—I wonder he did not add "of Earlshaugh," and doubtless the creature would figure in all Roland's splendid jewels and gifts. Pah!' said he; but the gentle Maude had a kind of pity for the girl, and her views of the matter were somewhat mingled.

Annot's mother had toiled always in the matrimonial market—long unaided by the young lady herself—and now the latter had landed a golden fish at last, as she thought, in the future heir of Earlsbaugh—Mr. Hawkey Sharpe!

No longer was she to be perplexed by questions how few or how many thousand a year had such as Bob Hoyle, and on other delicate matters dear to the Belgravian mater, and concerning 'detrimentals.' After more than one season spent in the chase, after dinners that were too costly for a limited exchequer, handsome dresses and much showy appearance, laborious days and watchful nights, snubs and disappointments — *homme propose, femme dispose* — Annot was fairly off her hands, and to be a 'Lady of that ilk.'

She had played her cards in Scotland beautifully!

And now came to pass the event which ruffled the calm pool of Maude's existence, when within three days of Elliot's departure to rejoin the army in Egypt. The crisis from which she ever shrank seemed now to have come!

Oftentimes before this had she wondered whether it were possible such unbroken happiness as her present life would ever come again, despite the tender, earnest, and trusting love that glowed in her breast; and on one particular evening, when Jack Elliot was absent making some final preparations, and would not be home till late, she sat alone, striving to prepare herself for the change, the solitude and anxiety that were to come, and praying tearfully for strength to pass the bitter ordeal—the wrench that was before them both.

This happy, happy honeymoon of a few weeks was drawing to its close, and her soft blue eyes grew very full as she thought over the whole situation, when a visitor was suddenly announced.

A showily-dressed and smart-looking little woman, about thirty years of age apparently, rather pretty, but flippant and nervous in manner, and having a slight *soupçon* of 'making-up' about her cheeks and eyelashes, was ushered in, and eyed, with some boldness and effrontery (to conceal the nervousness referred to), Maude, who, by force of habit,

bowed and indicated a seat, which her visitor at once took, and threw up her veil.

Maude saw that her features were good, but this colouring and expression made them cunning and daring, if somewhat remarkable and attractive.

Maude then remembering that this person had not sent in a card or announced herself, inquired to what she owed the occasion of her visit.

'The occasion—you'll soon know that—too soon for your own peace of mind, poor girl! You are—Miss Lindsay?'

'I was Miss Lindsay,' replied Maude.

'And who are you now?'

Maude stared at her visitor with some alarm.

'If you take an interest in Captain Elliot, it is a pity,' continued the latter.

'Interest—pity?' questioned Maude, rising now, and drawing near to the handle of the bell.

'Take my advice in time, and don't touch that!' said her strange visitor with sudden insolence of manner, while something of malevolence and triumph sparkled in her dark eyes.

'You must be mad, or——'

'Tipsy, you would say—I am neither; but I have that to say which you may not wish to furnish gossip for your servants, so do not summon them until I am gone.'

'Will you be so kind as to state at once the object of your visit?' said Maude, with as much hauteur as she could summon to her aid.

'So you are his wife—a doll like you! Mrs. Elliot of Braidielee, you think yourself!' said the woman mockingly; 'I fear I have that to tell which your dainty ears will not find very pleasant. But "gather ye rosebuds while ye may;" for ere long only the leaves, dead and without fragrance, will be left you!'

Maude felt herself grow pale and tremble; she knew that there was a great lunatic asylum somewhere in that quarter of the city, and began to fear that her visitor was an escaped patient. She moved a step towards the bell again, and cast

a lingering, longing glance at it, on which the woman again said sharply :

‘Don’t ! Listen to me, I tell you !’

Placing her elbows on a small Chippendale table, off which, without ceremony, she thrust a few books, she rested her chin upon her left hand, and looking at the shrinking Maude steadily and defiantly—for the perfect purity of the girl, her position in life, her whole aspect and bearing filled this fallen one—for fallen she was—with rivalry, envy, and hatred, she asked :

‘Now, who do you think I am ?’

‘That I have yet to learn,’ replied Maude, who was moving towards the door, when the next words of the woman arrested her steps.

‘Learn that I am Captain John Elliot’s—lawful wife !’

‘Oh—she is mad !’ thought Maude, who neither tottered, nor fainted, nor made any outcry, deeming the bold assertion as totally absurd.

‘You don’t believe me, I suppose ?’

‘You must hold me excused if I do not,’ replied Maude, thinking that she must temporise with a woman who, for all she knew, might bite her like a rabid dog ; for poor Maude had very vague ideas of the ways and proclivities of lunatics in general.

She had but one desire, to rush past, to gain the door and escape ; but was baffled by the expression of the woman’s watchful black eyes. That she was not and never had been a lady was evident ; neither did she seem of the servant class ; so Maude’s inexperienced eye was unable to fix her place in the scale of society, though her costume was good—if showy—even to her well-fitting gloves.

‘You would wish to see my marriage-lines, I doubt not,’ said the visitor with a smile, drawing a couple of folded papers from her bosom ; ‘but perhaps you had better read this first. I am a great believer in documentary evidence, and hope you are so too.’

Somewhat ostentatiously she flattened out a letter on the table, but carefully kept her hands thereon, as if in fear that it might be snatched away by Maude ; and impelled by

an impressible but hideous emotion of curiosity the latter drew near, and the woman with a slender forefinger traced out the lines she wished her to read—lines that seemed to seal the fate of Maude, whose dull eyes wandered over them like one in a dreadful dream—for the letter, if a forgery, was certainly to all appearance in the handwriting of Jack Elliot, and some of its peculiarities in the formation of capitals and certain other letters seemed to her too terribly familiar and indisputable.

They seemed to sear the girl's brain—the words she read—but summoning all her self-control, and seeming scarcely to breathe, she permitted as yet no expression of sorrow, of passion, or emotion of any kind to escape her.

‘DEAREST LITTLE WIFE,

‘I write you, Maggie, as I promised, as I cannot see you before leaving for Egypt, and fear the sorrow of such another parting as our last may kill me, for you know that all the love of my heart is yours, though I have been entrapped into a marriage with Maude Lindsay—a mad entanglement, for which I ask your forgiveness and pity, that you may not bring me to punishment and shame. I will buy your silence at any price; let me have back the marriage certificate and all letters, and I herewith enclose a blank cheque for you to fill up at your pleasure. This I do, dear little one, for the sake of our old——’

Here Maude reeled, for the room seemed to revolve round her.

‘There!’ said this odious woman exultingly, as she hastened to refold the letter and replace it in her breast, ‘will you deny it longer?’

The speaker showed neither the certificate nor the blank cheque; but poor Maude had seen enough. She fainted, and when she recovered her obnoxious visitor was gone—gone, but had left a dreadful sting behind.

Had her presence and her story been all a dream? No! There was the chair in which she had been seated; there was the little Chippendale table on which she had spread

the terrible letter that told of Jack's perfidy ; and there on the floor, just where she had thrown or thrust them, lay the scattered books—his presents in the past time.

She cast herself on the sofa—she could neither think nor weep ; her heart beat painfully—every pulsation was a pang ! What was she to do—whither turn for advice before madness came upon her ?

'Well, my old duck, Maggie, you have earned your money fairly, by all accounts—and my wonderful caligraphy was quite a success !' said Hawkey Sharpe, exploding with laughter, when he heard the narration of his 'fair' compatriot or conspirator, as he handed her a twenty-pound note, and drove with her townward in the cab with which he had awaited the termination of her visit at the Grange Loan. 'By Jove ! a pleasant home-coming that fellow will have ! "All men are brothers," says the minister of Earls-haugh ; Cains and Abels, say I.'

'I don't care about him or what he may suffer—you men are all alike, a bad, false, cruel lot,' replied the woman ; 'but, with all her airs and graces, her haughtiness and her touch-me-not manner, I *am* sorry for what that poor girl may be—nay, must be—enduring now.'

'The devil you are ! all things are fair in love and war—and this is *war* !' said Hawkey, still continuing his bursts of malignant laughter ; 'would she care for what you might endure ?'

'I am sure she would—her face and her voice were so sweet and gentle.'

'For all that she would draw aside her skirt if it touched yours, as though there was a taint in the contact.'

The woman made no reply, but glared at him with defiant malevolence in her bold black eyes, and now seemed shocked at the very act which, a few minutes before, had given her much malignant satisfaction.

But we have not heard the last of Mr. Hawkey Sharpe's skill in caligraphy.

CHAPTER XLVII.

THE RESULT.

SENSE returned to the unhappy creature ere her servants discovered her or knew that the mysterious visitor had departed.

‘It cannot be! It cannot have happened—it is too dreadful—too cruel!’ she repeated to herself again and again; but could she doubt the tenor of the letter she had seen and read—the letter in her husband’s own handwriting? ‘Oh, Heaven!’ she murmured; ‘our days together have been so blithesome and so happy, even when their brightest hours were clouded by a separation to come; but Oh, not such a separation as this! What have I done that God deems me so unworthy—that I am tortured, punished thus?’

‘There is scarcely in the whole sad world,’ it is said, ‘and in the woeful scale of mental suffering, aught sadder than the helpless struggle of a poor human heart against a crushing load of misery, strengthening itself in its despair, taking courage from the extremity of its wretchedness in the frenzied whispers of reassurance.’

Thus did Maude continue to whisper to herself: ‘It cannot be—it cannot be!’

She passed her hot hand several times across her throbbing forehead; her brain was too confused—too unable yet to grapple with this disillusion, the miserable situation, and with all the new and sudden horrors of her false and now degraded position in the world—in society, and in life!

She had heard stories; she had vague ideas of the temptations to which young men—young officers more than all—are subjected; and Jack might have been the victim of some hour of weakness, or evil, or treachery.

Holding by the bannisters, she ascended to her bedroom—their room, as it was but one short hour ago—and there on every hand were souvenirs of Jack which had once seemed so strange amid the appurtenances of her toilet; the slippers she had worked for him were under the dressing-

table ; his razors and brushes lay thereon ; his pipes littered the mantelpiece ; and his portmanteaux and helmet-case, ready for Egypt, stood in a corner.

Novels Maude had read, plays she had seen, stories she had heard of, in which concealed marriages and other horrors had been amply detailed ; and in the heart of one of these episodes she now found herself, as they crowded on her memory with bewildering force and pain.

She strove to think, to gather her thoughts, in vain. Jack could not be so vile, and yet there was that letter—that horrible letter !

‘ If this woman is his wife—what then am I ? Oh, horror and misery—horror and misery ! ’ thought Maude, covering her face with her tremulous hands, while the hot tears gushed between her slender fingers.

Was all this happening to her or to some one else ? She almost doubted her own identity—the evidence of her senses. A moment or two she lingered at a window wistfully looking over the landscape, which she had often viewed from thence with Jack’s arm round her, and her head on his shoulder, watching dreamily the light of the setting sun falling redly on the long wavy slope of the lovely Pentlands, or the nearer hills of Braid, so green and pastoral, the scene of Johnnie of Braidislee’s doleful hunting in the ancient time, and where in a lone and wooded hollow lies the dreary Hermitage beside the Burn, haunted, it is said, in the present day by the unquiet spirit of the beautiful Countess of Stair, the victim of a double and repudiated marriage, and whose wrongs were of the days when George IV. was king ; and now as Maude looked, the farewell rays of the sun were fading out on the summit of bluff Blackford, the haunt of Scott’s boyhood, and then the sober hues of twilight followed. Of the hill he wrote :

‘ Blackford ! on whose uncultured breast
A truant boy I sought the nest,
Or listed as I lay at rest ;
While rose on breezes thin
The murmur of the city crowd :
And from his steeple jangling loud
St. Giles’s mingling din.’

‘All is over and ended—God help me!’ wailed the girl many times as she wrung her white and slender hands, and yet prepared nervously and quickly to take measures that were stern and determined. There seemed to be a strange loneliness in the sunset landscape as she turned from it, and thought how beautiful, yet cruel and terrible, the world of life can be, and choking sobs rose in her throat.

Should she await Jack’s return—face him out and demand an explanation? No, a thousand times no; there seemed degradation in receiving one. Her resolution was taken; she would leave now and for ever, and now with the coming night a long journey to London was to be faced—to London, where she would quickly be lost to all the world that knew her once.

Jack would not be home (home!) for hours yet, but no time was to be lost, and action of any kind was grateful to her tortured spirit.

She quickly dressed herself for travelling; reckoned over what was in her purse, and what was in her desk, and for more than an hour sat writing—writing endless and incoherent letters of farewell and upbraiding—letters which she tore in minute fragments by the score, as none of them seemed suitable to the awful occasion. At last she feverishly ended one; placed it in an envelope, addressed it—oh how tremulously!—and placed it on the toilet table, where he was sure to find it when she would be far away.

‘I now know all—all about “Maggie!”’ ran the letter. (‘Who the devil is Maggie?’ thought the terrified and bewildered Jack when he *did* come to peruse it.)

‘You cannot forget that I once loved you—that I love you still, when—oh, my God!—I have no right to do so, nor can you forget the misery that obliges me to take this step and leave you. Oh, Jack! Jack!’

‘God forgive you, but you have broken my heart!’

‘When you read this, Jack, I shall be gone—gone to London or elsewhere—to where you shall never be able to follow or to trace me in my hiding place.’

‘The horrors of a public scandal must be avoided; but how, and however cautious our mode of action?’

‘I shall never see you more—never from this evening; never again hope for a renewal of happiness; and yet with all your perfidy, Jack, your memory will always be most precious to me, and I only fear I shall always love you too well!’

Much more in the same incoherent style followed.

Time was short; she moved about noiselessly. She drew sharply off her bracelet and brooch, which were gifts of Jack’s; she did more; she drew off her wedding ring with its keeper, her engagement ring also, and placed them in another envelope; she put a few necessary garments and toilet appurtenances into a travelling-bag, stole from the house, found a cab, and ordered the man to drive her at once to the railway station for London.

It was night, now, and the silent suburbs had been left behind, and the cab, swift and well-horsed, and all unlike a London ‘crawler,’ bowled through the busy streets that were flooded with light.

She was off—the die was cast! Nothing occurred to hinder or delay her, nor did she wish for any such thing at that time.

It was not too late to return; but why should she return—and to *whom*?—‘Maggie’s’ husband? and she set her little teeth firmly and defiantly, as she was driven along the platform of the Waverley Station, with the city lights towering high in the air above her, and where the train that was to bear her away was all in readiness for starting.

A new but unnatural kind of life seemed opening up to her, and under her thick Shetland veil her hot tears welled freely. Until she was quite alone now, she knew not what a feature Jack had been in her life, what an influence his presence had upon her; and now their days of earnest and peaceful love were over, and his whispers of endearment would fall upon her ear no more. Withal, she had a stunned feeling, and she began to accept her present position as if it was the result of something that had happened long, long ago, with a kind of desperate resignation and grim indifference as to what her own future might bring forth.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

'INFIRM OF PURPOSE!'

THE night, one of the last of autumn, was very cold. She had secured a compartment to herself, fortunately; but there was no kind hand to adjust her rugs, to see that the foot-warmer was hot, to provide her with amusing periodicals, or attend to her little comforts in any way. She did not miss them, but she missed Jack.

All her actions were mechanical, and it was not until she was fairly away in the last train for the South, and had emerged from the Calton Tunnel, leaving Edinburgh with all its lights and lofty mansions behind, that she quite knew she was—vague and desperate of purpose—on her way to London.

As the hours dragged slowly on—so slowly in strange contrast to the lightning-like speed of the clanking train that bore her away—she thought, would she ever forget that dreadful and hopeless night journey—in itself a nightmare—fleeing from all she loved, or had loved her, with no future to realise? Would she ever forget that dreadful, mocking woman, with her painted cheeks and cunning black eyes—her letter and her visit, every incident and detail of which seemed photographed in her heart and on her brain?

Mentally she conned over and thought—till her head grew weary—of the letter she was to write Roland on the subject, and how this new distress must pain and shock him.

On, on went the train; the stars shone bright in the moonless sky; the smoke of the engine streamed far behind, and strange splashes of weird light were cast on hedges, fields, and trees, on bank cuttings and other features on either side of the way.

Now she had a glimpse of Dunbar, with its square church tower of red sandstone; now it was Colbrands-path, with all its wild woods and ravines; anon it was the German Sea,

near Fast Castle, rolling its free waves in white foam against steep and frowning precipices ; and a myriad lights gleaming on the broad river far down below announced the bordering Tweed at Berwick, and Scotland was left behind.

She lowered the windows from time to time, for her temples felt hot and feverish. She seemed to have nothing left her now but light and air, and just then the former was absent and the latter choking ; and to her tortured soul life had but lately seemed so beautiful.

‘ How proud I was of his love ! oh happy, happy days that can return no more ! ’ were her ever recurrent thoughts.

