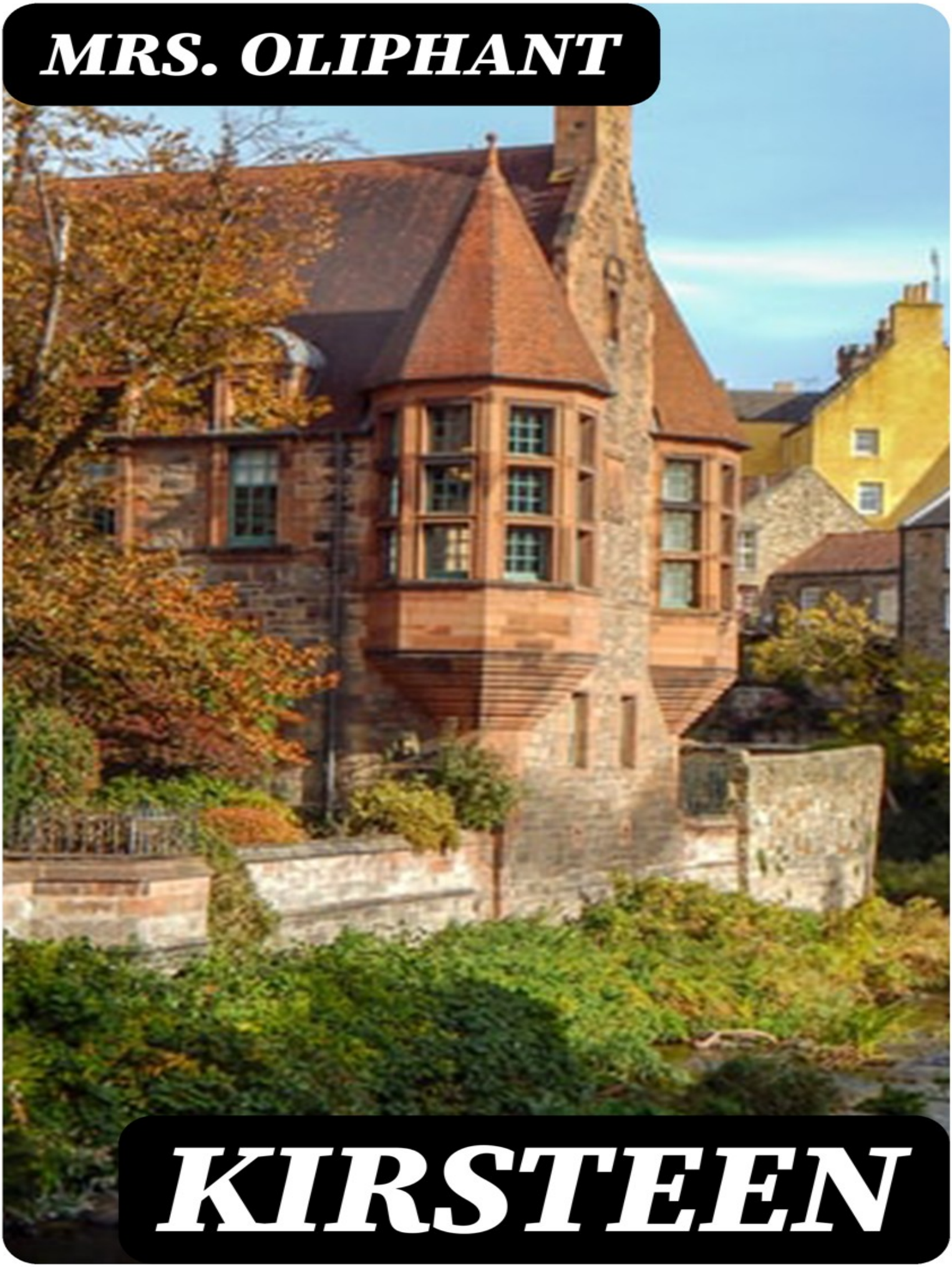
MRS. OLIPHANT



KIRSTEEN

Mrs. Oliphant

Kirsteen

The Story of a Scotch Family Seventy Years Ago

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PART I.

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CHAPTER I.

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“WHERE is Kirsteen?”

“’Deed, mem, I canna tell you; and if you would be guided by me you wouldna wail and cry for Kirsteen, night and day. You’re getting into real ill habits with her to do everything for you. And the poor lassie has not a meenit to hersel’. She’s on the run from morning to night. Bring me this, and get me that. I ken you’re very weakly and life’s a great trouble, but I would fain have ye take a little thought for her too.”

Mrs. Douglas looked as if she might cry under Marg’ret’s reproof. She was a pale pink woman seated in a large high easy-chair, so-called, something like a porter’s chair. It was not particularly easy, but it was filled with pillows, and was the best that the locality and the time could supply. Her voice had a sound of tears in it as she replied:

“If you were as weak as I am, Marg’ret, and pains from head to foot, you would know better—and not grudge me the only comfort I have.”