Yet such love as he had professed for her had been but a disgrace and a sham ! With all her affection, earnest and true, when she reflected how far he must have gone, and so daringly, out of his way to deceive her, and to throw dust in the eyes of her and her brother Roland, she felt one moment inclined to hate and scorn him, and the next her heart died within her at such a state of matters ; and, with all her shattered trust, love came back again—but love for what—for *whom* ?

Then came other thoughts.

Why had she been so precipitate ? What if the whole apparent catastrophe was some dire but explainable mistake ? Why had she not consulted Hester, who was so clever, so gentle, and loving, and her old uncle, Sir Harry ? But he was old and sorely ailing now.

Infirm of purpose, she began to fear that she had been perhaps too rash, and starting up, as if she would leave the carriage, she began to think—to think already—that to undo all she had done, she would give her right hand.

Her left—it bore no wedding-ring now. She looked at her watch—midnight ; long ere this Jack must have known that she had discovered all !

Morning drew on, and in its colder, purer air and atmosphere her thoughts seemed to become clearer, and as the train glided on through the flat and monotonous scenery of England she began to consider the possibility that she might have been deceived—that she had been too swift in avenging her wrongs, or supposed wrongs—and this im-

pression grew with the growing brightness of the reddening dawn, and with that impulsiveness which was characteristic of her, an hour even before the dawn came, she resolved that she would return—she would face the calamity out; she would cast herself upon her friends—not on the world; but how to stop the train, which flew on and on, inexorably on past station after station, every one of which seemed almost dark and deserted.

The steam was let off suddenly; the speed of the train grew slower and slower; it stopped at last in an open and sequestered place, on an embankment overlooking a great stretch of darkened, dimly seen, and flat country, half shrouded, as usual, in haze and mist.

Heads in travelling caps and strange gear were thrust from every window; inquiries were made anxiously and angrily; but no answer was accorded; the officials seemed all to have become very deaf and intensely sullen, while no passenger could alight, as every door was securely locked, to their alarm and indignation.

There was evidently an accident or a breakdown—a block on the line somewhere, no one knew precisely what. Signals were worked and lights flashed to avert destruction from the front or rear, and when the rush of a coming train was heard, 'the boldest held his breath for a time,' till it swept past—an express—on another line of rails.

If she were killed—smashed up horribly like people she had often read of in railways accidents, would Jack be sorry for her? There was a kind of revengeful pleasure in the thought, the conviction that he would be, even while she dropped a few natural tears over her own untimely demise.

The excitement grew apace. The next train might *not* be on the other line, and the mental agony of the travellers lasted for more than an hour—an hour of terror and misery, and of the wildest impatience to Maude, who in the tumult of her spirits would have welcomed the crash, the destruction, and, so far as she was personally concerned, the death by a collision, to end everything.

At last the steam was got up again, and slowly the train

glided into the brilliant station at York just as dawn was reddening the square towers of its glorious minster, and the pale girl sprang out on the platform to find that the train for Edinburgh had passed nearly two hours before, and that she would have to wait—to wait for hours with what patience she could muster.

Great was the evil and distress Hawkey Sharpe, in a spirit of useless revenge, had wrought her.

How slow the returning train was—oh, how slow! It seemed to stop everywhere, and to be no sooner off than it stopped again. Stations hitherto unnoticed had apparently sprung up like mushrooms in the night, and the platforms were crowded with people perpetually getting in or going out.

How long ago it seemed since last night—since that fatal visit, and since she left her pretty home, if home it was.

Even then, in the dire confusion and muddle of her thoughts, they lingered lovingly on the apparently remote memory of the happiest period of her young life—the day when Jack Elliot first said he loved her, and she had the joy of believing him to be entirely her own, to go hand-in-hand with through the long years that were to come—and now—now!

Looking forward to ample explanations from him, perhaps an entire reconciliation with him if these explanations were complete—or she knew not what—how the revolving wheels of the train seemed to lag! Then she would close her tear-inflamed eyes and strive not to think at all.

Already the Lion mountain of Arthur Seat, and the Calton with its Grecian columns, were rising into sight, and she would soon be at her destination.

To save appearances even before her servants—a somewhat useless consideration then—as even without the usual sharpness of their class they must now be aware of the fact that something unpleasant was on the *tapis*, and that their mistress had, unexplainedly, been absent from her own home

for a whole night and longer ; as the train approached the capital, Maude smoothed her sunny-brown hair, adjusted her laces, and bathed her pale face with *eau-de-cologne*. Oh, how grimy the process made her handkerchief after the dust of her long and double journey !

The afternoon of the day was well advanced when Maude, still paler, weary, unslept, and unrefreshed, faint from want of food and the wear and tear of her own terrible thoughts, arrived once more at the pretty villa Jack's love had temporarily provided for her.

The blinds were all closed as if death were in its walls, and her heart died within her.

She rushed up to her room ; it might just be the case that Jack might not have returned, and she might still find the packet she had addressed to him and her incoherent letter of farewell.

Is she in time ? Yes—a letter is there—a packet on her toilet-table ; she *is* in time—and makes a snatch of it. It is addressed not to her but to Hester Maule at Merlwood ; so Jack had been there and was gone, as were also his portmanteaux, his sword, and helmet-case.

In wild and vague search she moved swiftly from room to room.

'Jack—Jack !' she called in a low voice that sounded strangely resonant in the silent rooms ; but there was no answer, nor did any sound evince that he was in her vicinity. A chill crept over her, and she strove in vain to shake it off as her wondering servants gathered round her, and from them she soon learned all.

Their master had returned late last night—had got her letter, and, after a time, had driven away to catch the first early train for London—on his way to Egypt, he simply said. Egypt ! His train must have passed her somewhere on the line. Where was she to seek him—where telegraph to him ? Who was to advise her now ?

He had made up a packet of her letters, her rings, and other little mementos she had left, with a brief and certainly incoherent note to Hester Maule ; addressed it with a tremulous hand and carefully sealed it with his familiar

signet, bearing the baton *or* on a bend engrailed of the Elliots of Braidielee; and then, throwing himself into a cab, had driven away with no other trace than his farewell words given to the startled domestics.

Apart from the humiliation of uselessly attempting to explain matters to them, it was somewhat gratifying to Maude to learn that after his return 'the poor master' had been for a time quite quiet, as if stunned; then that he had been like 'a tearing lunatic'; had telegraphed to Merlwood, to Braidielee, and even to Earlshaugh for tidings of her, but in vain; and in the latter instance, fully informing Hawkey Sharpe that the train the latter had laid was ending in an explosion; and then that 'the master' had set off by daybreak.

He was not at his club in Queen Street.

Could he have taken London *en route* to Southampton, in the wild, vague hope of tracing her?

Eventually she was made aware that he had written to his own agents, and to Mr. M'Wadsett, to endeavour to elucidate the mystery which hung over the actions of Maude, the author of the forged letter, and to look after her during his probably prolonged absence in Egypt.

Thus, in rage and bewilderment, grief and anxiety, had Jack Elliot taken his departure, never doubting that they were both the victims of some nefarious plot, which he had not then time to unravel.

He was indignant, too, that Maude should so cruelly mistake and doubt him. He started for Egypt some twenty-four hours sooner than he need have done, and hence came fresh complications.

'Oh, what new and unexpected worry is this, Maude?' exclaimed Hester Maule, when a few hours later the girl threw herself speechless and in a passion of tears into her arms.

And now, or eventually, three lives they were interested in beyond all others (if Malcolm Skene survived), would be involved in the terrible risks of the war in the Soudan.

CHAPTER XLIX.

CHRISTMAS DAY IN CAMP AT KORTI.

THE last days of December saw Roland Lindsay with his regiment—the 1st Battalion of the South Staffordshire—of old, the 38th—a corps of the days of Queen Anne—the corps of the gallant old Luke Lillingston, who led the troops in Wilmot's West Indian Expedition of 1695—toiling in the boats up the great river of Egypt against strong currents by Kodokal, and within sight of the ruins of old Dongola—ruins of red brick covering miles—by Debbeh, where the currents were stronger still, and awnings could not be used, though the heat was 120 degrees, and the men became giddy and distracted by the white glare and the hot simmering atmosphere, with lassitude and thirst, and where it was so terrible at times, to emerge from the shadow of some impending rock, once more to plod and pull the heavy oar under the fierce and fiery sun. Though occasionally spreading the big sails like wings on each side of the boats, they would have a pleasant hour's run in the evening ere darkness or a rapid barred their upward way.

Then, on the redly-illuminated waters of the mighty and mysterious river, the white sails of the squadron would show up pleasantly in the twilight, after the landscape had been ablaze with that rich profusion of colour only to be seen where dark rocky hills, yellow desert sand, and patches of verdant vegetation border, as they do on the upper reaches of the Nile.

Then, when darkness came, the boats would close in with the shore, where they were moored to a bank, and the sails were lowered and stowed on board; while under the feathery palms, or date trees, fires were lighted, the frugal ration of bully-beef, onions, and potatoes was cooked and eaten amid the jollity and lightness of heart which are ever a characteristic of our soldiers, and then the poor fellows would coil themselves up to sleep and prepare for the coming toil of the morrow.

On the 22nd of December the camp at Korti was reached at 9.30 in the evening, after a hard struggle amid a labyrinth of sand banks. Roland found the camp to be prettily situated on the edge of the river, and surrounded by mimosa trees, and there the advanced guard of the expedition, detailed to relieve Gordon and raise the siege of the doomed city, was now assembling fast.

It was a spot never trod by Britons before. There the caravans from Egypt to Sennar quit the Nile and proceed across the Bayuda Desert, the route from Dongola being easy for travelling, and the land on both banks of the river rich and fertile.

At Korti, where now every hour or so our bugles were blown, there stood in the days of Thothemus III. a great temple dedicated to Isis, whose tears for the loss of Osiris caused the regular inundations of the Nile.

Under some wide spreading trees the tents of the Camel Corps were pitched along the western bank of the latter; and the whole scene there was most picturesque. The leafy shade tempered the fierce heat of the sun, and, after their long toil in the boats and over the burning sands and glittering rocks, our soldiers were charmed for a time with the place; but some wrath was excited when it was discovered that a correspondence between a French journalist in the camp of the Mahdi before Khartoum, and a clique in Cairo, supplied the former with the fullest information of Lord Wolseley's proceedings, with hints as to the best means of baffling them.

Though the enemy were at some distance, every precaution was taken against a surprise by night. Cavalry vedettes were posted out beyond the camp by day, and strong outlying pickets, with chains of advanced sentries by night; but, as Christmas Day drew near, considerable anxiety was felt in the camp at Korti at the total cessation of all news from blockaded Khartoum, which was two hundred and sixty miles distant by the desert, and by river where the former touched the latter at Gubat or Abu Kru.

The total strength of the advanced force at Korti, after the departure of Roland's regiment, was under two thousand

five hundred men, with six screw guns, two thousand two hundred camels and horses, two pinnaces, and sixty-four whale boats, while the 19th Hussars, when the advance began, had orders to ride by the western bank of the Nile and act as scouts to the Khartoum relief column.

By this time there was not a single sound garment in the latter—the result of fifty days' river work from Sarras. The mud-stained helmets were battered out of all shape; the tunics and trousers were patched with cloth of every kind and hue; officers and men had beards of many days' growth, and the skin of their faces was peeled off in strange and uncouth patches, the result of incessant exposure to the fierce sun by day and the chill dews by night.

Christmas morning, 1884, was ushered in by a church parade, and by prayer, when the whole force—slender though it was—was present, under the feathery palms, by the banks of the Nile, that river of mystery, which has its rise in a land unknown; and at night the soldiers gathered round two great camp-fires and made merry, singing songs, and doubtless thinking of those who were far away at home.

It was on this occasion that the South Staffordshire, under the gallant Eyre, raised three hearty cheers, when, from the rear, a telegram was brought, sent all the way from their second battalion in England, wishing 'all ranks a happy Christmas and a brilliant campaign.'

And happy and jolly all certainly were, though they were now in the region of bully-beef, for they fared on hard biscuits and coffee in the morning, with bully-beef for tiffin, and bully-beef for dinner.

As the evening of Christmas Day closed in, Roland, with a cigarette in his mouth, reclined on the grass under a mimosa bush, watching the picturesque groups of tanned and tattered soldiers that hovered round the two great watch-fires, which cast weird patches of light on the feathery palms, the glittering piles of arms, the few white tents occupied by Lord Wolseley's staff and officers of rank; on the long rows of picketed camels; on the distant figures of the advanced sentinels seen darkly against the sky of pale

green and orange that showed where the sun had set beyond Gebel Magaya in the Bayuda Desert ; on the quaint boats and barges moored in the Nile ; and on the broad flow of that majestic river, reddened as it was by the flames, to which the active hands and sharp bill-hooks of the soldiers added fuel every moment ; while the high spirits of the troops—seldom wont to flag—were irrepressible then in the great hope of getting on—getting on and reaching Khar-toum—to shake hands with Gordon ere it might be—too late!

In three days the South Staffordshire were to start and take the lead in that eventful expedition, and led by jovial Dick Mostyn, Wilton, and other kindred spirits ; already the soldiers were chorusing a song with which they meant to bend their oars ; and more than once, as they sang, they turned to where their favourite officer, Roland Lindsay, lay looking on, for he was one of those men who are by nature and habit born to be the leader of others, and possessing that kind of magnetic influence which inspires confidence.

Roland had plenty of spirit, bodily vigour, and perseverance ; but when a halt came, and with it a brief term of rest, he could not help indulging in occasional regretful thoughts, haunting memories, and wishes that were hopeless. He had, as Annot anticipated, got over his rudely-dispelled passion for her, true love it could not have been, he flattered himself now, and he was fully justified in dismissing *her* from his mind ; and in that matter he was disturbed by the fact no more ‘than a nightmare disturbs the occupations of the dreamer, as he goes about his business on the following day in the full light of heaven, and with his brain clear of the idle fantasies of the darkness.’

But now he could not help thinking of Hester Maule, especially as he had seen her last, when she stood at the door of Merlwood, and murmured good-bye, her hand in his, her dark blue eyes dimmed with gathering tears—the tears that he knew would fall when he was gone—her graceful head drooping towards him, and how he now, as then, longed to whisper in her little white ear the words he scarcely knew how to utter, and which were withheld through very shame of himself.

Earlshaugh he deemed, of course, now gone from his family for ever ; well, it was only one more case of the now daily sinking out of sight, the decay or destruction of good old Scottish families, while mushrooms came up to take their place in the land, though seldom in history.

Roland had and still loved Hester, and in his heart believed in her as an embodiment of all that is good and pure in womanhood ; but rather unwisely had allowed the fact to be guessed at by her, thinking that she understood him, and that his declaration might be made at any time ; and, as we have shown, he was quite upon the point thereof, when Annot Drummond came with her wiles and smiles to prove the evil genius of them both.

In connection with Annot's name he almost let his scornful lips form a malediction now—that name once linked with the dearest and fondest terms his fancy could frame. Yet he could not even now class all women under her category, and believe that beauty was given them for the sole purpose of winning men's hearts without losing their own. But his reflections at times on his own folly were fiery and bitter for all that ; and as a sedative he enjoyed to the utmost extent the daily excitement of active service now in that remarkable land, the Soudan.

Christmas-night in the camp at Korti was indeed a merry one, and although under the eyes of Lord Wolseley and his staff, the soldiers were in no way repressed in their jollity and fun—for a little of the latter goes a long way in the army—and, all unlike the Northern Yule to which they were accustomed, it was without snow or icicles, holly-berries, mistletoe, and plum-pudding ; but those who lingered round these watch-fires on the arid sand of the Soudan had many a kindly and tender thought of the bright family circles, the loved faces, and household scenes of those who were dear to them, and were so far, far away beyond the drear Bayuda Desert, and beyond the seas, in many a pretty English village, where the Christmas carols were being sung while the chimes rang joyously in the old ivied steeple, in memory of the star that shone over Bethlehem—the herald of peace and goodwill to men.

Ere that festival came again more than one battle had to be fought—Khartoum would be lost or won—Gordon saved or abandoned and betrayed—and many a young heart that was full of joy and hope would be as cold as inexorable death could make it ; but no thought of these things marred the merry night our soldiers spent as they turned into the bivouac at Korti—for though called a camp, it was scarcely a complete one.

Dick Mostyn had procured some wine from an enterprising Greek sutler ; and this he shared freely with Lindsay and others while it lasted.

Though poor, and such as was never seen on the mess-table, it was voted ‘capital stuff,’ in that part of the world, and Dick—with a sigh—wished his ‘throat was a mile long,’ as he drained the last of it.

‘Such a wonderful flow of spirits you always have, Dick !’ said Lindsay.

‘Well—I have made up my mind to be jolly, remembering Mark Tapley and his Eden,’ replied Mostyn.

‘Jolly on your couch—the sand ?’

‘Jolly as a sandboy—yes ; yet not disinclined to pray for the man who invented a good feather-bed, even as Sancho Panza did for him who invented sleep.’

Indeed, Mostyn admitted that he was happier in the Soudan than he had been in England.

He had fluttered the dovescots of the West End with tolerable success, and might have ‘bagged an heiress,’ as he phrased it ; but high stakes at his club, bets on every possible thing ; a bad book on the Derby, ditto on the Oaks ; unpaid accounts—St. John’s Wood and ‘going to the devil on all fours,’ marred his chances ; then his gouty old governor had come down upon him with his ‘cut-you-off-with-a-shilling face,’ and Dick thought he was well out of all his troubles, and had *only* the Arabs to face in the Soudan.

Next day the regiment was inspected and highly complimented by Lord Wolseley, as ‘the first to come up with the boats,’ adding, ‘I know you will do credit to the county you are named after and to the character you have won. I am proud to have such a battalion on service with me.’

This ceremony was scarcely over and the soldiers' dinner drum been beaten as a summons once more to bully-beef and hard biscuits, when a few boats brought up a detachment that marched at once into camp, where crowds gathered round them, as newcomers, to hear the last news from the rear, as letters were becoming scarce and newspapers just then still more so.

A tall officer who was in command, with his canvas haversack, water-bottle, revolver-case, and jack-knife dangling about him, and whose new fighting suit of gray contrasted with the tattered attire of Roland and others, came towards them with impatient strides.

CHAPTER L.

THE START FOR KHARTOUM.

'ELLIOT, can this be Jack Elliot?' exclaimed Dick Mostyn as he screwed an eyeglass into his left eye. 'By Jove, he looks as if he had a bad toothache! What's up, Jack—lost your heart to some fair Cairene on the Shoubrah road—eh?'

'Jack Elliot it is!' said Roland, as the officer in question, after 'handing over' his detachment, made his way to the quarters of the South Staffordshire, 'you are just in time to go up the river with us. We are on the eve of starting for Khartoum.'

'At last!'

'Yes, at last,' continued Roland, as they grasped each other's hands, and the latter, when looking intently into his brother-in-law's face, detected a grave, grim, keen-eyed, harassed, and even haggard expression, which was all unlike the jovial, free, and open one he was wont to see there. 'Why, Jack,' said he, 'what the devil is up? Are you ill with fever, or what? Did you leave all well at home?' he added as he drew him aside.

‘Well—yes—I suppose ; but ill or well, thereby hangs a tale—a devil of a tale ; but ere I can tell it, give me something to drink, old fellow—my water-bottle is empty—flask ditto, and then I shall relate that which you would rather not hear.’

Jack unbuckled and flung his sword aside, while Roland hastily and impatiently supplied his wants, and then heard his brief, rapid, and startling story, winding up with the disappearance of Maude from the villa, and the incoherent and mysterious letter of farewell she left for him.

‘After this—the deluge !’ exclaimed Roland in the direst perplexity.

‘God and my own heart only know what it cost me to start for the seat of war, leaving Maude, as I did, untraced, unfollowed, and undiscovered ; but I had neither time nor an address to follow up,’ sighed Elliot ; ‘and God only knows, too, how all this has cut her as it must have cut her—my poor darling—to the soul !’

The meeting of Roland and Jack Elliot was one of perplexity, gloom, and genuine distress. Far away from the land where they could be of help or use in unravelling the mystery, or succouring Maude, whom they deemed then a houseless fugitive, they felt themselves miserably powerless, hopeless, and exasperated ; but curiously, perhaps, they never thought of suspecting the real author of the mischief, and were utterly at a loss to conceive how such a complication and accusation came about in any way.

Neither Jack nor Roland could know or conceive that she was safe under her uncle’s wing at Merlwood. Thus they had to endure the anxiety of supposing her, with all her beauty, refinement, and delicacy, to be adrift in some homeless, aimless, and despairing way in London—haunted by anger and terror of an injury and irreparable wrong. The contemplation of this state of affairs filled the minds of both with incessant torture—a torture for which there was no relief, and would be none, either by letter or telegraph, for a long time, if ever, to them, as inexorably—in two days now—the regiment would be again on the Nile.

‘Reason how we may,’ was the ever-recurring and gloomy

thought of Roland now, 'it has been said that Fate does certainly pursue some families to their ruin and extinction, and such is our probable end—the Lindsays of Earls-haugh !'

And so, apart from their brother officers, these two conversed and talked of the mysterious episode of the woman and her claims again and again, viewing it in every imaginable way, till they almost grew weary of it, in the hopelessness of elucidating it while in the Soudan; and as for poor Malcolm Skene and *his* fate, that was supposed to be a thing of the past, and they ceased to surmise about it.

At 2 p.m. on the 28th of December the start for Khartoum began !

It was made by the South Staffordshire, under the gallant Eyre, with exactly 19 officers and 527 men of the Regiment, and 2 officers and 20 men of the Royal Engineers in 50 boats, having the Staffordshire Knot painted on their bows, the badge of the old '38th.'

The sight was a fine and impressive one; the band was playing merrily in the leading boat, as usual, Scottish and Irish airs, as England, apparently, has none for any martial purpose. Thus it is that Scottish and Irish quicksteps are now ordered by the Horse Guards for nearly all the English regiments, with Highland reels for the Cavalry, and one other air in the 'Queen's Regulations,' with which we bid farewell to the old colours, is 'Auld Lang Syne.'

Steadily the whole battalion moved up stream, cheering joyously—the first away for Khartoum—exhibiting a regularity and power of stroke as they feathered their oars, and showing how much recent practice had done to convert them into able boatmen, and soon the camp was left behind, and the boats had the bare desert on both sides of the stream; but on and on they went, stemming the current of the famous Nile, famous even in the remotest ages, when the Egyptians worshipped the cow, the cat, the ibis, and the crocodile, and when King Amenchat, sixth of the Twelfth Dynasty, cut his huge river-like canal to join Lake Mœris, 250 miles lower down.

On the 29th the Staffordshire boats were off the island

of Massawi, where the atmosphere was grilling, being 120 degrees in the shade; but the soldiers were in the highest spirits, their regiment being the leading one of the whole army.

One scorching day followed another, yet on and on they toiled unwearyingly, passing Merawi and Abu Dom amid date-trees and rank, gigantic tropical vegetation, till the New Year's Day of 1885 found them nearing the foot of a cataract, after passing which the River Column was to form for its final advance on Khartoum. Already the uniforms were more than ever ragged, and scarcely a man had boots to his feet.

Roland and Elliot had command of different boats, so they could commune no more, even when they moored for the night by the river's bank, when the crimson sun had set in ruddy splendour beyond the gray hills of the Bayuda Desert, and the dingy yellow of the Nile was touched by the afterglow, in which its waves rippled in purple and silver sheen, while the dark, feathery palms and fronds swayed slowly to and fro in the friendly breeze, and the great pelicans were seen to wade amid the slime and ooze where the hideous crocodiles were dozing.

In some places the boats were rowed between islets which displayed a wondrous tropical wealth of dhurra, sugar-canes, and cotton-trees, with palms innumerable.

Officers and men—even chaplains—worked hard at the oars in their anxiety to get on. For days some never had the oar out of their hands; on others they were hauling the boats over the rapids and up cataracts, where at times they stuck in rocks and sandbanks, and had to be unloaded and lifted bodily off. At times the pulling was awful, and the hot sun scorched the back like fire, while the boats seemed to stand still in places where the main stream forced itself between masses of rock in a downward torrent, forming ugly whirlpools, about which the only certainty was, that whoever fell into them was drowned.

'Pull for your lives,' was then the cry; 'give way, men—give way with a will! Pull, or you'll be down the rapids.'

Then might be seen the men with their helmets off, bare-headed, and braving sunstroke under that merciless sunshine; steaming with perspiration—their teeth set hard—their hearts panting with the awful and, at times, apparently hopeless exertion of pulling against that mighty barrier of downward rolling water against which they seemed to make no head; yet ever and anon the cry went up:

‘Pull, my lads, cheerily—we’ll shake hands with old Gordon yet!’

And so they toiled on—now up to their knees in mud, now up to their chins in water, in rags and tatters, their blistered and festered hands swathed in dirty linen bandages, officers and men alike; often hungry, ever thirsty and weary, yet strong in heart and high in impulse, as our soldiers ever are when face to face with difficulty or death.

Then a little breeze might catch the sails, carry the boats ahead, and then a cheer of satisfaction would make the welkin ring.

Incredible was the amount of skill, care, and toil requisite for getting the boats of the flotilla up the Nile, especially at these places where with terrible force the rapids came in one sheet of foam, with a ceaseless roar between narrow walls of black rock at a visible incline, while at times the yells of thousands of wondering natives on the banks lent a strange and thrilling interest to the scene.

‘At low Nile,’ says a writer, ‘these rapids are wild and desolate archipelagos, usually at least one or two miles in length, while the river bank on either side presents a series of broken, precipitous, and often inaccessible cliffs and rugged spurs. Their sombre and gloomy appearance is heightened by the colour of the rock, which, between high and low water-mark, is usually of a jet hue, and in many places so polished by the long action of the water, that it has the appearance of being carefully black-leaded. One or two big-winged, dusky birds may suddenly flap across, with a harsh, uncanny cry, or some small boy, whose tailor’s bills must trouble him little, looks up from his fish-trap and shrieks for backsheesh; but beyond these, and the ceaseless rush of the water, sound or sight there is none.’

Many of these islets are submerged at high Nile, creating a number of cross currents which vary with the depth of the water, and render navigation difficult to all, and impossible to those who are unacquainted with each special locality ; thus the troops of the relieving column had before them such a task as even Britons scarcely ever encountered before ; but the Canadians, under Colonel Kennedy, of the Ontario Militia ; the Indians, under the great chief White Eagle, and the soldiers, all worked splendidly together.

The 3rd of January saw the Staffordshire reach the Bivouac of Handab, in a wild and rocky spot, and in a position of peril between two great bodies of the enemy ; but cheerily the soldiers joined in the queer chorus of a doggerel Canadian boat song adapted to the occasion by the Indians, who, whilom, had made the poplar groves of the Red River and Lake Winnipeg echo to it—

‘ Pulley up the boat, boys, rolley up the sleeve,
Khartoum am a long way to trabbel !
Pulley up the boat, boys, rolley up the sleeve,
Khartoum am a long way to trabbel, I believe !’

CHAPTER LI.

THE MARCH IN THE DESERT.

WE have stated that Roland and his comrades were left stationed at a point where they were menaced by two forces of the enemy.

‘ These were,’ says Colonel Eyre, of the Staffordshire, in his ‘ Diary,’ ‘ the tribes whose people murdered poor Colonel Stewart. They are entrenched twenty-three miles in front of us up the river, and sent word that they were to fight. They have a large force on the Berber Road, forty miles on our flank ; they were here two days ago, and took all the camels in the district. We are encamped on a wild desert,

with ridges of rocky hills about two miles inland. We have pitched our tents.'

There we shall leave them for a time, and look back to Korti, where some boats of troops arrived from Hannek, twenty-three miles lower down the Nile, and in one of these, tugging manfully at an oar, came the rescued Malcolm Skene!

His disappearance many weeks before—nearly three months now—was well known to the troops; hence—though in that fierce warfare, a human life, more or less lost or saved, mattered little—his sudden appearance in camp, when he reported himself at the headquarter tent, did make a little stir for a time; and thus he was the hero of the hour; but great and forward movements were in progress now, and there was not much time to waste on anyone or anything else.

Though he had missed his corps, the Staffordshire, by about twenty-four hours, it was with a source of intense satisfaction that he found himself among his own countrymen again—once more with the troops and ready for active service of any kind.

One thought was fully prominent in his mind, never again would he be taken alive by the Soudanese.

A horse, harness, and arms, belonging to some of the killed or drowned, were speedily provided for him, and, by order of the General commanding, he was attached to the personal staff—*pro tem.*—of Sir Herbert Stewart, as his great knowledge of the country and of Arabic might prove of good service.

Considering the treachery of Hassan Abdullah, his long detention in the zereba of the Sheikh Moussa, and what his too probable end would have been after the deportation of Zebehr Pasha, with the recent close and deadly struggle he had for life in the grasp of Girolamo, and how nearly he escaped recapture and slaughter, Malcolm Skene had now a personal and somewhat rancorous animosity to the Soudanese.

Now that he had not perished in the desert, in the river, by Arab hands, or in any fashion as his troublesome pre-

sentiment had led him to expect when he left Cairo guided by that rascal Hassan on his lonely mission to Dayr-el-Syrian, he felt a curious sense of mortification, compunction, almost of regret, concerning the very tender and loving letter of farewell he had written to Hester Maule; and began to think it would be somewhat remarkable and awkward if—after all—he should again meet her face to face in society.

Then again, as often before, he seemed to see in fancy the conservatory at Earlshaugh, with its long and faintly lit vistas of flowers, rare exotics, with feathery acacias and orange trees and azaleas overhead; the gleam of the moonshine on the adjacent lakelet; the tall slender figure and soft dark eyes of Hester; and to his vivid imagination her words and his own came back to him, with the nervous expression of her sad and parted lips as she forbade him ever to hope, and yet gave him no reason why!

How long, long ago, it seemed since then! Yet he often fancied himself saying to her:

‘Is the answer you gave me then still the same, dear Hester?’

Well—well—that was over and done with, as yet, and ere dawn came in on the 29th of December he was roused by the bugles sounding ‘the assembly’ for the advance.

Lord Wolseley’s orders were now that General Earle, with an Infantry Brigade (including the Black Watch and Staffordshire), was to punish the Monassir tribe for the murder of Colonel Donald Stewart; while the Mounted Infantry and Guards Camel Corps, under Sir Herbert Stewart, were to advance on a march of exploration to Gakdul, a distance of ninety miles, with a convoy of camels laden with stores—a route between the deserts of Bayuda and Ababdeh.

A little after 3 a.m. on the 29th of December, the cavalry scouts, under Major Kitchener, with some Arab guides, moved off, and then Lord Wolseley gave his orders for the column to get into motion, and strike straight off across the pebble-strewn desert, towards the distant horizon, which was indicated only by a dark, opaque, and undulating line,

against which a mimosa tuft stood up, and above which the rays of the yet unrisen sun were faintly crimsoning the then hazy sky, which otherwise as yet was totally dark.

To Sir Herbert Stewart the final orders were brought by Malcolm Skene, his new aide-de-camp.

‘You are to advance, sir, in column of companies, with an interval of thirty paces between each, the Guards Camel Corps and Engineers in front, the convoy and baggage next, then the Artillery and Mounted Infantry, the Hussars to form the advance and rear guards.’

Malcolm saluted, reined back his horse, and betook him to the inevitable cigarette, while the camels ceased to grunt, and stalked off to the posts assigned them, and the column began to move, so as to be in readiness to form a hollow square at a moment’s notice.

To Malcolm Skene, even to him who had recently seen so much, it was indeed a strange sight to watch the departing camels, with their long, slender necks stretched out like those of ostriches, and their legs, four thousand pairs in number, gliding along in military order, silently, softly, noiselessly, like a mighty column of phantoms, beast and rider, until the light, rising dust of the desert blended all, soldiers, camels, convoy, artillery, and baggage, into one gray, uniform mass, which ere long seemed to fade out, to pass away from the eyes of those who remained behind in the camp.

In case of an attack the Guards were to form square, echeloned on the left front of the column; the Mounted Infantry were to do the same on the right rear; but the column was so great in length that it was feared their fire would scarcely protect the entire line unless the usually swift enemy were seen approaching in time to get the baggage and convoy closed up; for, broad though the front of this strange column, it was fully a mile long, and would have proved very unwieldy to handle in case of a sudden onslaught. Thus on the march it frequently halted, dismounted, and, for practice, prepared to meet the enemy, and was so formed that if the latter got among the camels they would be exposed to an enfilading fire from two faces each way.

After a halt nine miles distant from Korti, and as many to the left of the Wady Makattem, the march was resumed under a peculiarly brilliant moonlight—one so bright that few present had ever seen anything like it before.

Not a cloud was visible in the far expanse of the firmament ; there were millions upon millions of stars sparkling, but their brightness paled almost out in the brilliance of the moon. There were no leaves to shine in the dew, but showers of diamonds seemed to gem the yellow pebbles of the desert ; and had birds been there, they might have sung as if a new day had dawned ; yet how all unlike the warm glow of an Egyptian day was the icy splendour of the moonlight that mingled in one quarter with the coming redness of the east.

Every sword-blade, every rifle-barrel, every buckle and stirrup-iron, glinted out in light, while the figures of every camel and horse, soldier, and artillery-wheel were clearly defined as at noonday ; and no sound broke the stillness save the shrill voices of the Somali camel-drivers.