“Me grudge ye ainything! no for the world; except just that bairn’s time and a’ her life that might be at its brightest; but poor thing, poor thing!” said Marg’ret, shaking her head.

The scene was the parlour at Drumcarro, in the wilds of Argyllshire, the speakers, the mistress of the house *de jure*,

and she who was at the head of affairs *de facto*, Marg’ret the housekeeper, cook, lady’s maid, and general manager of everything. Mrs. Douglas had brought Marg’ret with her as her maid when she came to Drumcarro as a bride some thirty years before; but as she went on having child after child for nearly twenty years, without much stamina of either mind or body to support that continual strain, Marg’ret had gradually become more and more the deputy and representative, the real substitute of the feminine head of the house. Not much was demanded of that functionary so far as the management of its wider affairs went. Her husband was an arbitrary and high-tempered man, whose will was absolute in the family, who took counsel with no one, and who after the few complaisances of a grim honeymoon let his wife drop into the harmless position of a nonentity, which indeed was that which was best fitted for her. All her active duties one by one had fallen into the hands of Marg’ret, whose first tender impulse to save the mistress whom she loved from toils unfitted for her, had gradually developed into the self-confidence and universal assumption of an able and energetic housekeeper born to organize and administer. Marg’ret did not know what these fine words meant, but she knew “her work,” as she would have said, and by degrees had taken everything in the house and many things outside it into her hands. It was to her that the family went for everything, who was the giver of all indulgences, the only person who dared speak to “the maister,” when clothes were wanted or any new thing. She was an excellent cook, a good manager, combining all the qualities that make a house comfortable, and she was the

only one in the house who was not afraid of “the maister,” of whom on the contrary he stood in a little awe. A wife cannot throw up her situation with the certainty of finding another at a moment’s notice as a good housekeeper can do—even if she has spirit enough to entertain such an idea. And poor Mrs. Douglas had no spirit, no health, little brains to begin with and none left now, after thirty years of domestic tyranny and “a bairntime” of fourteen children. What could such a poor soul do but fall into invalidism with so many excellent reasons constantly recurring for adopting the habits of that state and its pathos and helplessness? especially with Marg’ret to fall back upon, who, though she would sometimes speak her mind to her mistress, nursed and tended, watched over and guarded her with the most unfailing care. Drumcarro himself (as he liked to be called) scarcely dared to be very uncivil to his wife in Marg’ret’s presence. He knew better than to quarrel with the woman who kept so much comfort with so little expense in his spare yet crowded house.

“Who is your ‘poor thing, poor thing’?” said a cheerful voice, with a mimicry of Marg’ret’s manner and her accent (for Marg’ret said poor as if it were written with a French u, that sound so difficult to English lips) “would it be the colley dogue or the canary bird or maybe the mistress of the house?”

Marg’ret turned round upon the only antagonist in the house who could hold head against her, or whom she could not crush at a blow—Kirsteen, the second daughter, who came in at this moment, quite softly but with a sudden burst open of the door, a sort of compromise between the noise it

would have been natural to her to make, and the quietness essential to the invalid’s comfort. She was a girl of nearly twenty, a daughter of the hills, strongly built, not slim but trim, with red hair and brown eyes and a wonderful complexion, the pure whiteness like milk which so often goes with those ruddy locks, and the colour of health and fine air on her cheeks. I would have darkened and smoothed my Kirsteen’s abundant hair if I could, for in those days nobody admired it. The type of beauty to which the palm was given was the pale and elegant type, with hair like night and starry eyes either blue or dark; and accordingly Kirsteen was not considered a pretty girl, though there were many who liked her looks in spite of her red hair, which was how people expressed their opinion then. It was so abundant and so vigorous and full of curl that it cost her all the trouble in the world to keep it moderately tidy, whereas “smooth as satin” was the required perfection of ladies’ locks. Her eyes were brown, not nearly dark enough for the requirements of the time, a kind of hazel indeed, sometimes so full of light that they dazzled the spectator and looked like gold—also quite out of accordance with the canons of the day. She was slightly freckled: she was, as I have said, strongly built; and in the dress of the time, a very short bodice and a very straight and scanty skirt, her proportions were scarcely elegant, but her waist was round if not very small, and her arms, in their short sleeves, shapely and well formed, and whiter than might have been expected from their constant exposure to air and sun, for Kirsteen only put on her gloves on serious occasions. The air of health and brightness and

vigour about her altogether, made her appearance like that of a burst of sunshine into this very shady place.

"'Deed," said Marg'ret, putting her hands on each side of her own substantial waist in a way which has always been supposed to imply a certain defiance, "it was just you yoursel'."