It was soon after this that Major Barrow, when scouting with some Hussars, came upon a solitary messenger, bearer of a tiny scrap of paper, no larger than a postage stamp—one of the last missives from Gordon, dated 14th December, he being then shut up in Khartoum.

The moonlight faded ; the red dawn came in, and still the march of the column went on ; in front a dreary, sandy, and waterless desert ; behind, the narrow streak of green that indicated the course of the Nile ; and now our officers began to say to each other that ‘if the camel corps alone was from the first deemed sufficient to relieve Khartoum, then why, at such enormous expense, exertion, and toil, were 3,000 infantry brought blundering up the Nile ? And anon, if they were not sufficient, surely there was infinite danger in exposing the corps, unsupported, to the contingency of an overwhelming attack by the united forces of the Mahdi.’

It was found that there were wells, however, at Hamboka, El Howeiyat, and elsewhere, far apart, and that so far as water was concerned the practicability of the desert route to

Metemneh was proved by the march to Gakdul; after reaching which Sir Herbert Stewart retraced his steps to Korti; where two days afterwards, about noon, a cloud of dust seen rising in the distance, almost to the welkin, announced the return of his column, looming large and darkly out of the mirage of the desert, in forms that were strange, distorted, and gigantic, after leaving twenty broken-down camels to die, abandoned in the awful waste.

Just as Stewart came, the sound of Scottish pipes on the Nile announced the arrival of the Black Watch in their boats off Korti. All round the world have our bagpipes sounded, but never before so far into the heart of the Dark Continent.

On Thursday, the 8th of January, the second advance through the desert began, and the natives looked upon the troops as doomed men. Three armies, larger and better equipped, had departed on the same errand to 'smash up' the Mahdi, but had been cut off nearly to a man, and their unburied skeletons were strewn all over the country.

All the officers in Sir Herbert Stewart's column were strangers to Malcolm Skene, but such is the influence of service together, *camaraderie* and companionship in danger and suffering, that even in these days of general muddle and 'scratch' formations, he felt already quite like an old friend with the staff and many others.

The pebble-strewn desert was glistening in the moonlight, when the column *en route* for Khartoum, *viâ* Gubat and Metemneh, marched off at two in the morning, and ever and anon the bugle rang out on the ambient air, sounding 'halt,' that the stragglers in the rear might close up, and then the long array continued to glide like a phantom army, or a mass of moving shadows, across the waste.

Three hours afterwards, there stole upon one quarter of the horizon a lurid gleam—the herald of the coming day; then the bugles struck up a Scottish quick-step—the silence was broken, and the men began to talk cheerily, and 'chaff' each other, though already enduring that parched sensation in the mouth, peculiar to all who traverse the deserts that border on the Nile—a parched feeling for which liquor,

curious to say, is almost useless, and often increases the torture—and all, particularly the marching infantry, in defiance of orders, drank from their water-bottles surreptitiously, even when it was announced that *seventy* more miles had to be covered ere a proper supply could be obtained from wells.

Those at Hamboka, forty-seven miles from Korti, were found full of dry sand—destroyed by the horsemen of the Sheikh Moussa Abu Hagil, who was in that quarter; those at El Howieyat, eight miles further on, were in nearly the same condition, and already the soldiers were becoming maddened by thirst.

Day had passed, and again the weary march was resumed in the dark.

At the well of Abu Halfa, eighty miles from Korti, the scene that ensued was exciting and painful—even terrible. The orders were that the fighting men were to be first supplied; and, held back by the bayonet's point, the wretched camp-followers, Somali camel-drivers, and others frantically tore up the warm sand with their hands in the hope that a little water might collect therein, and when it did so, they stooped and lapped it up like thirsty cats or dogs. Others failed to achieve this, and with their mouths cracked, their entrails shrivelled, their flashing eyes wild and hollow, they rolled about with frenzy at their hearts, and blasphemy on their lips. There was no reasoning with them—they could no longer reason.

Even the resolute British soldier could scarcely be restrained by habitual discipline from throwing the latter aside, and joining in the throng that surged around the so-called well—a mere stony hole in the desert sand—while in the background were maddened horses, and even the ever-patient camels, plunging, struggling, unmanageable, and fighting desperately with their masters for a drop of that precious liquid.

In the struggle here Malcolm Skene, as an officer, got his water-bottle filled among the earliest, having ridden forward, and with a sigh that was somewhat of a prayer he was about to take a deep draught therefrom, when the wan face,

the haggard eyes, and parched lips of a young soldier of the 2nd Sussex caught his eye. Too weak to struggle, perhaps too well-bred, if breeding could be remembered in that hour of madness, or so despairing as to be careless, he had made no effort to procure water, or if he did so, had failed.

Skene's heart smote him.

'Drink, my man,' said he, proffering his water-bottle, 'and then I shall.'

'Oh, may God bless you, sir,' murmured the poor infantry lad fervently, as he drank, and returned the bottle with a salute.

Gakdul—hemmed in by lofty and stupendous precipices of bare rock—was reached on the 12th January, when, amid cheers and rejoicings, a plentiful supply of water was obtained, after which preparations were made for the march to Metemneh, where it was known that thousands were gathering to bar our way to Khartoum. Yet Stewart's total strength was only 1,607 men of all ranks, encumbered by 304 camp followers, and 2,380 camels and horses. The halt of two days at Gakdul did wonders in restoring the energies of men and cattle.

There Malcolm Skene's knowledge of Arabic was frequently in requisition. As yet the leaders of this advanced column were utterly without any trustworthy intelligence as to the movements of the Mahdi's army, for bands of prowling robbers and the Bedouins of the Sheikh Moussa infested every route in front and rear, keeping carefully out of sight by day-time, but swooping down on the camping grounds by night in the hope of finding abandoned spoil—perhaps sick or wounded men to torture and slay.

Sir Herbert Stewart arrived on the 16th of January within a few miles of the now famous wells of Abu Klea, after a waterless march of forty-three miles from those of El Faar, and already even the poor camels had become so reduced in physique that as many as thirty dropped down to die in one day; but the troops reached a line of black sandstone ridges lying westward of Abu Klea, and a squadron of Hussars, whose horses were suffering most severely from

want of water, cantered forward to inspect the country, and Malcolm Skene rode with them.

At mid-day they found the enemy in a valley, where long and reedy grass was waving in the hot breeze—a place studded by several camel-thorns and acacias. The Arab centre occupied a long and gentle slope, like the glacis of an earthwork.

Led by a Sheikh, about 200 mounted men advanced resolutely and in tolerable order, opening fire with their Remingtons on the Hussars.

In their leader Malcolm, through his field-glass, recognised the Sheikh Moussa Abu Hagil, who alone of all his band wore a suit of that mail armour of the Middle Ages, which is thus described by Colonel Colborne, who says ‘it was in the Soudan’ he first saw it, to his amazement: ‘Whether original or a copy of it, it was undoubtedly the dress of the Crusaders. The hauberk was fastened round the body by the belt, and formed a complete covering from head to foot. The long and double-edged sword was worn between the leg and saddle.’

Moussa wore a flat-topped helmet with a plume, and tippet of Darfour mail; his horse’s head was cased in steel, and covered by a quilt thick enough to turn a spear; but, save their bodies, which were clad in Mahdi shirts, his followers were naked—with their dark, bronze-like legs and arms bare.

Under their fire the reconnoitring force of Hussars fell back, an operation viewed by Sir Herbert Stewart and his staff from the summit of a lofty hill composed entirely of black and shining rock, from whence he could see the whole country for miles, and from where he ordered a general advance.

By difficult defiles, and in serious distress owing to the want of water, the troops advanced in steady and splendid order, the line being led by the Brigade Major, David, Earl of Airlie, of the 10th Hussars—one of a grand old historic race—round whose Castle of Cortachy a spectre drummer is said to beat when fate is nigh—and he had brought the whole into the valley by half-past two o’clock; then Sir

Herbert, having ascertained from Skene's report that the wells of Abu Klea were too far in rear of the Arab position to be accessible that night, resolved to fortify the ground he occupied, a ridge rising gently from the Wady, but broken before it reached the hills, while close in rear of it was a grassy hollow, wherein the baggage animals were picketed.

Hasty parapets of stones, gathered from the ground whereon the troops lay, were constructed along the front of the position, flanked by *abattis* of thorny mimosa, while the great hill of black rock referred to was occupied by a party of signallers, who built thereon a redoubt; while a mile in its rear, on the brow of a precipice, another fortlet was formed as a rallying point in case of a reverse.

With his staff and a few Hussars Sir Herbert now rode to the front, and saw, as the ruddy sun began to set and cast long shadows over the swelling uplands of the scenery, the enemy in their thousands taking possession of a lofty hill sixteen hundred paces distant on his right—a position from whence they could completely enfilade his lines. Thus ere darkness fell they secured the range, and from that time no one could reckon on twenty minutes' sound sleep.

Prior to that a couple of shells were thrown among them, exploding with brilliant glares and loud crashes, on which they retired a little or sank down, leaving two great white banners floating out against the starry sky-line.

All night long they 'potted' away with their Remingtons, keeping up a desultory, but most harassing, fire, their long range and trajectory placing every point in danger, and some of their bullets fell whizzing downwards through the air upon the sleepers.

Many men were wounded, and many camels, too, and all night long, while their rifle shots flashed redly out of the darkness, they maintained a horrible din on their one-headed war drums, making the hours hideous.

All through the dark and moonless night these savage sounds rose and swelled upon the dewy air, and formed a fitting accompaniment to the wail of their pestering bullets as they swept over the silent British bivouac.

CHAPTER LII.

THE PRESENTIMENT FULFILLED.

So passed the night.

On the morning of the 17th of January, early, and without blast of bugle or beat of drum, a frugal breakfast—the last meal that many were to have in this world—was served round, and had been barely partaken of, when the Arab skirmishers came swarming over the low hills on our right flank, and opened fire with their Remingtons at eleven hundred yards' range.

With a succession of dreadful crashes, our shrapnel shell exploded among them, tearing many to pieces and putting the rest to flight; and after more than one attempt to lure the enemy from their position had failed, at 7 a.m. Sir Herbert Stewart began his preparations to advance, and drive them from the wells of Abu Klea.

Meanwhile the army of the Mahdi had been continually appearing and disappearing in front, their many-coloured pennons streaming out on the passing breeze, their long sword-blades and spear-heads flashing brightly in the red rays of the uprising sun, while the thunder of their battle-drums and their savage wild cries loaded the morning air.

Five ranks deep, four thousand of them deployed in irregular lines along a hollow in our front, led by mounted sheikhs and dervishes, clad in richly-embroidered Mahdi camises, and posted at intervals of twenty-five yards apart—conspicuous among them Moussa Abu Hagil, in his Dar-four shirt of mail.

They were posted on strong ground westward of the wells, which our soldiers, sorely athirst, were full of anxiety to reach; and as the camels were mostly to be left in the rear, they were knee-haltered, and their stores and saddles used to strengthen the parapets of the detached fortlets.

In the fighting square which now advanced were only

one hundred camels for carrying litters, stores, water, and spare ammunition.

The Heavies on this eventful morning were led by Colonel Talbot; the Guards by Colonel Boscawen; the gallant Barrow led the Mounted Infantry, and Lord Beresford the slender Naval Brigade.

Men were being knocked over now on every hand, and among the first who fell was Lord St. Vincent, of the 17th Lancers, who received a wound that proved mortal. Under Barrow the Mounted Infantry went darting forward, and the Arab skirmishers fell back before them, vanishing into the long wavy grass from amid which the smoke of their rifles spirted up. Skene had the spike of his helmet carried away by one ball; his bridle hand sharply grazed by another, but he bound his handkerchief about the wound and rode on.

By this time nearly an hour had elapsed since the zereba and its fortlets had been left in the rear, and only two miles of ground had been covered, and all the while our troops had been under a fire from the sable warriors on the hill slopes.

‘Halt!’ was now sounded by the bugles, and the faces of the square were redressed and post was to be taken on a slope, which the enemy would have to ascend when attacking.

Their total strength was now estimated at 14,000 men!

Our dead men were left where they fell; but frequent were the halts for picking up the wounded. Yet steady as if on parade in a home barrack square, our little band advanced, over stony crests, through dry water-courses, like some hugh machine, compact and slow, firm and regular, amid the storm of bullets poured into it from the front, from the flanks, and eventually from the rear.

At first the enemy swarmed in dark masses all along our front, and for two or three miles on either flank groups of their horsemen, with floating garments and glittering spears, could be seen watching the advance of the hollow square from black peaks of splintered rock. ‘There was no

avenue of retreat now for us,' wrote one, 'and no one thought of such a thing. "Let us do or die!" (in the words of Bruce's war song) was the emotion of all; and Colonel Barrow, C.B., with his "handful" of Hussars, became engaged about the same time as the square.'

He maintained a carbine fire, while General Stewart, with his personal staff, including Major Wardrop, the Earl of Airlie, and Captains Skene and Rhodes, galloped from point to point, keeping all in readiness to repulse a sudden charge; but, with all their bravery, it was a trial for our Heavy Dragoons to march on foot and fight with infantry rifles and bayonets—weapons to which they were totally unaccustomed.

The keen, yet dreamy sense of imminent peril—the chances of sudden death, with the spasmodic tightness of the chest that emotion sometimes causes, had passed from Malcolm Skene now completely; he 'felt cool as a cucumber,' yet instinct with the fierce desire to close with, to grapple, and to spur among the enemy *sabre à la main*; and he forgot even the smarting of his wounded bridle hand as the troops moved onward.

A few minutes after ten o'clock, when the leading face of the square had won the crest of a gentle slope on the other side of a hollow, a column of the enemy, about 5,000 strong, was seen echeloned in two long lines on the left, or opposite that face which was formed by the mounted infantry and heavy cavalry, and looking as if they meant to come on now.

They were still marshalled, as stated, by sheikhs and dervishes on horseback, and, with all their banners rustling in the wind, the battle-drums thundering, and their shrill cries of 'Allah! Allah!' loading the air, they advanced quickly, brandishing their flashing spears and two-handed swords. Abu Saleh, Ameer of Metemneh, led the right; Moussa Abu Hagil led the centre; and Mahommed Khuz, Ameer of Berber, who had soon to retire wounded, led the left, and our skirmishers came racing towards the square.

Strange to say, our fire as yet seemed to have little effect

upon the foe ; very few were falling, and the untouched began to believe that the spells of Osman Digna and the promises of the Mahdi had rendered their bodies shot-proof ; and when within three hundred yards of the square they began to rush over the undulating ground like a vast wave of black surf. Now the Gardner gun was brought into action ; but when most required, and at a moment full of peril, the wretched Government ammunition failed to act—the cartridges stuck ere the third round was fired ; the human waves of Arabs came rolling down upon the square, leaping and yelling over their dead and wounded, never reeling nor wavering under the close sheets of lead that tore through them now.

Like fiends let loose they came surging and swooping on, their burnished weapons flashing, and their black brawny forms standing boldly out in the glow of the sunshine, unchecked by the hailstorm of bullets, spearing the horsemen around the useless Gardner gun, and fighting hand to hand, Abu Saleh and the Sheikh Moussa leading them on, and then it was that the gallant Colonel Burnaby, of the Blues, fell like the hero he was.

The wild and high desire to do something that might win him a name, and make, perhaps, Hester Maule proud of him, welled up in the heart of Malcolm Skene, even at that terrible crisis, and he spurred his horse forward a few paces, just as Burnaby had done, to succour some of the skirmishers, who, borne back by the Arab charge, had failed to reach the protection of the square, which was formed in the grand old British fashion, shoulder to shoulder like a living wall.

By one trenchant, back-handed stroke of his sword, he nearly swept the head off the yelling Arab, thereby saving from the latter's spear a Foot Guardsman, who had stumbled ere he could reach the square ; but now Skene was furiously charged by another, who bore the standard of Sheikh Moussa.

Grasping his spear by his bridle hand, he ran his sword fairly through the Arab, who fell backward in a heap over his horse's crupper, and then Skene tore from his dying grip

the banner, which was of green silk—the holy colour—edged with red, and bore a verse of the Koran in gold (for it was a gift from the Mahdi), and, regaining the shelter of the square, threw his trophy at the foot of the General.

‘This shall go to the Queen—in your name, Captain Skene!’ said the latter.

‘The Queen—no, sir—but to a girl in Scotland, I hope, whether I live or not!’ replied Malcolm.

It was sent to the Queen at Windsor eventually, however, for Malcolm, now, when the square, recoiling before the dreadful rush, had receded about a hundred yards, and the Arabs were charging our men breast high, and the Heavies, instead of remaining steady as infantry would have done, true to their cavalry instincts were springing forward to close with the foe, once more dashed to the front in headlong fashion, and found himself beyond the face of the square, opposed to a tribe of Ghazis, who were brandishing their spears, hurling javelins, and hewing right and left with their two-handed swords—all swarthy negroes from Kordofan, and copper-coloured Arabs of the Bayuda Desert with long, straight, floating hair.

Heedless of death—nay, rather courting it as the path to paradise—with weapons levelled or uplifted, they came forward, with blood pouring from their bullet wounds in many instances, some staggering under these till they dropped and died within five paces of the square, while the others rushed on, and the fight became hand to hand, the bayonet meeting the Arab spear. On our side there was not much shouting as yet, only a brief cry, an oath, or a short exclamation of prayer or agony as a soldier fell down in his place, and all the valour of the Heavies became unavailing, when their formation was broken, when the foe mingled with them, and they were driven back upon the Naval Brigade, with its still useless Gardner gun, upon the right of the Sussex Regiment, which strove to close up the gap.

Then it was that Skene found himself opposed to Moussa Abu Hagil, whose horse had been shot under him, and who, half-blinded by his own blood streaming from a bullet-wound from which his Darfour helmet failed to save him, fought

like a wild animal, slashing about with his double-edged sword, which broke in his hand, and then using his spear.

Dashing at Skene with a demoniac yell, he levelled the long blade of the weapon at his throat. Parrying the thrust by a circular sweep of his sword, Skene checked his horse and reined it backwards ; but the length of Skeikh Moussa's spear, nearly ten feet, put it out of his power to return with proper interest the fury of the attack. Twice at least his sword touched the Arab, thus making him, if more wary, all the more eager and fierce, and there was a grim and defiant smile on Skene's face as he fenced with Moussa and parried his thrusts ; but now he was attacked by others when scarcely his horse's length from the face of the square.

One wounded him in the right shoulder ; Skene turned in his saddle and clove him down. At that moment a soldier—the young lad of the 2nd Sussex to whom he gave his water-bottle at the well of Abu Halfa—ran from the ranks and attacked another assailant of Skene, but perished under twenty spears, and ere the latter could deliver one blow again, he was dragged from his saddle, covered with wounds in the neck and face—ghastly wounds from which the blood was streaming—‘each a death to nature,’ and literally hewn to pieces.

So thus, eventually, was his strange presentiment fulfilled !

Meanwhile the Ghazis had forced their way so far into the square that one was actually slain in the act of firing the battery ammunition. Despite the great efforts of a gallant Captain Verner and others, ‘the Heavies were being massacred ; and after the fall of Burnaby, whom Sir William Cumming, of the Scots Guards, tried to save, Verner was beaten down, but his life (it is recorded) was saved by Major Carmichael, of the Irish Lancers, whose dead body fell across him, as well as those of three Ghazis.’

The Earl of Airlie and Lord Beresford, fighting sword in hand, were both wounded, and so furious was the inrush of the Arabs, that many of them reached the heart of the square, where they slew the maimed and dying in the

litters, and rushed hither and thither, with shrill yells, streaming hair, and flashing eyes, until they were all shot down or bayoneted to death.

Fighting for life and vengeance, and half maddened to find that their cartridges jammed hard and fast after the third shot, our soldiers—in some instances placed back to back—fought on the summit of a mound surrounded by thousands upon thousands of dark-skinned spearmen and swordsmen, hurling their strength on what were originally the left and rear faces of the square, till, with all its defects, our fire became so deadly and withering, that they began to waver, recoil, and eventually fly, while the triumphant cheers of our men rent the welkin.

Away went the Arabs streaming in full flight towards Berber, Metemneh, and the road to Khartoum, followed by Barrow and his Hussars, cutting them down like ripened grain, and followed, too, by the screaming, plunging, and crashing fire of the screw guns, which now came into action and pursuit with shot and shell.

So the field and the wells of Abu Klea were won, but dearly, as we had 135 of all ranks killed, and above 200 wounded, including camel drivers and other camp followers.

The former were buried by the men of the 19th Hussars. Earth to earth—dust to dust—ashes to ashes ; three carbine volleys rang above them in farewell, and all was over ; while the native slain were left in their thousands to the birds of the air.

The column reached the wells of Abu Klea in the evening, and then, parched and choked with thirst after the heat and toil and fierce excitement of the past night and day, all enjoyed the supreme luxury of pure cold water from the fifty springs or more that bubble in the Wady. Round these, men, horses, and camels gathered to quench their thirst, that amounted to agony, by deep and repeated draughts, while fires were lighted and a meal prepared.

Next followed the battle of Gubat and the futile expedition of Sir Charles Wilson, both of which are somewhat apart from our story.

The death of Colonel Burnaby, of the Blues, created a profound sensation in London society, where he was a great favourite; but there were many more than he to sorrow for.

Skene's fall made a deep impression among the Staffordshire, as he was greatly beloved by the soldiers.

'Poor Malcolm—killed at last!' said Roland, when the tidings came up the river to the bivouac at Hamdab. He should never see his brown, dark eyes again; feel the firm clasp of his friendly hand, or hear his cheery voice say—'Well, Roland—old fellow!'

'But it may be my turn next,' thought he.

'Poor Malcolm!' said Jack Elliot; 'I have known him nurse the sick, bury the dead, sit for hours playing with a soldier's ailing child, and once he swam a mile and more to save a poor dog from drowning.'

And as he spoke, something like a tearless sob shook Elliot's sturdy frame, and Roland knew that with his friend Malcolm

'All was ended now—the hope, the fear, and the sorrow;
All the aching of the heart, the restless, unsatisfied longing;
All the dull, deep pain and constant anguish of patience—
His love and his life had ended together!'

CHAPTER LIII.

A HOMEWARD GLANCE.

THE action of one human being on another, by subtle means, it has been said, is as effective as the action of light on the air; thus, under the influence of Hawkey Sharpe and certain new circumstances, Annot Drummond had visibly deteriorated already.

Her high-flown ideas and undoubtedly better breeding had caused her to experience many a shock when in the daily and hourly society of her husband, with all his vulgar

and horsey ways, and he was certainly far below that young lady's high-pitched expectations and her love of externals.

Her life at Earlsbaugh had at first been getting quite like a story, she thought, and a perplexingly interesting story, too, with the high game she had to play for—a game in manœuvres worthy of Machiavelli himself.

Annot, we know, was not tall ; but her slight figure was prettily rounded. She carried herself well, though too quick and impulsive in her movements for real dignity, and as Maude had said, she never could conceive her at the head of a household, or taking a place in society. Now, as the wife of 'a cad' like Hawkey Sharpe, the latter was not to be thought of.

Her pretty ways and glittering golden hair, which had misled better men than the wretched Sharpe, were palling even upon him, now ; and her studied artlessness had given place to a bearing born of vanity and her own success and ambition, the sequel of which she was yet to learn, but withal she was not yet lady of Earlsbaugh. But, as a writer says of a similar character, 'a self-love, that demon who besets alike the learned philosopher with his own pet theories ; the statesman with his pet political hobbies ; the man of wealth with his own aggrandisement ; and the man of toil with his own pet prejudices—that insidious demon had entire hold now of this silly little girl's heart, and closed it to anything higher.'

Married now, and safe in position as she thought herself, Annot was no longer the coaxing and cooing little creature she had been to Hawkey Sharpe ; and rough and selfish though he was, a flash of her eyes, or a curl of her lip cowed him at times. She treated him as one for whom she was bound to entertain a certain amount of marital affection, but no respect whatever, and when she contrasted him with Roland Lindsay and other men she had known, even poor, weak Bob Hoyle, her manner became one of contempt and, occasionally, disgust.

But she had preferred the *couleur d'or* to the *couleur de rose* in matrimony, and had now, as Hawkey said, 'to ride the ford as she found it.'

‘Men like Roland,’ said Annot to Mrs. Lindsay when discussing her whilom lover, ‘especially military men, see a good deal of life, and experience teaches them how passing a love affair may be.’

‘You mean——’ began Mrs. Lindsay, scarcely knowing what to say.

‘I mean that he must have played with fire pretty often,’ said Annot, laughing, but not pleasantly, ‘and will forget me as he must have forgotten others. I suppose our likes and dislikes in this world are based upon the point that somebody likes or dislikes ourselves.’

Hawkey Sharpe’s debts and demands since his marriage had exhausted the patience if not quite the finances of his sister: and now the bill, erewhile referred to—the racing debt—was falling inexorably due, and how to meet it, or be stigmatised as a ‘welsher’ on every course in the country, became a source of some anxiety to that gentleman.

To meet his other requirements, all the fine timber in the King’s Wood was gone—a clean sweep had been made from King James’s Thorn to the Joug Tree, that bears an iron collar, in which for centuries the offenders on the domains of Earlsbaugh had suffered durance, and the once finely foliated hill now looked bare and strange; and for angry remarks thereat, Willie Wardlaw, the gardener, and Gavin Fowler, the head gamekeeper, aged dependants on the house of Earlsbaugh, as their fathers had been before them, had been summarily dismissed by Mr. Hawkey Sharpe.

A well-known firm of shipbuilders on the Clyde had offered for the wood, and to the former the most attractive part of the transaction, in addition to the good price, was the fact that the money was paid down at once but it was far from satisfying the wants of Mr. Hawkey Sharpe.

‘You know I disliked having that timber sold—that I hated the mere thought of having it cut!’ said Deborah to him reproachfully, as she looked from the window into the sunshine.

‘Why?’ he asked sulkily; ‘what the devil was the use of it?’

‘It was the favourite feature in the landscape——’

‘Of whom?’

‘My dead husband.’

‘Bosh!’ exclaimed Hawkey, who thought this was (what, to do her justice, it was not) ‘twaddle.’

They were together in his sanctum, or ‘den,’ which passed occasionally as his office; though the table, like the mantelpiece, was strewn with pipes, their ashes were everywhere, and the air was generally redolent of somewhat coarse tobacco smoke.

Having a favour to ask, he had, in his own fashion, been screwing his courage to the sticking-point.

‘You have been imbibing—drinking again?’ said his pale sister, eyeing him contemptuously with her cold, glittering stare.

“‘I take a little wine for my stomach’s sake and other infirmities,” as we find in 1st Timothy,’ said he with a twinkle in his shifty eyes.

‘The devil can quote Scripture, so well may you.’

‘That is severe, Deb,’ said he, filling his pipe.

‘Come to the point.’

‘Well, Deb, dear, would it be convenient to you to—to lend me a couple of thousand pounds for a few weeks? I have hinted of this from time to time.’

‘Two thousand pounds! Not only inconvenient, but impossible,’ said she, twisting her rings about in nervous anger.

‘Why, Deb?’

‘I have not even a fifty-pound note in the house.’

‘But plenty lying idle at your banker’s.’

‘Not the sum you seek to borrow just now. Borrow! Why not be candid, and ask for it out and out? Two thousand——’

‘I must have the money, I tell you,’ he said, with sudden temper, ‘or—or——’

‘What?’

‘Be disgraced—that is all,’ he replied, sullenly lighting his huge briar-root.

‘Well, you must find it without my aid,’ said she, coldly and sullenly too.

‘Could you not raise it on some of your useless jewels? Come, now, dear old Deb, don’t be too hard upon a fellow.’

Anger made her pale cheek suffuse at this cool suggestion, and she became very much agitated.

‘Now, don’t cut up this way. It is your heart again, of course; but keep quiet, and let nothing trouble you,’ said he, puffing vigorously. ‘You have a lot of the Lindsay jewels that are too old-fashioned for even you to wear.’

‘But not to bequeath.’

‘To Annot?’ said he, brightening a little.

‘I am sick of you and your Annot,’ exclaimed Mrs. Lindsay, now all aflame with anger, and trembling violently.

‘Sorry to hear it,’ said he, somewhat mockingly. ‘We have not yet quite got over our spooning.’

‘Don’t use that horrid, vulgar phrase, Hawkey.’

‘Vulgar! How?’

‘One no doubt derived from the gipsies, when two used one horn spoon. Annot, with all her apparent amiable imbecility, is a remarkably acute young woman.’

‘She is—and does credit to my taste, Deb.’

‘One whom it is impossible to dislike, I admit.’

‘Of course.’

‘And also quite impossible to love.’

‘Oh, come now, poor Annot!’ said Hawkey, with a kind of mock deprecation; and then to gain favour he said, ‘I do wish, dear Deb, that you would see the doctor again—about yourself.’

‘I have seen him; the old story, he can do nothing but order me to avoid all agitation, yet you have not given me much chance of that lately.’

‘But just once again, Deb—about this money——’

‘Another word on the subject and we part for ever!’ she exclaimed, and giving him a glance—stony as the stare of Medusa—one such as he had never before seen in her small, keen, and steely-gray eyes, she flung away and left him.

He gnashed his teeth, smashed his pipe on the floor, then

lit a huge regalia to soothe his susceptibilities, and thought about *how* the money was to be raised. He knew his sister had thousands idle in the bank, and have it he should at all hazards !

He had meant, too, if successful, and he found her pliable, to have spoken to her again about making her will ; but certainly the present did not seem a favourable occasion to do so.

‘ Deb will be getting her palpitation of the heart, nervous attacks, low spirits, and the devil only knows all what more, on the head of this ! ’ he muttered with a malediction.

Hawkey had watched her retire through the deep old doorway (under the lintel of which tall Cardinal Beatoun had whilom stooped his head) and disappear along the stately corridor beyond. Then he dropped into an easy-chair—stirred the fire restlessly and impatiently, and drained his glass, only to refill it—his face the while fraught with rage and mischief.

He drew a letter or two from a drawer—they were from his sister—and he proceeded to study her signature with much artistic acumen and curiosity.

‘ Needs must when the devil drives ! ’ said he, grinding his teeth and biting his spiky nails ; ‘ I have done it—and that she’ll know in time ! ’

Done what ?

That the reader will know in time too.

CHAPTER LIII.

THE LONG-SUSPENDED SWORD.

SORROW is said to make people sometimes, to a certain extent, selfish ; thus sorrow in her own little secluded home was, ere long, to render Hester, for a space at least, less thoughtful of the grief which affected her cousin Maude.

Hester was somewhat changed, and knew within herself that it was so.

She found that her daily thoughts ran more anxiously and tenderly upon her father, and about his fast-failing health, than on any other subject now.

She lost even a naturally feminine interest in her own beauty. Who was there to care for it ? she thought.

So on Sundays she sat in her pew, in the kirk on the wooded hill, and there listened to the preacher's voice blending with the rustle of the trees and the cawing of the rooks in the ruined fane close by ; but with an emotion in her heart never known before—that of feeling that ere long she would have a greater need of some one to lean on—of something to cling to in the coming loneliness that her heart foreboded to be near now.

At last there came a day she was never to forget—a day that told her desolation was at hand.

Seated in his Singapore chair at breakfast one morning, her father suddenly grew deadly pale ; a spasm convulsed his features ; his coffee-cup fell from his nerveless hand ; and he gazed at her with all the terror and anguish in his eyes which he saw in her own.

‘ Papa—papa ! ’ she exclaimed, and sprang to his side.

He gazed at her wildly, vacantly, and muttered something about ‘ the Jhansi bullet.’ Then she heard him distinctly articulate her name.

‘ Hester—my own darling—you here ? ’ he said, with an effort ; ‘ how sweet you look in that white robe. I always loved you in it, dear.’

‘ My dress is rose-coloured—a morning wrapper, papa,’

said Hester, as the little hope that gathered in her heart passed away.

‘So white—so pure—just like your marriage-dress, Hester! But you wore it the first day I saw you, long ago—long ago—at Earlshaugh, when you stood in the Red Drawing-room—and gave me a bouquet of violets from your breast. My own Hester!’

‘Oh, papa—papa!’ moaned the poor girl in dire distress, for she knew he spoke not of her but of her mother, who had reposed for years under the trees in the old kirk-yard on the hill; and a choking sob of dismay escaped her.

It was a stroke of paralysis that had fallen upon the Indian veteran, and he was borne to his bed, which he never left alive.

Hour after hour did Maude hang over him, listening to his fevered breathing, and futile moanings, which no medical skill could repress or soothe; and the long day, and the terrible night—every minute seemed an age—passed on, and still the pallid girl watched there in the hopeless agony of looking for death and not for life.

That long night—one of the earliest of winter—was at last on its way towards morning.

All was still in the glen of the Esk save the murmur of the mountain stream and the rustle of the leaves in the shrubberies without, and there was a strange loneliness, a solemnity, in Hester’s mind as she thought of Merlwood in its solitariness, with death and life, time and eternity, so nigh each other under its roof; and the ceaseless ticking of an antique clock in the hall fell like strokes of thunder on her brain, till she stopped it, lest the sound might disturb the invalid.