"Me!" the girl cried with a sort of suppressed shout. She cast a laughing glance round with an apparent attempt to discover some cause for the pity. "What have I done wrong now?" Then her eyes came back to the troubled almost whimpering pathos of her mother's looks, and a cloud came over her bright countenance. "What has she been saying, mother, about me?"

"She says I'm crying on you for something day and night, and that you never have a minute to yourself; and oh, Kirsteen, my dear, I fear it's true."

Kirsteen put her arms akimbo too, and confronted Marg'ret with laughing defiance. They were not unlike each other, both of them types of powerful and capable womanhood, the elder purely and strongly practical, the other touched with fancy and poetry and perhaps some of the instincts of gentle blood, though neither in father nor mother were there many graces to inherit. "You are just a leein' woman," said the girl with a flash of her bright eyes. "Why, it's my life! What would I do without my Minnie?—as the song says." And she began to sing in a fresh, sweet, but uncultivated voice:

> "He turned him right and round about,
> Said, Scorn not at my mither,

True loves I may get mony an ane
But Minnie ne’er anither.”

Before Kirsteen’s song came to an end, however, her eyes suddenly filled with tears. “What were you wanting, mother,” she said hastily as she dropped the tune which was a very simple one, “to make her speak?”

“Oh, I was wanting nothing, nothing in particular. I was wanting my pillows shifted a little, and the big plaiden shawl for my knees, and one of my wires that fell out of my reach, and my other clew for I’m nearly at the end of this one. Ay! that’s better; there is nobody that knows how to make me comfortable but you.”

For Kirsteen in the meantime had begun to do, with swift and noiseless care, all that was wanted, finding the clew, or ball of worsted for the stocking her mother was knitting, as she swept softly past to get the big shawl, on her way to the side of the chair where she arranged the pillows with deft accustomed skill. It did not take a minute to supply all these simple requirements. Marg’ret looked on, without moving while all was done, and caught the look half-soothed, half-peevish, which the invalid cast round to see if there was not something else that she wanted. “You may put down that book off the mantelpiece that Robbie left there,” Mrs. Douglas said, finding nothing else to suggest; “it will curl up at the corners, and your father will be ill-pleased—”

“Weel,” said Marg’ret, “now ye’ve got your slave, I’m thinking ye’ve nae mair need of me, and there’s the grand supper to think of, that the maister’s aye sae keen about. When will ye have markit a’ thae things, Miss Kirsteen? For I maun see to the laddie’s packing before it’s ower late.”

“There’s the last half dozen of handkerchiefs to do; but I’ll not take long, and they’re small things that can go into any corner. I’ll do them now,” said Kirsteen with a little sigh.

“There’s nae hurry;” Marg’ret paused a little, then caught the girl by the sleeve, “just take another turn in the bonnie afternoon before the sun’s down,” she said in a low tone, “there’s plenty of time. Run away, my bonnie lamb. I’ll see the mistress wants naething.”

“And you that have the supper and the packing and all on your hands! No, no. I’ll do them now. You may go to your work,” said Kirsteen with a look half tender, half peremptory. She carried her work to the window and sat down there with the white handkerchiefs in her hand.

“And what colour will you mark them in, Kirsteen? You have neither cotton nor silk to do it.”

Kirsteen raised her head and pulled out a long thread of her red hair. “I am going to do it in this colour,” she said with a slight blush and smile. It was not an unusual little piece of sentiment in those days and the mother accepted it calmly.

“My colour of hair,” she said, smoothing with a little complaisance her scanty dark locks under her cap, “was more fit for that than yours, Kirsteen, but Robbie will like to have it all the same.”

Kirsteen laughed a little consciously while she proceeded with her work. She was quite willing to allow that a thread of her mother’s dark hair would be better. “I will do one with yours for Robbie,” she said, “and the rest with mine.”

“But they’re all for Robbie,” said the mother.

“Yes, yes,” Kirsteen replied with again that conscious look, the colour mantling to her cheeks, a soft moisture filling her eyes. The handkerchief was marked in fine delicate little cross stitches upon the white cambric, and though Mrs. Douglas’s dark hair was like a spider’s web, the red of Kirsteen’s shone upon the fine fabric like a thread of gold.

The handkerchiefs were not yet finished when two young men came into the room, one so like Kirsteen that there was no difficulty in identifying him as her brother, the other a swarthy youth a little older, tall and strong and well knit. Robbie was on the eve of his start in life, leaving home, and Ronald Drummond, who was the son of a gentleman in the neighbourhood, was going with him. They were both bound with commissions in the Company’s service for India, where half of the long-legged youths, sons of little Highland lairds and Lowland gentlemen, with good blood and plenty of pride and no money, the Quentin Durwards of the early nineteenth century, found an appropriate career. The period was that of the brief peace which lasted only so long as Napoleon was at Elba, long enough, however, to satisfy the young men that there was to be no chance of renewed fighting nearer home and to make them content with their destination. They had been bred for this destination from their cradles, and Robbie Douglas at least was not sorry to escape from the dullness of Drumcarro to a larger life. Several of his brothers were already in India, and the younger ones looked to no other fate but that of following. As for the girls they did not count for much. He was sorry to say good-bye to Kirsteen, but that did not weigh down his

heart. He was in high excitement, eager about his new outfit, his uniform, all the novel possessions which were doubly enchanting to a boy who had never before possessed anything of his own. He was eighteen, and to become all at once a man, an officer, an independent individuality, was enough to turn the head of any youth.

Ronald Drummond was different. He was going from a much more genial home: he had already tasted the sweets of independence, having served in the last campaign in the Peninsula and been wounded, which was a thing that raised him still higher in the scale of life than the three years' advantage in respect of age which he had over his young comrade. He was neither so cheerful nor so much excited as Robbie. He came and stood over Kirsteen as she drew closer and closer to the window to end her work before the light had gone.

"You are working it with your hair!" he said, suddenly, perceiving the nature of the long curling thread with which she threaded her needle.

"Yes," she said, demurely, holding up her work to the light. "What did you think it was?"

"I thought it was gold thread," he said. And then he took up one of the handkerchiefs already completed from the table. "R. D.," he said. "That's my name too."

"So it is," said Kirsteen, as if she had now discovered the fact for the first time.

"Nobody will do anything like that for me," he added, pathetically.

"Oh, Ronald! if not the hairs of their heads but the heads themselves would do ye good ye should have them—and

that ye know."

"It is very true," said Ronald, "and thank you, Kirsteen, for reminding me how good they are; but," he added, after a moment, in a low voice, "they are not *you*."

She gave vent to a very feeble laugh which was full of emotion. "No, they could not be that," she said.

"And R. D. is my name too," said the young man. "Kirsteen!" She looked up at him for a moment in the light that was fading slowly out of the skies. He had taken one of the handkerchiefs from the pile, and touching her sleeve with one hand to call her attention, put the little glistening letters to his lips and then placed the handkerchief carefully in the breast pocket of his coat. Standing as he did, shutting out, as she complained, all the light from Mrs. Douglas, this little action was quite unseen, except by the one person who was intended to see it. Kirsteen could make no reply nor objection, for her heart was too full for speech. Her trembling hand, arrested in its work, dropped into his for a moment. He whispered something else, she scarcely knew what—and then Marg'ret marched into the room with the two candles which were all the lights ever used in Drumcarro parlour, and all was over and done.

CHAPTER II.

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THERE was "a grand supper," as Marg'ret had announced, at Drumcarro this evening, for which, though it was almost entirely a family party, solemn preparations were being made. The house was full of an unusual odour of good cheer, unusual goings and comings through the house

betrayed the excitement and sense of a great event approaching which was diffused through the family. On ordinary occasions the family dinner took place between two and three o’clock in the afternoon, followed by tea at seven with much wealth of scones and jam, new-laid eggs and other home produce—and the day ended for the elders by the production of “the tray” with its case of spirit-bottles and accompanying hot water. Now and then by times, however, this great ceremonial of a supper took place, always on the eve of the departure of one of the boys to make their fortune in the world. These occasions were consequently not surrounded by the brightest recollections to the grown-up portion of the family, or to their mother. The supper indeed to her was a feast of tears, probably as great, though a more usual indulgence than the other characteristics of the festival. It was rarely that Mrs. Douglas ventured to weep in presence of her lord, but on that night he said nothing, made no comment upon her red eyes, and suffered the whimper in her voice without any harsh, “Hold your tongue, woman!” such as usually subdued her. And it was recognized in the house that it was the mother’s *rôle* and privilege on these occasions to cry. The children were not disturbed by it as they might have been by tears which they were less accustomed to see shed.

The dining-room was the best room in Drumcarro, as in many Scotch houses of the kind, being recognized as the real centre of life, the special room of “the maister” and the scene of all the greater events in the family. There were two windows in it which at a time when the existence of the window-tax curtailed the light, was of itself a fine feature,

and it was well-sized and not badly furnished, with a multitude of substantial mahogany chairs, sideboard, cellaret, and a long dining table of very dark mahogany, shining like a black mirror, which was capable of being drawn out to almost any length, and which had attained the very highest polish of which wood was capable. Covered with a dazzling white cloth, lighted with four candles, a most unusual splendour—set in the silver candlesticks, which were the pride of the family—and surrounded by all the Douglases who still remained at home, it was an imposing sight. Flowers had not yet been thought of as decorations of a table; such frivolities were far in the depths of time. A large square dish set in a high stand of plated silver with straggling branches extending from it on every side, each of which contained a smaller dish full of confectionery, pieces of coloured “rock” from Edinburgh, and sweeties procured from “the merchant’s” for the occasion, occupied the centre of the table. It was called the *épergne* and was considered very splendid. The central dish was piled high with ruddy apples, which gave an agreeable piece of colour, if any one had thought of such fantastic folly. The four candlesticks, each with a pair of snuffers in its tray placed between them, completed the decorative portion of the table. The candles were not the delicate articles which advancing civilization has learned how to produce, but smoky “moulds” which tinged the atmosphere with a perceptible emanation, especially when they stood in need of snuffing. They threw a ruddy light upon the faces closely assembled round the board, bringing out most fully those of the more youthful members of the family, and fading dismally towards the