And in that time of supreme anxiety and sorrow the lonely girl thought of her only kinsman, Roland Lindsay—the friend of her childhood and early girlhood—the merry, handsome, dark-haired fellow, who taught her to ride and row and fish, and whom she loved still with a soft yet passionate affection, that was strong as in the old days, for all that had come and gone between them.

Would he ever return—return to her and be as he had been before—before Annot Drummond came?

Another and a fatal stroke came speedily and mercifully; the long-suspended sword had fallen at last, and the old soldier was summoned to his last home!

A few days after saw Hester prostrate in her own bed and in the hands of the doctors, her rich dark-brown hair shorn short from her throbbing temples, feverish and faint, with dim eyes and pallid lips that murmured unconsciously of past times, of the distant and the dead—of her parents, of camps and cantonments far away; of little brothers and sisters who were in heaven; of green meadows, of garden flowers and summer evenings, when she and Roland had rambled together; and then of Egypt and the war in the deserts by the Nile.

After a time, when the early days of February came, when the mellow-voiced merle and the speckle-breasted mavis were heard in the woods by the Esk; when the silver-edged gowans starred the grassy banks, and the newly-dug earth gave forth a refreshing odour, and everywhere there were pleasant and hopeful signs that the dreary reign of winter was nearly over, Hester became conscious of her surroundings, but at first only partially so.

‘Maude,’ said she, in a weak voice to a watcher, ‘dear Maude—are you there?’

‘Yes,’ replied the cousin, drawing the sick girl’s head upon her bosom. ‘Oh, Hester—my poor darling, how ill you have been!’

‘Ill—I ill? I thought it was papa,’ she said, with dilated eyes. ‘Is he well now?’

‘Yes,’ replied Maude, in a choking voice, ‘well—very well; but drink this, dearest.’

‘Where is papa—can I see him? Will you or the doctor take me to him?’

‘He is not here,’ began the perplexed Maude.

‘Not here; *where* then?’

‘You must wait, Hester, till you are well and strong—well and strong; you must not speak or think—but eat.’

Then a feeble smile that made Maude's tender heart ache stole over Hester's pale face.

'Where *is* papa?' the latter exclaimed suddenly, with a shrill ring of hysterics in her voice. 'Ah—I know—I remember now,' she added, with a smile, 'he is dead—dead!'

'Born again, rather say, my darling,' whispered poor Maude, choked with tears, as she nestled Hester's face in her neck.

'Dead—dead; and I am alone in the world!' moaned Hester, as a hot shower of tears relieved her, and she turned her face to the wall, while convulsive sobs shook her shoulders.

In time she was able to leave her bed—to feel herself well, if weak—deplorably weak, and knew that she had resolutely and inexorably to face the world of life.

A pile of letters occupied her, luckily, for a time—letters that were sad if soothing—all full of sympathy, tenderness, and sincere regret, profound esteem, and so forth, for the brave old man who was gone; even there was one from Annot, but none from Roland or Jack.

Where were they? Far away, alas! where postal arrangements were vague and most uncertain.

We have said that Hester had the world to face. Her father's pay and pension died with him, and suddenly the girl was all but penniless. Her father had been unable to put away any money for her. People thought he might and ought to have managed better; but so it was.

Sir Henry's Indian relics, his treasured household gods, such as the tulwar of the Amazonian Ranee of Jhansi, who fought and died as a trooper when Tantia Topee strove to save the lost cause, all of which had to Hester a halo of love and superstition of the heart about them, were brought to the auctioneer's hammer inexorably, and with the money realised therefrom she thought to look about for some such situation or employment as might become one in her unfortunate position.

As the relics went, her conscience smote her now, for the recollection of how often she had grown weary over the oft-repeated Indian reminiscences of the poor old man, who

lived in the past quite as much, if not more, than in the present. What would she not give to hear his voice once again! And she remembered now how fond he was of quoting the words of 'The Ancient Brahmin':

'Happy is he who endeth the business of his life before his death. . . . Avoid not death, for it is a weakness; fear it not, for thou understandest not what it is; all thou certainly knowest is, that it putteth an end to thy sorrows. Think not the longest life the happiest; that which is best employed doth the man most honour, and himself shall rejoice after death in the advantages of it.'

Like other girls who are imaginative and impressionable, she had built her *châteaux en Espagne*, innocent edifices enough, and romantic too, but now they had crumbled away, leaving not one stone upon another. Her future seemed fixed irrevocably; no idle dreams could be there, but a life that would, too probably, be blank and dreary even unto the end.

We cannot be in the world and grieve at all times; but yet one may feel a sorrow for ever.

'I shall go and earn my living, Maude—be a governess, or something,' she said, as her plans began to mature. 'It cannot be difficult to teach little children; though I always hated my own lessons, I know, even when helped by—Roland.'

'Nonsense, Hester!' exclaimed Maude; 'you shall live with me and—and Jack, if he ever returns, and all is well. You are too pretty to be a governess; no wise matron would have you.'

'Why?'

'Because all the grown sons and brothers would be falling in love with you. So you must stay with me.'

But Hester was resolute.

To the many letters of the former—letters agonising in tenor—addressed to Jack Elliot and to her brother Roland, no answer ever came, while weeks became months; for many difficulties just then attended the correspondence of the troops that were on the arduous expedition for the relief of Khartoum.

Thus, amid all the sorrows of Hester, how keen and great was the anxiety of Maude !

Jack, her husband—if he *was* her husband—was now face to face with the enemy—those terrible Soudanese—and might perish in the field, by drowning, or by fever, before she could ever have elucidated the mystery, the cloud, the horrible barrier that had come between them.

At times the emotions that shook the tender form of Maude were terrible, since the night of that woman's visit, when the iron seemed to enter her soul ; and there descended upon her a darkness through which there had come no gleam of light.

The past and the future seemed all absorbed in the blank misery of the present, and as if her life was to be one career of abiding shame, emptiness, and misery, as a dishonoured wife—if wife she was at all !

Hawkey Sharpe had inflicted the revengeful blow ; the woman, his degraded tool, had disappeared, and her story remained undisproved as yet. Jack, as we have said, might perish in Egypt, and the truth or the falsehood of that odious story would then be buried in his grave !

The pretty villa near the Grange Loan—the wood-shaded Loan that led of old to St. Giles's Grange—she now went near no more ; it was torture to go back there—her home it never could be. Turn which way she would, her haggard eyes rested on some reminder of Jack's love or his presence there—their mutual household Lares : her piano, Jack's carefully selected gift ; the music on the stand, chosen by him, and with his name and 'love' inscribed to her, just as she had left it ; books, statuettes—pretty nothings, alas !

Her mind now pointed to no definite course ; she felt like a rudderless ship drifting through dark and stormy waters before a cruel blast ; in all, her being there was no distinct resolution as yet what to do or whither to turn.

Yet, calm as she seemed outwardly, there was in her tortured heart a passionate longing for peace, and peace meant, perhaps, death !

And all this undeserved agony was but the result of a most artful but pitiful and vulgar vengeance !

Whether born of thoughts caused by recent stirring news from the seat of war, we know not ; but one night Hester woke from a dream of Roland—after a feverish and sleep-haunted doze—haunted as if by the spiritual presence of one who—bodily, at least—was far away.

Waking with a start, she heard a familiar and firm step upon the staircase, and then a door opened—the door of that room which Roland had always occupied when at Merlwood.

‘ Roland—Roland ! ’ she cried in terror, and then roused Maude.

There was, of course, no response, but a sound seemed to pass into that identical room ; she fancied she heard steps—his familiar steps moving about, but as if he trod softly—cautiously.

Terror seized her, and her heart seemed to die within her breast.

She sprang from bed, clasped Maude’s hand, and went softly, mechanically to the room. It was empty, and the cold light of the waning moon flooded it from end to end, making it seem alike lone and ghostly.

Her imagination had played her false ; but she was painfully haunted by the memory of that dream and the palpable sounds that, after waking, had followed it ; and hourly, in her true spirit of Scottish superstition, expected to hear of fatal tidings from the seat of war—like her who, of old, had watched by the Weird Yett of Earlshaugh.

Like poor Malcolm Skene was she, too, to have her presentiment—her prevision of sorrow to come ?

It almost seemed so.

But her thoughts now clung persistently to the hero of her girlish days ; he had behaved faithlessly, uncertainly to her, she thought ; yet, perhaps, he might come back to her some day, if God spared him, and then he would find the old and tender love awaiting him still.

Yet Roland might come home and marry *someone else* ! No man, she had heard, went through life remembering and regretting one woman for ever. Was it indeed so ?

But after the night of her strange dream the morning papers contained the brief, yet terrible, telegram stating that a battle had been fought at a place called Kirbekan, by General Earle's column (of which the Staffordshire formed a part), but that no details thereof had come to hand.

The recent calamity she had undergone rendered Hester's heart apprehensive that she might soon have to undergo another.

And ere the lengthened news of the battle did come, she and Maude had left Edinburgh, as they anticipated, perhaps for ever.

CHAPTER LIV.

WITH GENERAL EARLE'S COLUMN.

WHILE the column of Brigadier Sir Herbert Stewart was toiling amid thirst and other sufferings across the vast waste of the Bayuda Desert, and gaining the well-fought battles of Abu Klea and Abu Kru, the column of Brigadier Earle had gone by boats up the Nile to avenge the cruel assassination of Gordon's comrade and coadjutor, Colonel Donald Stewart, on Suliman Wad Gamr and the somewhat ubiquitous Moussa Abu Hagil with all their people.

The succession of cataracts rendered the General's progress very slow ; thus the 4th of January found his advanced force, the gallant South Staffordshire, only encamped at Hamdab, as we have stated a few chapters back.

Suliman, on being joined by Moussa a few days after Abu Klea, had fallen back from Berti, thus rendering it necessary for General Earle to push on in pursuit, through a rocky, broken, and savage country, bad for all military operations, and altogether impracticable for cavalry.

On the river the Rahami cataract proved one of great danger and difficulty, and severe indeed was the labour of getting up the boats. There the bed of Old Nile is broken

up by black and splintered rocks, between which it rushes in snowy foam with mighty force and volume.

The boats had to be tracked up the entire distance, often with many sharp turns to avoid sunken rocks in the chasms ; and, as a large number of men were required for each boat, the column, comprising the Staffordshire, the Black Watch, a squadron of Hussars, and the Egyptian camel corps, with two guns, had work enough and to spare. 'The perils and difficulties,' we are told, 'were quite as great as any hitherto encountered on the passage up the Nile. For the last six miles below Birti the river takes an acute angle, and then as sharply resumes its former course. The Royal Highlanders were first up ; but after they got their boats through, another channel was discovered on the western side of the stream, and as it turned out to be less difficult, the succeeding regiments were enabled to come up more quickly.

Roland's regiment remained in a few days encamped at Hamdab. 'We are now leading the whole army,' says its Colonel, the gallant and ill-fated Eyre, in his 'Diary,' 'and are the first British troops that have ever been up the Nile.'

On the 6th of January there was a sand-storm from dawn till sunset ; it covered the unfortunate troops, who seemed to be in a dark cloud for the whole day. Around them for a hundred miles the country was all rocks, and yet bore traces of once having a vast population.

At Hamdab the river teemed with wild geese—beautiful gray birds, with scarlet breasts and gold wings. Dick Mostyn shot one, which Roland's soldier servant prepared for their repast in a stew, that was duly enjoyed in the latter's quarters—a hut made of palm branches and long dhurra grass ; while their comrade Wilton, when scouting on Berber road, captured a couple of Arabs, who gave the column a false alarm by tidings of an attack at daybreak, thus keeping all under arms till the sun rose.

The 18th was Sunday, when Colonel Eyre read prayers on parade, and three days after came tidings of the battle of Abu Klea, the death of Burnaby, after all his hair-breadth escapes, and of many other brave men.

‘Poor Malcolm—poor Malcolm!’ said Roland; ‘what dire news this will be for his old mother at Dunnimarle. This event gives you your company in the corps——’

‘Don’t speak of it!’ interrupted Mostyn, with something like a groan; ‘I would to Heaven that poor Skene had never given me such a chance.’

The last days of January saw Earle’s column making a sweep with fire and sword of the district in which poor Colonel Stewart and his companions had been murdered; and on the 2nd of February it had reached a country beyond all conception or description wild, and quite uninhabited.

The sufferings of Earle’s troops were considerably severe now. The faces and the knees of the Highlanders were skinned by the chill air at night and the burning sun by day; while, in addition, there were insects in the sand, so minute as to be almost invisible, yet they got into the men’s ragged clothing, and bit hands and feet so that they were painfully swollen.

On the 9th of February Earle’s column reached Kirbekan, near the island of Dulka, seventy miles above Merawi, which is a peninsular district of Southern Nubia, and the enemy, above 2,000 strong, led by Moussa Abu Hagil, Ali Wad Aussein, and other warlike Sheikhs, and chiefly composed of the guilty Monnassir tribe, some Robatats and a force of Dervishes from Berber, were known to be in position at no great distance; thus a battle was imminent.

Ere it took place Roland Lindsay and his friend Elliot were destined to hear some startling news from home. At this time all papers and parcels for the column got no further than Dongola, but a few letters from the rear were brought up, and the mail-bag contained one of importance for Roland, and several for his friend Dick Mostyn.

Lounging on the grass, under a mimosa tree, with a cigarette between his teeth, and with just the same lazy, *debonnair* bearing with which he had taken in many a girl at home in pleasant England, lay Dick Mostyn reading his missives. Some he perused with a quiet, *insouciant* smile; they were evidently from some of the girls in

question. Others he tore into small shreds and scattered on the breeze; they were duns. How pleasant it was to dispose of them thus on the bank of the Nile!

Roland, a little way apart, was perusing his solitary letter.

It was from Mr. M'Wadsett, the W. S., dated several weeks back, from 'Thistle Court, Thistle Street, Edinburgh' (how well Roland remembered the gloomy place under the shadow of St. Andrew's Church, and the purpose of his last visit there!); and it proved quite a narrative, and one of the deepest interest to him.

His uncle, Sir Harry, was dead, and his daughter Hester was going forth into the world as a companion or governess. (Dead! thought Roland; poor old Sir Harry!—and Hester, alone now—oh, how he longed to be with her—to comfort and protect her!)

But to be a governess—a companion—where, and to whom? His heart felt wrung, and he mentally rehearsed all he had heard or read—but not seen—of how such dependents were too often treated by the prosperous and the *parvenu*; obliged to conform to rules made by others, to perform a hundred petty duties by hands never before soiled by toil; to never complain, however ill or weary she might feel; to stumble with brats through wearisome scales on an old piano; to be banished when visitors came, and endure endless, though often unnecessary affronts. He uttered a malediction, lit a cigar, and betook him again to his letter.

'About seeking a situation, I know there is nothing else left for the poor girl to do,' continued the writer; 'but I besought her to wait a little—to make my house her home, if she chose, for a time; but she told me that she did not mind work or poverty. I replied that she knew nothing of either, but a sad smile and a resolute glance were my only answer.'

The old man's love of himself, his upbraiding words when they last parted, and his own unkind treatment (to say the least of it) of Hester, all came surging back on Roland's memory now.

‘I shall not readily forget Miss Maule’s passionate outburst of grief and pain on leaving Merlwood,’ continued the old Writer to the Signet; ‘but all there seemed for the time to be sacred to the hallowed memories of her father, her mother, and her past childhood!’

‘And next I have to relate something more startling still—the sudden death of your stepmother, and to congratulate you on being now the true and undoubted *Laird of Earls-haugh*.

‘Actuated, I know not precisely by what sentiment—whether by just indignation at the character of her brother, or by remorse for your false position with regard to the property—Mrs. Lindsay, as an act of reparation, and to preclude all legal action on the part of any heir of her own or of her brother, Hawkey Sharpe, that might crop up, by a will drawn out and prepared by myself, duly recorded at Her Majesty’s General Register House, Edinburgh, has left the entire estate to you, precisely and in all entirety as it was left to her.

‘She sent a message when she did this. It was simply: “When my time comes, and I feel assured that it is not far off now, and that I shall not see him again, he will know that I have done my best.”

‘There must have been an emotion of remorse in her mind, as I now know that for some days before the demise of your worthy father, he eagerly urged that you should be telegraphed for, and more than once expressed a vehement desire to see *me*, his legal adviser, but in vain, as Mrs. Lindsay number two and her brother Hawkey barred the way; so the first will in the former’s favour remained unaltered.

‘Since you last left home, Mr. Hawkey forged his sister’s name to a cheque for £2,000 to cover a bill or racing debt. It duly came to hand. Mrs. Lindsay looked at the document, and knew in an instant that her name had been used, and, remembering the amount of Hawkey’s demand on her, knew also that she had been shamefully and cruelly deceived.