ends of the long table at which the principal personages were placed. There were but two visitors of the party, one the minister, invited in right of having more or less superintended Robbie’s studies, such as they were, and seated on Mrs. Douglas’s right hand; the other an old Miss Douglas known as Aunt Eelen, from whom there were certain expectations and who occupied a similar place of honour by the side of Drumcarro. The hero of the evening was at his father’s left hand. The rest of the party were Mary the eldest daughter, Jeanie the youngest, Kirsteen, and two boys aged fourteen and twelve respectively, the remaining sons of the house. The fare was excellent, and in another region might have been thought luxurious; but it was impossible to conceal that the large dish of delicious trout which stood smoking before Mrs. Douglas, and the corresponding hecatomb of grouse to which her husband helped the company after the trout had been disposed of, came from the loch and the moor on Drumcarro estate, and therefore were as much home produce as the eggs and the cream. This fact elicited a somewhat sharp criticism from Miss Eelen at the foot of the table.

“The grouse is no doubt very good,” she said, “and being to the manner born as ye may say, I never tire of it; but for a genteel supper like what you have always given to the lads—”

“Faith,” said the laird, “they’ll find it most genteel where they’re going. The Englishmen will think it the finest table in the world when they hear we have grouse every day; and Robbie’s no bound to condescend upon the number of other dishes. I know what I am doing.”

“No doubt, no doubt: I was only making a remark. Now I think a bit of cod from the sea or a made dish of fine collops, or just a something tossed up with a bit of veal, they’re more genteel—and I know that’s what you’re always thinking of, Neil—of course, for the boys’ sakes——”

“There’s a made dish coming, mem,” said Merran, who was waiting.

“Oh, there’s a made dish coming! I thought Marg’ret would mind what was for the credit of the house. Robbie, my man, ye ought to feel yourself a great personage with all the phrase that’s made for you. When Sandy went away, who was the first, there was nothing but a haggis—but we’ve learned many things since then.”

“A haggis is a very good thing, it’s fit for a king’s table.”

“But not what you would call refined, nor genteel. Give me the leg and a piece of the back—there’s more taste in it. I hope you will always be grateful to your father for giving ye such a grand set out.”

“I think,” said the minister at the other end, “that you and Drumcarro, mem, give yourselves more and more trouble every son that leaves ye. This is the fifth I have seen.”

“Oh, don’t say me, Mr. Pyper,” said the mother. “I know just nothing about it—when your son’s going away, and ye think ye may never set eyes on him again, who’s to think of eating and drinking? He may do it, but not me.”

“That’s very true,” said Mr. Pyper. “Still, to give the lad a something pleasurable to look back upon, a last feast, so to speak, has many points in its favour. A lad’s mind is full of

materialism, as you may call it, and he will mind all the faces round the friendly board."

"It's not very friendly to me," said the mother, with a sob, "my four bonny boys all away, and now Robbie. It just breaks my heart."

"But what would you do with them, mem, if they were here?" said the sensible minister; "four big men, for they're all men by this time, about the house? No, no, my dear leddy, you must not complain. Such fine openings for them all! and every one getting on."

"But what does that matter to me, Mr. Pyper, if I am never to see one of them again?"

"Oh, yes, mem, it matters—oh, ay, it matters much. The young of no species, much less the human, can bide at home. Fathers and mothers in the lower creation just throw them off, and there's an end. But you do more than that. You put them in the best way of doing for themselves, and the King himself cannot do better. Alas!" said the minister, "no half so well, decent man—for look at all these young princes, one wilder than the other. And every one of yours doing so well."

"Oh, yes, they're doing well enough—but such a long way away. And me so delicate. And Robbie never quite strong since he had the measles. It's borne in upon me that I will never see him again."

"You need not say it, mother," said Kirsteen, "for that's what nobody can know; and it's just as likely he may be sent home with despatches, or some great grandee take a fancy to him and bring him back. And when we're sitting

some day working our stockings he'll come linking in by the parlour door."

"Oh, you're just as light as air," said the mother; "there's nothing serious in ye. You think going to India is just like going to the fair."

Kirsteen darted a quick glance at her mother, but said no more. Her eyes kept filling much against her will. She was in great terror lest a big drop might brim over and run down her cheek, to be spied at once by Jeanie or the boys. For nothing would be hid from these little things: they could note at the same moment the last bit of a bird which they had all counted on, being transferred to Aunt Eelen's plate, and keep an eye upon the favourite apple each had chosen, and spy that suspicious brightness in Kirsteen's eyes. Nothing could be hid from their sharp, little, all-inspecting looks.

There was a breathless moment when the cloth was drawn, and the black gleam of the mahogany underneath changed in a moment the lights of the picture, and gave the children a delightful opportunity of surveying themselves in that shining surface. It was a moment full of solemnity. Everybody knew what was coming. The port and sherry, with their little labels, in the silver holders intended to prevent the bottles from scratching the table, were placed before Mr. Douglas. Then there was also placed before him a trayful of tall glasses. He rose up: the eyes of all followed his movements: Jock and Jamie projecting their red heads forward in the smoky glow of the candles, then much in want of snuffing: Jeanie's paler locks turned the same way. Mary, who had her mother's brown smooth hair, rested her

clasped hands upon the edge of the table with calm expectation. Kirsteen leant her elbows on the same shining edge, and put down her face in her hands. Miss Eelen shook her head, and kept on shaking it like a china mandarin. The laird of Drumcarro went to an old-fashioned wine-cooler, which stood under the sideboard. He took from it one bottle of champagne, which occupied it in solitary dignity. Marg'ret stood ready with a knife in her hand to cut the wire, and a napkin over her arm to wipe up anything that might be spilt. Not a word was said at table while these preliminaries were gone through. Aunt Eelen, as the catastrophe lingered, went so far as to make a suppressed *Tchish! Tchish!* of her tongue against her palate. The rest were full of serious excitement too important for speech. The bottle was opened finally without spilling a drop: it was perhaps not so much "up" as it might have been. Drumcarro filled all the glasses, one for each person at table, and another for Marg'ret. There was perhaps more foam than wine in a number of the glasses. He held up his own in his hand. "It's Robbie's last night at Drumcarro," he said, "for the present. Have you all your glasses? Before the fizz is out of the wine drink to Robbie's good health, and good luck to him, and to all our lads that have gone before." He touched the foam in his glass, now fast dying away, with his lips. "May they all come back with stars on their breasts," he said, "and do credit to their name —and not a laggard, nor a coward, nor one unworthy to be a Douglas among them all!"

The other male members of the party were standing up also, "Here's to you, Robbie! Here's to you, Robbie!" cried the two boys. The foam in their glasses merely moistened

their throats; the minister, however, whose glass had been full, gravely swallowed its contents in little sips, with pauses between. “A very good health to them all, and the Lord bless them,” he said with imposing authority. Mrs. Douglas, taking advantage of the privilege awarded to her, began to cry, and Marg’ret lifted up a strong voice, from the foot of the table where she stood with her hand upon the shoulder of the hero.

“Be a good lad, Robbie—and mind upon your Minnie and a’ the family—and be a credit to us a’: here’s to you, and to the rest o’ the young gentlemen, them that’s gone, and them that are to go!”

“Ye’ll have to get a new bottle for the little one,” said Aunt Eelen, “Neil, my man, for your half-dozen will be out with Jock.” She gave a harsh laugh at her own joke. “And then there’s the lasses’ marriages to be thought upon,” she added, setting down her glass.

Drumcarro resumed his seat, the ceremonial being over. “Let the lasses’ marriages alone,” he said impatiently. “I’ve enough to think upon with my lads. Now, Rob, are you sure you’re all ready? Your things packed and all your odds and ends put up? The less of them you take the better. Long before you’ve got the length of Calcutta ye’ll be wishing you had left the half of your portmanteaux at home.”

“I’ve just two, father.”

“Well, ye’ll be wishing ye had but one. Bring ben the hot water, Marg’ret; for wine’s but a feeble drink, and cold on the stomach. My wife never moves at the right time—will I give her a hint that you’re waiting, Eelen?”

“Not on my account, Drumcarro. Your champagne’s no doubt a grand drink; but a glass out of your tumbler, if you’re going to make one, is more wholesome and will set all right.”

“I thought ye would say that,” said the laird. She had said it already on every such occasion—so that perhaps his divination was not wonderful. He proceeded with care to the manufacture of “the tumbler,” at which the minister looked from the other end of the table with patient interest, abiding his time.

“Snuff the candles,” said the laird, “will nobody pay a little attention? You three little ones, you can run away with your apples, it’s near your bed-time; but don’t make more noise than you can help. Marg’ret, take the hot water to the minister. Champagne, as ye were saying, Eelen, is a grand drink; I think it right my sons should drink it at their father’s table before they plunge into the extravagance of a mess. It teaches a lad what he’s likely to meet with, and I would not have one of mine surprised with any dainty, as if he had come out of a poor house. But a wholesome glass like what I’m helping you to is worth twenty of it.” He was filling a wine-glass with his small silver toddy-ladle as he spoke, and the fumes of the pungent liquid rose in curls of steam pleasant to the accustomed nostrils. Robbie kept an eye upon the hot water which Mr. Pyper detained, knowing that one of the privileges of his position to-night was “to make a tumbler” for himself, with the privilege of offering it then to his sisters, as each of his brothers had done.