‘The sequence of the numbers in her cheque-book showed by the absence of the counterfoil where one had been abstracted—that for the £2,000 payable to bearer. In her rage she repudiated it, and the law took its course.

‘The nameless horror that is the sure precursor of coming evil took possession of her, and then it was that she executed in your favour the will referred to, instigated thereto not a little by Hawkey’s incessant and annoying references to her secret ailment—disease of the heart.

‘To me she seemed to have changed very much latterly. Her tall, thin figure had lost somewhat of its erectness, and her cold, steel-like eyes (you remember them?) were sunken and dimmed.

‘Her illness took a sudden and fatal turn at the time that rascal Hawkey was arrested; and she was found that evening by Mrs. Drugget, the housekeeper, and old Funnell, the butler, dead in the Red Drawing-room. Thus her strange faintnesses and continued pallor were fully accounted for by the faculty then.

‘When she was dead Mr. Hawkey was disposed to snap his fingers, believing himself the lord of everything; but the will prepared by me precluded that, and he was forthwith lodged by order of the Procurator-Fiscal in the Tolbooth of Cupar, where he can hear, but not see, the flow of the Eden.

‘His wife, the late Miss Annot Drummond, on seeing him depart with a pair of handcuffs on, displayed but small emotions of regard or sorrow, but a great deal of indignation, despair, and shame. She trod to and fro upon the floor of her room during the long watches of the entire succeeding night, tore her golden hair, and beat her little hands against the wall in the fury and agony of her passion and disappointment to find herself mated to a criminal; and now she has betaken herself to her somewhat faded maternal home in South Belgravia, where I do not suppose we shall care to follow her.’

‘So, I am Earlishaugh again!’ thought Roland with pardonable exultation. His old ancestral home was his once

more. But a battle was to be fought on the morrow. Should he survive it—escape? He hoped so now; life was certainly more valuable than it seemed to him before that mail-bag came up the Nile.

Roland could not feel much regret for the extinguisher which Fate had put upon the usurpers of his patrimony, but he was by nature too generous not to recall, with some emotions of a gentle kind, how Mrs. Lindsay had once said to him in a broken voice, when he bade her farewell, of something she meant to do, ‘If it was not too late—too late!’

And when he had asked her *what* she referred to, her answer was that ‘Time would show.’

And now time had shown. She had certainly, after all, liked the handsome and *debonnair* young fellow who had treated her with that chivalrous deference so pleasant to all women, old or young.

Roland, as he looked up at the luminous Nubian sky, felt for a time a solemn emotion of awe and thankfulness, curiously blended with exultant pride; that if he fell in the battle of to-morrow he would fall, as many of his forefathers had done, a Lindsay of Earlshaugh, but alas! the last of his race.

‘By Jove, there is a postscript—turn the page, Roland!’ exclaimed Jack Elliot, who had been noting the letter, as mutual stock, over his brother-in-law’s shoulder.

‘Since writing all the foregoing,’ said the postscript, ‘I find that your sister, Mrs. Elliot, appears to have had some news, after receiving which she and Miss Hester have suddenly left Edinburgh, but for *where* or with what intention I am totally unable to discover.’

‘News,’ muttered Roland; ‘what news can they have had?’

Roland, by the field telegraph rearward, *viâ* Cairo, wired a message to Mr. M’Wadsett for further intelligence, if he had any to give, concerning the absentees, but no answer came till long after the troops had got under arms to engage, and Roland was no longer there to receive it.

‘By Heaven, this infernal coil at home is becoming more

entangled !' exclaimed Jack. 'Were it not for my mother's sake I would hope to be knocked on the head to-day.'

'Not for poor little Maude's sake?' asked Roland reproachfully.

'God help us both !' sighed Jack.

'To every one who lives strength is given him to do his duty,' said Roland gravely. 'Do yours, Jack, and no more.'

'To me there seems a dash of sophistry in this advice now ; but had you ever loved as I have done——'

'Had I *ever* loved ! What do you mean?' asked Roland, almost impatiently. 'But there go the bugles, and we must each to his company.'

Then each, seizing the other's hand, drew his sword and 'fell in.'

The mystery involving the fate of Maude and the movements of both her and Hester were a source of intense pain, perplexity, and grief to the two friends now, even amid the fierce and wild work of that eventful 10th of February.

CHAPTER LV.

THE BATTLE OF KIRBEKAN.

ON the night before this brilliant encounter the greatest enthusiasm prevailed in the ranks of General Earle's column at the prospect of a brush with the enemy at last, after an advance of eighteen most weary miles, which had occupied them no less than twenty days, such was the terrible nature of the country to be traversed by stream and desert.

As a fine Scottish ballad has it :

'With painful march across the sand
How few, though strong, they come,
Some thinking of the clover fields
And the happy English home ;

And some whose graver features speak
Them children of the North,
Of the golden whin on the Lion Hill
That crouches by the Forth.

'Tis night, and through the desert air
The pibroch's note screams shrill,
Then dies away—the bugle sounds—
Then all is deathly still,
Save now and then a soldier starts
As through the midnight air
A sudden whistle tells him that
The scouts of death are there !

At half-past five in the morning, after a meagre and hurried breakfast—the last meal that many were to partake of on earth—the column got under arms and took its march straight inland over a very rocky district for more than a mile, while blood-red and fiery the vast disc of the sun began to appear above the far and hazy horizon.

Of the scene of these operations very little is known. Lepsius, in his learned work published in 1844, writes of the ruins of Ben Naga, now called Mesaurat el Kerbegan, lying in a valley of that name, in a wild and sequestered place, where no living thing is seen but the hippopotami swimming amid the waters of the Nile.

Taking ground to the left for about half a mile the column struck upon the caravan track that led to Berber, and then the enemy came in sight, led by the Sheikhs Moussa Abu Hagil, Ali Wad, Aussein, and others, holding a rocky position, where their dark heads were only visible, popping up from time to time as seen by the field-glasses.

It was intended that the Monassir tribe, the murderers of Donald Stewart and his party, should, if possible, be surrounded and cut off ; but they were found to be entrenched and prepared for a desperate resistance on lofty ground near the Shukuk Pass on a ridge of razor-backed hills, commanding a gorge which lies between the latter and the Nile, and the entrance to which they had closed by a fort and walls loopholed for musketry.

‘The Black Watch and Staffordshire will advance in skirmishing order!’ was the command of General Earle.

Six companies of the Highlanders and four of the latter corps now extended on both flanks at a run. The Hussars galloped to the right, while two companies of the Staffordshire, with two guns, were left to protect the boats in the river, the hospital corps, the stores, and spare ammunition.

This order was maintained till the companies of skirmishers gradually, and firing with admirable coolness and precision, worked their way towards the high rocks in their front. While closing in with the enemy, whose furious fusillade enveloped the dark ridge in white smoke, streaked by incessant flashes of red fire, men were falling down on every hand with cries to God for help or mercy, and some, it might be, with a fierce and bitter malediction.

There was no time to think, for the next bullet might floor the thinker: it was the supreme moment which tries the heart of the bravest; but every officer and man felt that he must do his duty at all hazards. Bullets sang past, thudded in silvery stars on the rocks, cut the clothing, or raised clouds of dust; comrades and dear friends were going down fast, as rifles were tossed up and hands were lifted heavenward—as, more often, men fell in death, in blood and agony; but good fortune seemed to protect the untouched, and then came the clamorous and tiger-like longing to close in, to grapple with, to get within grasp of the foe!

In this spirit Roland went on, but keeping his skirmishers well in hand, till they reached the high rocks in front, when they rushed between or over them; and there Colonel Eyre, a noble, veteran officer, and remarkably handsome man, who, though a gentleman by birth, had risen from the ranks in the Crimea—then as now conspicuous for his bravery—fell at the head of his beloved South Staffordshire while attacking the second ridge, ‘where, behind some giant boulders, the Sheikh Moussa Abu Hagil was with his Robatat tribe—the most determined of the Arab race.’

The good Colonel was pausing for a moment beside two

of his wounded men. 'Colonel Eyre took one of them by the hand,' wrote an officer whom we are tempted to quote, 'to comfort him a little. A minute after he turned to me and said: "I am a dead man!" I saw a mark below his shoulder, and said: "No, you are not." He looked at me for a second, and said: "Lord, have mercy upon me—God help my poor wife!" . . . He was dead in a minute after he was hit, and did not appear to suffer, the shock being so great. The bullet entered the right breast, and came out under the left shoulder.'

Like a roaring wave the infuriated Staffordshire went on, and then the Robatat tribe were assailed by two companies of the Highlanders, led by their Colonel and General Earle in person. 'The Black Watch advanced over rocks and broken ground upon the Koppies,' says Lord Wolseley's very brief despatch, 'and, after having by their fire in the coolest manner driven off a rush of the enemy, stormed the position under a heavy fire.'

But desperate was the struggle prior to this. The Arabs, from the cover of every rock and boulder, poured in a fire with the most murderous precision, while our soldiers flung themselves headlong at any passage or opening they found, no matter how narrow or steep.

Like wild tigers in their lair, the Arabs fought at bay, having everywhere the advantage of the ground, and inspired by a fury born of fanaticism and religious rancour, resolute to conquer or die; but in spite of odds and everything, our soldiers stormed rock after rock, and fastness after fastness, working their way on by bayonet and bullet, the Black Watch on the left, the old 38th on the right, upward and onward, over rocks slippery with dripping blood, over the groaning, the shrieking, the dying, and the dead.

Here fell Wilton and merry Dick Mostyn, both mortally wounded, rolling down the rocks to die in agony; and to Roland it was evident that Jack Elliot was bitterly intent on throwing his life away if he could, for he rushed, sword in hand, at any loophole in the rocks from whence a puff of smoke or flash of fire spirted out.

But brilliant as was the rush of the Staffordshire, climbing

with their hands and feet, it was almost surpassed by the advance of the Highlanders, for in the *élan* with which they went on every man seemed as if inspired by the advice of General Brackenbury when he said : 'Take your heart and throw it among the enemy, as Douglas did that of King Robert Bruce, and follow it with set teeth determined to win !'

When General Earle ordered the left half-battalion of the Highlanders to advance by successive rushes, they went forward with a ringing cheer and with pipers playing 'The Campbells are coming,' and in another moment the scarlet coats and green kilts, led by Wauchop of Niddry, had crowned the ridge, rolling the soldiers of the Mahdi down the rocks before their bayonets in literal piles that never rose again, and then it was that Colonel Coveny, one of their most popular officers, fell.

Roland felt proud of his regiment, the old South Staffordshire, but when he saw the tartans fluttering on the crest, and heard the pipes set up their pæan of victory, all his heart went forth to the Highlanders, who, ere these successive rushes were carried out, had been attacked by a most resolute band of the enemy, armed with long spears and trenchant swords, led by a standard-bearer clad in a long Darfour shirt of mail.

The latter, the Sheikh Moussa Abu Hagil, was shot, and as his body went rolling down, the holy standard was seized in succession by three men of resolute valour, who all perished successively in the same manner. Some of this band now rushed away towards the Nile to escape the storm of Highland bullets, but were there met by a company of the Staffordshire and shot down to a man.

Within the koppie stormed by the Highlanders was a stone hut full of Arabs, who, though surrounded by victorious troops, defiantly refused to surrender. General Earle, a veteran Crimean officer of the old 49th, or Hertfordshire, now rashly approached it, though warned by a sergeant of the Black Watch to beware, and was immediately shot dead.

An entrance was found to be impossible, so securely was

the door barricaded. Then the edifice was set on fire by the infuriated Highlanders, breached by powder, and all the Arabs within it were shot down or burned alive.

The enemy now fled on all hands, while the chivalrous Buller, with a squadron of the 19th Hussars, captured the camp three miles in rear of their position, and Brackenbury, as senior officer, assumed the command.

Our casualties were eighty-seven of all ranks killed and wounded ; those of the enemy it was impossible to estimate, as only seventeen were taken alive, but their dead covered all the position, and an unknown number perished in the Nile.

Untouched, after that terrible conflict of five consecutive hours, Roland Lindsay and Jack Elliot grasped each other's hands in warmth and gratitude when they sheathed their swords and felt that their ghastly work was done.

The subsequent day was devoted to quiet and rest, and on the field, under a solitary palm tree, the remains of General Earle, Colonels Eyre, Coveny, and all who had fallen with them, were reverently interred, without any special mark to attract the attention of the dwellers in the desert.

After all this, Brigadier Brackenbury was about to march in the direction of Abu Hammed, when unexpected instructions from the vacillating British Government reached Lord Wolseley from London, and the river column was ordered to fall back on the camp at Korti, a task of no small difficulty ; and though a handful of men under Sir Charles Wilson did reach Khartoum, as we all know, the movement was achieved too late, and, cruelly betrayed, Gordon had perished in the midst of his fame.

CHAPTER LVII.

THE SICK CONVOY.

REPEATEDLY Jack Elliot thanked Heaven that his comrades in the regiment had not got hold of his wretched story—that he and his young wife had quarrelled—were actually separated, and that she had run away from him because of some other woman, as he knew well that but garbled versions of the comedies or tragedies in the lives of our friends generally reach us.

The movements of the column were now so abrupt, and, for a time, undecided, that no telegram in reply to his message reached Roland from Edinburgh, and ere long he had a new source of anxiety.

Enteric fever, that ailment which proved so fatal to many of our troops during this disastrous and useless war, fastened upon poor Jack Elliot, and the column had barely reached the camp at Korti when he was 'down' with it, as the soldiers phrased it, and very seriously so—all the more seriously, no doubt, that the tenor of Mr. M'Wadsett's post-script left such a doubt on his mind as to the plans and movements of Maude.

His head felt as if weighted with lead—but hot lead; he had an appalling thirst, and was destitute of all appetite even for delicacies, and the latter were not plentiful, certainly, in our camp at Korti.

If he survived, which he thought was almost impossible, he believed that he could never, never forget what he endured in the so-called camp there—first, the languor and disinclination for work, duty, exercise, even for thinking; the pains in his limbs; his dry, brown tongue, that rattled in his mouth; mental and bodily debility; and all the other signs of his ailment, produced by exposure, by midnight dew, and the bad, brackish water of the desert.

Roland—of a hardier nature, perhaps—was unwearying in his care of him, and thrice daily with his own hands gave him the odious prescribed draught—hydrochloric acid, tinc-

ture of orange, and so forth, diluted in Nile water—while the once strong, active, and muscular Jack was weak as a baby.

Roland greatly feared he would die on his hands, and hailed with intense satisfaction an order by which he was personally detailed to take a detachment of certain sick and wounded, including Jack Elliot, down the Nile to Lower Egypt.

In his tent, he was roused from an uneasy dream that he was again lying at the bottom of the Kelpie's Cleugh at Earlishaugh, by an orderly sergeant, who brought him this welcome command about dawn, and noon saw him, with a small flotilla of boats freighted with pain and suffering, take his leave of the South Staffordshire and begin his journey down the Nile, *viâ* New Dongola, the cataracts at Ambigol and elsewhere, by Wady-Halfa and other points where temporary hospitals or halting-places were established.

Day by day the boats with their melancholy loads, sometimes by oars, at others with canvas set, had dropped down the Nile between barren shores overlooked by wild and sterile mountains, where the sick were almost stunned occasionally by the harsh yells of the watchful Arabs echoing from rocks and caves! and, after turning a sharp angle, Roland suddenly saw the island of Philæ, with all its numerous temples, before his flotilla, and as there was a considerable flood in the river the cataract there became a source of anxiety to him, and rather abated the interest with which he might otherwise have surveyed the scene around him.

‘Shellal! Shellal!’ (the Cataract! the Cataract!) he heard the yells of the naked Arabs, who hovered on the banks expecting a catastrophe, which they would have beheld with savage joy.

The soldiers held their breath and hung on their suspended oars, the blades of which dripped and flashed like gold in the sheen of the setting sun; yet the boats glided down the foaming rapid without a sound other than the rush of the water; then came a sudden calm, an amazing combination of light and colour on shore, and isle, and stream,

with the rays of the moon, in the blue zenith, conflicting with those of the sun at the horizon.

‘On either side,’ wrote one who was there, ‘walls of overhanging rock shut in the river, standing in pious guardianship around the sacred isle. Beneath their frowning blackness lapped and flowed a shining expanse of water stained with crimson in the sunset’s glow, in which a line of tall and plummy palms were bending in the wind; to the east, the Libyan sands poured in a golden stream through every cleft and fissure in the darkling hills; and overhead, and all about, floated a splendour of reddening fire. From their station they seemed to look straight into the very heart of the sunset when all the west had burst into sudden flames of fire. The freshening wind tossed them in uncertain rise and fall; the melancholy sound of the distant cataract, and now and then the cry of some night bird cut sharply through the stillness of the hour. An immense sense of loneliness brooded over the empty temples and adjacent isles abandoned by their forgotten gods, whose sculptured faces gazed mournfully out from the crumbling walls, then flushed with the supreme splendour of the dying day.