“Can I assist you to a glass, mem? just a drop. It will do ye good,” the minister said.

“Nothing will do me good,” said Mrs. Douglas. “I’m far past that; but I’ll take a little for civility, not to refuse a friend; whether it’s toddy or whether it’s wine it’s all sounding brass and a tinkling cymbal to me. A woman when her bairns go from her is little comforted by the like of that.”

“And yet the creature comforts have their place, a homely one but still a true one,” said the minister. “There’s a time to feast as well as a time to refrain from feasting. Miss Mary, may I have the pleasure of assisting you?”

“I’ll take a little from Robbie,” said the elder daughter, wisely instructed that it was well thus to diminish the unwonted tumbler allowed to the novice. Kirsteen rose quickly to her feet as these interchanges went round.

“Mother, I think if ye’ll let me, I’ll just give an eye to what the little ones are doing,” she said, “and see that Robbie’s things are all ready. One of the boxes is open still and there are these handkerchiefs.”

Kirsteen’s eyes were brimming over, and as she spoke a large drop fell upon her hand: she looked at it with alarm, saying, “I did not mean to be so silly,” and hastened away.

“Where is Kirsteen away to? Can she not take her share of what is going like the rest?” said her father. “You breed these lasses to your own whimsies, Mistress Douglas. The bairns are well out of the road; but them that are grown up should bide where they are, and not disturb the family. I have no patience with them.”

“I’m here, father,” said Mary in her mild voice.

“Oh, ay, you’re there,” said the inconsistent head of the house, “for you’re just nobody, and never had two ideas in your head,” he continued in a lower tone. “Now, Robbie, my

man, take your glass, there is no saying when you will get another. It's just second nature to a Scotsman, but it's as well for you to be out of the way of it; for though it's the most wholesome drink, it's very seductive and you're much better without it at your age. It's like the strange woman that you're warned against in Scripture."

"Drumcarro!" said Aunt Eelen. "Oh fie! before ladies."

"Ladies or no ladies I cannot let the occasion pass without a word of warning," said the father. "Ye will have every temptation put before ye, my lad; not drink perhaps, for the climate will not stand it, but other things, that are worse."

"I'm thinking, Christina," said the old lady, "that now your goodman has begun his moralities it may be as well for us to go, for you know where that begins and you never can tell where it may end; a man has cognizance of many things that cannot enter into the experience of you and me. Mind you what your father says, Robbie, but it's not intended for your mother and me."

CHAPTER III.

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KIRSTEEN hurried out of the room, out of the fumes of the toddy and the atmosphere of the half-festive, half-doleful occasion which made a not altogether unpleasant excitement in the monotony of the home life. She gazed in at the open door of the parlour, and saw the three younger children gathered in the firelight upon the hearthrug munching their apples, and the sweets with which they had been allowed to fill their pockets. The firelight made still

more ruddy the red heads and freckled faces of the boys, and lit up Jeanie, who sat on a footstool a little higher than her brothers, in her more delicate tints. Kirsteen was much attached to her younger sister, who promised to be the beauty of the family, and thought her like an angel, especially as seen through the dew of her wet eyes. “Dinna make a noise,” she said; “be awfu’ quiet or you’ll be sent to your beds;” and then closed the door softly and stole through the dark passage towards the principal entrance. There was no light save a ruddy gleam from the kitchen in the depths of that dark passage which traversed the whole breadth of the house, and that which shone through the crevices of the dining-room door. She had to find her way groping, but she was very well used to this exercise, and knew exactly where the hall-table and the heavy wooden chairs on each side stood. The outer door stood half open according to the habit of the country where there were no burglars to fear, and little to tempt them, and a perfect capacity of self-defence inside. There was a full moon that night, but it had not yet risen, though the sky was full of a misty light which preceded that event. A faint shadow of the group of trees outside was thrown upon the doorway; they were birches slender and graceful, with their leaves half blown away by the October gales; those that remained were yellow with the first touches of the frost, and in themselves gave forth a certain light. Kirsteen stole out to a bench that stood against the wall, and sat down in a corner. She was not afraid of cold with her uncovered head and bare arms. All the moods of the elements were familiar to the Highland girl. She thought it mild, almost warm: there was no wind,

the yellow birches perceptible in their faint colour stood up like a group of long-limbed youths dangling their long locks in the dim light: the further landscape was but faintly visible, the shoulder of the hill against the sky, and a single gleam of the burn deep down among the trees.