A few miles further down, the Isle of Flowers, with all its wondrous vegetation, and the many black rocks of Assouan rising from a medley of dust, Roman ruins and feathery palms were left astern; and of the long, long downward journey some 450 miles were mastered, after which lay nearly the same distance to Cairo.

Often had the boats to pause in their downward way, while the melancholy duty was performed of burying those whose journey in life was over, by the river bank, uncoffined, in nameless and unrecorded graves, where the ibis stalks among the tall reeds, and the scaly crocodile dozes amid the ooze.

And as the boat in which he lay under an awning glided down the Nile Jack Elliot was often in a species of stupor, and muttered at times of his boyish days at the High School of Edinburgh; of the brawling Tweed when he had been wont to fish at Braidielee; of matches at Aldershot, and clearing the hurdles in the Long Valley; but he was most

often a boy, a lad again in his fevered dreams, and seeking birds' nests among the bonnie Lammermuirs, feeling the pleasant breeze that came over the braes of the Merse, while the sun shone on the pools and thickets of the Eye and the Leader ; but of Maude, strange to say, or their mysterious separation, no word escaped him, till he became conscious, and then Roland would hear him muttering as he kissed her photo :

'Where are you, my darling? Shall I ever look upon your face again?'

And with a wasted and trembling hand he would consign the soft leather case to the breast of his tattered and faded tunic. He was so weak, so utterly debilitated that sometimes he shed involuntary tears—a sight that filled Roland with infinite pity and commiseration, and a dread each day that he might have to leave Jack, as he had left others, in a lonely tomb by the river-side.

Jack, poor fellow, was dwelling generally in a land of shadows ; familiar scenes and faces came and receded, and loved voices came and sank curiously in his ear, while his apparently dying eyes and lips pled vainly for one kiss of his sunny-haired Maude to sweeten the bitter draught of that death which seemed so close and nigh.

But he was still struggling between life and eternity, when in the ruddy haze Roland hailed the purple outlines of the Pyramids in the Plain of Ghizeh, the ridge of the Jebel Mokattam, the distant minarets and the magnificent citadel of Cairo.

On reaching the Kasr-el-Nil Barracks, Roland was ordered to be attached for duty purposes to a regiment quartered there till further orders, as no more troops were proceeding up the Nile.

Though the battle of Hasheen was to be fought and won, and the lamentable fiasco of Macneill's zereba to occur at Suakim, the war was deemed virtually over, as the cause for it had collapsed by Gordon's betrayal and the fall of Khartoum.

With the general advance of the expedition under Lord Wolseley to rescue Gordon, our story has only had a certain

connection—a mission undertaken far too late, but during which the mind at home was kept at fever-heat by news from that burning seat of strife, recording the sufferings of our soldiers, and the bloody but victorious battles with the Mahdists, till the dark and terrible tidings came, that just as Wilson's column was ready to join Gordon, who had sent his steamers to Metemneh to meet him—Khartoum, after a defence perhaps unsurpassed in the annals of peril and glory, had fallen by storm and treachery, and the people of Britain were left to wonder, and in doubt, whether a stupendous blunder or an unpardonable crime had been perpetrated.

CHAPTER LVIII.

IN THE SHOUBRAH GARDENS.

ROLAND lost no time in telegraphing home for news of the missing ones, but received none; Mr. M'Wadsett was absent from town, so he and Jack Elliot, who was far from recovery yet, had to take patience and wait, they scarcely knew for what. One fact was too patent, that both Hester and Maude had disappeared—one too probably in penury and the other in an agony of grief and shame. It was not even known, apparently, whether they were together.

They had vanished, and, save a cheque or two cashed by Jack's bankers, left no trace of how or when; and a chilling fear crept over the hearts of both men as to what might have happened—illness, poverty, unthought-of snares, even death itself.

Meanwhile, 'the shadow, cloaked from head to foot, who keeps the keys of all the creeds,' was hovering perilously near Jack, for whom Roland procured quarters in a pleasant house in the beautiful Shoubrah Road, near Cairo—a broad but shady avenue formed of noble sycamores, the 'Rotten Row' of the city, and day followed day somewhat monoto-

nously now, though a letter dated some weeks back from his legal friend of Thistle Court gave Roland some occasion for gratifying thought.

‘If you can return,’ it ran, ‘must I remind you that now Earlshaugh is unoccupied; the land so far neglected, and the tenants well-nigh forgotten; the rents are accumulating at your bankers’, but no good is done to anyone. Your proper place and position is your own again; justice has restored your birthright; so come home at once and act wisely—home, my dear friend, and you shall have such a welcome as Earlshaugh has not seen since your father came back after the Crimean War.’

Pondering over this letter and on what the future might have in store, Roland was one afternoon idling over a cigarette in the gardens of the Shoubrah Palace, an edifice which rises from the bank of the Nile. On one side are pleasant glimpses of the latter, with its palm-clad banks and sparkling villages; on the other a tract of brilliantly tinted cultivation, and beyond it the golden sands of the desert, the shifting hillocks they form, and the gray peaks of several pyramids.

The gardens, surpassingly beautiful and purely Oriental in character, are entered by long and winding walks of impenetrable shade, from which we emerge on open spaces that team with roses, with gilded pavilions and painted kiosks. ‘Arched walks of orange-trees with the fruit and flowers hanging over your head lead to fountains,’ says a Jewish writer, ‘or to some other garden court, where myrtles border beds of tulips, and you wander on mosaic walks of polished pebbles; a vase flashes amid a group of dark cypresses, and you are invited to repose under a Syrian walnut-tree by a couch or summer-house. The most striking picture, however, of this charming retreat is a lake surrounded by light cloisters of white marble, and in the centre a fountain of crocodiles carved in the same material.’

Lulled by the heat, by the drowsy hum made by the sound of many carriages filled with harem beauties or European ladies rolling to and fro on the adjacent Shoubrah Road, with the ceaseless patter of hoofs, as

mounted Cairene dandies and our cavalry officers rode in the same gay promenade, Roland reclined on a marble seat, lit another cigarette, and watched the giant flowers of the Egyptian lotus in the little lake, blue and white, that sink when the sun sets, but open and rise when it is shining, till suddenly he saw a young lady appear, who was evidently idling in the gardens like himself.

He could see that she was a European. With one glove drawn off, showing a hand the pure whiteness of which contrasted with her dark dress, she was playing with the water of a red marble fountain that fell sparkling into the lakelet, not ten yards from where he was seated, unseen by her.

Suddenly his figure, in his undress uniform, caught her eye; she turned and looked full at him, as if spell-bound.

‘Roland!’ she exclaimed.

‘Hester—good heavens, can it be?—Hester, and *here!*’ said he.

Hester she was; he sprang to her side, and they took each other’s hands, both for a moment in dumb confusion and bewilderment. At the moment of this meeting and before recognition, even when hovering near him, and he had been all unconscious of who the tall and slender girl in mourning really was, she had been thinking of him, and as she had often thought—

‘I loved Roland all my life—better than my own soul; but such a love as mine is too often only its own best reward; and many a sore heart like mine learns that never in this world is it measured to us again as we have meted it out.’

Thus bitterly had the girl been pondering, when she found herself suddenly face to face with the subject of her reverie, and, in spite of herself, a little cloud was blended with the astonishment her eyes expressed.

‘Hester—what mystery is this? And are you not glad to see me?’ he asked impetuously.

‘Glad—oh, Roland! glad indeed, and that you escaped that dreadful day at Kirbeka!’ she replied, while her eyes became humid now.

‘God bless you, my darling!’ he exclaimed, as all his soul seemed suddenly to go forth to her, and he would have drawn her to him; but she thought of Annot Drummond, and fell back a pace. ‘Hester,’ said he upbraidingly, ‘will you not accord me one kiss, darling?’

She grew pale now, for she feared that her welcome had been more cordial than he had any right to expect; but the circumstances were peculiar, their place and mode of meeting alike strange and unexpected; but it was impossible for her not to guess, to read in his eyes, in fact, all the tender passion of love, esteem, and kinship that filled his heart for her now.

‘How well you are looking, Hester, after all you must have suffered—some of the old rose’s hue is back to your cheek, darling.’

‘Don’t speak thus, Roland—I—I——’ she faltered.

‘Why not, Hester? You loved me, I know, even as I loved you.’

‘Before that beautiful little hypocrite and adventuress came,’ said she, with quiet bitterness, ‘I certainly did love you, Roland——’

‘And love me still, Hester?’

‘Do I look as if I had let the worm in the bud feed on my damask cheek?’ said she, with a little gasping laugh; ‘has my hair grown thin or white? How vain you are, Cousin Roland!’

‘No, Hester’ (how he loved to utter her name!); ‘though I admit to having been a hopeless and thoughtless fool—no worse; but, forgive me, dear Hester; I ask you in the name of your good old father, who so loved us both, and in memory of our pleasant past at Merlwood.’

She made no answer; but her downcast eyes were full of tears; her breast was heaving, and her lips were quivering now.

‘It ought not to be hard to forgive you, Roland, as you never said, even in that pleasant past, that you loved me; and yet, perhaps—but I must go now,’ she said, interrupting herself, as she turned round wearily and vaguely.

‘Go where?’ he asked. ‘But how came you to be here—here in Cairo—and whither are you going?’

‘To where I reside,’ she replied, with a soft smile; for, with all her love for him, and with all her supreme joy at meeting him again thus safe and sound, and in a manner so unprecedentedly peculiar, she was not disposed quite to strike her colours and yield at once.

‘Reside!’ thought Roland, with a flush of anger in his heart; ‘as companion, governess, nursing sister, or—what?’

‘To where I reside with Maude,’ she added, almost reading his thoughts.

‘Is Maude here, too?’

‘Yes; we came together in quest of you and Jack. Oh! where is he?—well and safe, too, I am sure, or you would not be looking so bright. Maude left her home under a mistake—the victim of a conspiracy, hatched, as we know now, by that wretched creature Sharpe.’

‘And she is here—here in Cairo?’

‘Yes.’

‘This seems miraculous!’

‘Come with me to Maude.’

‘And then to Jack—to poor Jack, whom the sight of her beloved face will surely make well and strong again.’

And, as people in a dream, in another minute they were in a cab—for cabs are now to be had in the city of the Caliphs and the Mamelukes—and were bowling towards one of the stately squares in the European quarter through strangely picturesque streets of lofty, latticed, and painted houses, richly carved as Gothic shrines, where, by day, the many races that make up the population of Cairo in their bright and varied costumes throng on foot, on horse or donkey-back; and where, by night, rope-dancers, conjurers, fire-eaters, and tumblers, with sellers of fruit, flowers, sherbet, and coffee, make up a scene of noise and bustle beyond description; and now certainly, with Hester suddenly conjured up by his side, Roland felt, we say, as if in a dream wild and sudden as anything in the ‘Arabian Nights.’

Does love once born lie dormant to live again?

Judging by his own experience, he thought so, with truth.

More than once when he had gone forth into the world with his regiment he had almost forgotten the little Hester as she had been to him, a sweet, piquante, and dainty figure amid the groves of Merlwood, and in the background of his boyish days; then in his soldier's life, she would anon flit across the vista of memory, fondly and pleasantly, till he learned to love her (ere that other came, that Circe with her cup and the dangerous charm of novelty); and now all his old passion sprang into existence, holding his heart in its purity and strength as if it had never wandered from her—tender, unselfish, and true as his boyish love had been in the past time; yet just then, by her side, and with her hand within grasp of his own, he felt his lips but ill unable to express all he thought and felt, and his fear of—*the refusal* that might come.

Then he was about to see his dearly-loved sister Maude; but his joy thereat was clouded by the dread and knowledge that poor Jack's life was trembling in the balance.

CHAPTER LVIII.

CONCLUSION.

THE fond white arms of Maude were around Jack, his head was pillowed on her breast; so the young pair were once more together, and she had, of course, installed herself as his nurse.

Oh, how haggard, wan, wasted, and changed he was!

He lay quiet, motionless, and happy, if 'weak as a cat,' he said, with the hum of the great city of Cairo coming faintly through the latticed windows that overlooked the vast Uzbekyeh Square and its gardens, whilom a marsh, and now covered with stately trees, under which are cafés for the sale of coffee, sherbet, and punch, where bands play in

the evenings, and Franks and Turks may be seen with Europeans in their Nizam dresses, and the Highlander in his white jacket and tartan kilt.

How delightful it was to have her dear caresses again—to feel her soft breath on his faded cheek; all seemed so new, so strange, that he almost feared the delicious spell might break, and he, awaking, find himself again in his grass hut at Korti, or gliding down the Nile in the whale-boat of the old Staffordshire, with Arabs to repel, rocks to avoid, and cataracts to shoot with oar and pole.

‘Oh, Jack,’ said Maude, for the twentieth time, ‘forgive and pardon me for doubting you; but that woman——’

‘A vile plot—backed up by a forged letter! My little Maude, it would not have borne a moment’s investigation!’

‘I know—I know now; but I was so terrified—so crushed—so lonely! And then, think of the days and nights of horror and agony I underwent. The woman dying of a street accident in the Infirmary of Edinburgh, signed a confession of her story—that she was the bribed agent of Sharpe’s plot. I wrote all about it, but you never got my letter.’

‘And this was “the startling news” that made you so suddenly leave Edinburgh?’

‘To come here in search of you. Oh, Jack! I was mad to doubt you; but you would quite pardon me if you knew all I have undergone. Shall I ever forget the night she came—the night of that aimless flight south—aimless, save to avoid you—but ending at York? Oh never, Jack, if I lived a thousand years! I now know that it takes a great deal to kill some people; yet I think that, but for dear, affectionate Hester, I could not have lived very long with that awful and never-ceasing pain gnawing at my heart.’

Jack raised her quivering face between his tremulous hands, and looked into it fondly and yearningly. How full of affection it seemed—so softly radiant with shy and lovely blushes, while her eyes of forget-me-not blue never, even in the past, shone with the love-light that illumined them now,

when sufferings were past and their memory becoming fainter.

‘How long—how long it seems since we separated, and without a farewell, Jack!’

‘A day sometimes seems an age—ay, even a day, when matters of the heart are concerned.’

‘And a minute or two may undo the work of years—yea, of a lifetime. But you must get well and strong, Jack, for the homeward voyage. In a few days we shall have you laughing among us again; and you will see what a careful little nurse I shall prove.’

Jack, withal, feared just then that there was but little laughter left for him on earth; yet their reunion and the presence of Maude acted as a wonderful charm upon him, and from her loving little hands, instead of those of a stolid hospital orderly, he now took his prescribed ‘baby food’ as he called it—beef-tea, eggs beat up in milk, and port wine elixir, with the odious ‘diluted hydrochloric acid, one drachm, and of quinine, eight drachms,’ as ordered by the medical staff.

But he rallied rapidly, though Maude’s heart beat painfully when occasionally a ray of sunshine stole into the room through the picturesque lattice-wood windows (which in Cairo had not been superseded by glass) and rested on his face, and she saw how pale and wan, if peaceful and bright, the latter was now: and then if he spoke too much, she placed her white hands on his lips, or silenced them more sweetly but quite as effectually.

Hester, when she first saw Jack Elliot, little imagined that he would recover so rapidly. She had thought of Maude and then of her own father.

‘Strange it is,’ pondered the girl, ‘that when one sorrow comes upon us—a shock unexpectedly—we seem to see the gradual approach of another, and so realize its bitterness before it becomes an actual fact. Thus I felt, long before poor papa died, that I should be alone and penniless in the world.’

‘Hester!’ exclaimed Roland, softly but upbraidingly, as she said something of this kind to him.

‘Well, Roland,’ said Hester, ‘no one seemed to care where I went or what became of me; all the world was indifferent to me; I had lost all interest and saw no beauty in it.’

He had both her hands in his now, and was gazing into her white-lidded and long-lashed dark-blue eyes.

Then, as eye met eye, each saw a strange but alluring expression in the other—the past, the present, and future all mingled and combined—an expression of a nature deep and indescribable.

We do not mean to rehearse all that Roland said then. If no woman can without some emotion hear a tale of love, especially if told so powerfully as Roland was telling it then, we may well believe how Hester’s heart responded; and he held her in his embrace, and kissed her again and again as a man only kisses the girl he loves, and, more than all, the one he hopes to make his wife.

So everything is said to come in time to those who wait.

They were together again—together at last—and the outer world and all other things thereof seemed to glide away from them, leaving only love and peace and rest behind—love and trust with the radiance of light!

THE END.



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Preston Fight.
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Two Midshipmen.
Medora.
War Hawk.
Young Commander.

BANIM, John.

Peep o' Day.
Smuggler.

BELL, M. M.

Deeds, Not Words.
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