She sat pressing herself into the corner of the seat, and the long pent-up tears poured forth. They had been getting too much for her, like a stream shut in by artificial barriers, and now came with a flood, like the same stream in spate and carrying every obstruction away. It was almost a pleasure to see (if there had been any one to do so) the good heart with which Kirsteen wept: she made no noise, but the tears poured forth in a great shower, relieving her head and her heart. They were very heavy, but they were not bitter. They meant a great deal of emotion and stirring up of her whole being, but though her feelings were very poignant they were not without pleasure. She had never felt so elevated above herself, above every dull circumstance that surrounded her. She had been very sorry and had shed tears plentifully when the other boys went away. But this was not the same. She perhaps did not confess to herself, yet she knew very well that it was not altogether for Robbie. Robbie had his share, but there was another now. For years Kirsteen and Ronald Drummond had been good friends. When he went away before she had felt a secret pang, and had been very eager to hear the news of the battles and that he was safe: but something had changed this friendship during the last summer while he had been at home. Not a word had been said: there was no love-making; they were both too shy to enter upon any revelation of feeling, nor was

there any opportunity for explanations, since they were always surrounded by companions, always in the midst of a wandering, easy-minded party which had no respect for any one's privacy. But Kirsteen when she marked her brother's handkerchiefs with her hair had fully intended that Ronald should see it, and be struck with the similarity of the initials and ask for or take one of them at least. Her heart beat high when this happened according to her prevision; and when he stooped and whispered, "Will ye wait for me, Kirsteen, till I come back?" the answering whisper, "That I will!" had come from the bottom of her heart. She had scarcely been aware of what was said in the hurry of the moment. But it had come back to her, every syllable and every tone as soon as it was all over. Their spirits had floated together in that one moment, which was only a moment, yet enough to decide the course of two lives. They were too much bound by the laws of their youthful existence to think of breaking any observance in order to expand these utterances, or make assurance sure. That Ronald should spend his last evening at home with his mother and sister, that Kirsteen should be present at Robbie's parting supper, was as the laws of the Medes and the Persians to these two. No emergency could be imagined of sufficient weight to interfere with such necessities of life. And there was something in their simple absolutism of youthful feeling which was better expressed in the momentary conjunction, in the sudden words so brief and pregnant, than in hours of lovers' talk, of which both boy and girl would have thought shame. "Will ye wait for me till I come back?" What more could have been said in volumes? and "That I will!" out of

the fervour of a simple heart? Kirsteen thought it all over again and again. He seemed to stand by her side bending a little over her with a look half smile, half tears in his eyes; and she was aware again of the flash of the sweet discovery, the gold thread of the little letters put to his lips, and then the question, “Will ye wait?” Wait! for a hundred years, for all the unfathomed depths of life, through long absence and silence, each invisible to the other. “That I will!” She said it over and over again to herself.

In those days there was no thought of the constant communications we have now, no weekly mails, no rapid courses overland, no telegraph for an emergency. When a young man went away he went for good—away; every trace of him obliterated as if he had not been. It was a four months’ voyage to India round by the Cape. Within the course of the year his mother might hope to hear that he had arrived. And if an Indian letter had come even at that long interval for a girl in another family, what a host of questions would she not have had to go through! “A letter for Kirsteen! Who’s writing to Kirsteen? What is he writing to her about? What is the meaning of it all? I must know what that means!” such would have been the inquiries that would have surged up in a moment, making poor Kirsteen the object of everybody’s curious gaze and of every kind of investigation. She never dreamed of any such possibility. Robbie, when he wrote home, which he would no doubt do in time, might mention the companion of his voyage; Agnes Drummond might say “There’s a letter from our Ronald.” These were the only communications that Kirsteen could hope for. She was very well aware of the fact, and raised no

thought of rebellion against it. When she gave that promise she meant waiting for interminable years—waiting without a glimpse or a word. Nor did this depress her spirits: rather it gave a more elevating ideal form to the visionary bond. All romance was in it, all the poetry of life. He would be as if he were dead to her for years and years. Silence would fall between them like the grave. And yet all the time she would be waiting for him and he would be coming to her.

And though Kirsteen cried, it was not altogether for trouble. It was for extreme and highly-wrought feeling, sorrow and happiness combined. Through all her twenty years of life there had been nothing to equal that moment, the intensity of it, the expectation, the swift and sudden realisation of all vague anticipations and wishes. It was only a minute of time, a mere speck upon the great monotonous level of existence, and yet there would be food enough in it for the thoughts of all future years. When the thunder-shower of tears was exhausted, she sat quite still in a kind of exalted contentment, going over it and over it, never tired. The hot room and the smoky glare of the candles, and the fumes of the whisky and the sound of all the voices, had been intolerable to her; but in the fresh coldness of the night air, in that great quiet of Nature, with the rustle of the leaves going through it like breath, and the soft distant tinkle of the burns, what room and scope there was for remembering; which was what Kirsteen called thinking—remembering every tone and look, the way in which he approached the table where her work was lying, her wonder if he would notice, the flush of perception on his face as he said, “It’s my name too,” and then that tender theft, the act