

CAN I GO THERE?

Anne Hepple

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By the same Author—

JEMIMA RIDES
THE UNTEMPERED WIND
THE OLD WOMAN SPEAKS
TOUCH ME NOT
AND THEN CAME SPRING
RUNAWAY FAMILY
ASK ME NO MORE
GAY GO UP
RIDERS OF THE SEA
SUSAN TAKES A HAND
EVENING AT THE FARM
GREEN ROAD TO
WEDDERLEE
SIGH NO MORE
SALLY COCKENZIE

CAN I GO THERE?

By

ANNE HEPPLÉ

“How many miles to Babylon?
Three score and ten.
Can I go there by candle-light?
Yes, and back again.
Then open your gates, and let me through!”

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To
MY BELOVED GRANDDAUGHTER
ROSAMUND ANN

“The stars of midnight shall be dear
To her; and she shall lean her ear
In many a secret place
Where rivulets dance their wayward round,
And beauty born of murmuring sound
Shall pass into her face.”

WORDSWORTH.

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CHAPTER I

By Candle-light

REXIE awoke and sat up in bed with a start. She was frightened but that had not awakened her—she was always afraid just now. She was cold and hungry, too, but she was used to that—it must have been her ankle: it was throbbing badly; she had walked too much the day before.

The doctor had said, when she left the hospital, that it must have complete rest, but how could she rest when she had to spend her days tramping about looking for a job. First to the Public Library to see the advertisements in the papers, and then to any office or shop where there seemed a chance of employment. She had no money for bus fares, no money for anything. She owed her landlady two weeks' rent and she had said she must go to-morrow unless she could pay or had found a job.

When John, her brother and only relative, left for Africa, she had had a good job on *Everyday*, a woman's weekly, and the cosy little flat she and John had shared. But she had lost her job because the new editor had wanted it for a favourite of his own. Then she had been knocked down in the street by a car while hunting for another job and now, though she had moved into poorer and poorer rooms, her savings were all gone, she had pawned or sold most of her possessions and, most terrible of all, John had completely disappeared. The last time she had heard of him he was starting out, with the rescue expedition his newspaper had sent out, to look for a lost explorer in the interior of Africa, and might not, he said, be able to send or receive letters for a long time. Since then—silence.

She struck a match and lit the piece of candle she had used since her landlady cut off the gas, depriving her both of light and heat. The tiny glow showed a dreary attic room with a few meagre bits of furniture and a penny-in-the-slot gas stove.

It also lit up Rexie's slight figure, upright in the bed, the small, austere face which stood out between strands of straight, fair hair, parted in the middle, from which stray "lingle-ends" of silver gilt fell over her thin cheeks with their high, fragile bones and a pair of long eyes so intensely blue that the faint shadows beneath them seemed tinged with the colour that had seeped out of their irises.

One could see that she was thin with that sort of straight-up-and-down childish thinness of the very small boned. Indeed, when a poet friend of John's, describing her, had quoted, "Pale primrose, the flower that's like thy

face, Fidele,” John, with brotherly candour, had said, “Rexie’s too boney for a flower. She may be like a primrose all right, but one made of biscuit-china,” and indeed the fragile bones were too evident for the soft contours of a flower.

Nevertheless, there was a frail innocence about her face so like a flower’s that people were deceived by it into thinking Rexie herself was very delicate. Far from it, Rexie, as she said herself, was tough, and, after all, primroses and snowdrops are hardy enough to weather any gales.

She rebandaged the ankle, took her purse from under the pillows and recounted the few coppers left in it—ninepence halfpenny.

That was all she had. She gripped the thin counterpane and stared out into the shadows. She *must* get a job. She *must*.

She sat there staring out into the candlelit room, but seeing nothing but despair. The candle flickered and she wondered what time it was. Listening intently she was glad to hear sounds of movement below. She would get up and dress; she might be warmer if she put on her coat and sat in it, even if it meant that she had nothing else to put on when she faced the greater cold outside.

What did one do, she wondered, if one were turned out of one’s room and had nowhere to go? Did one just walk about?

How strange and terrible when it grew dark to have no house to go into. To see all the people hurrying home and have to stay out-of-doors. She shivered and got out of bed. She *must* find a job.

Dressed, she made her bed and tidied the room. She had blown out the candle and drawn the blind and now the cold grey light of a February morning came in and she saw that sleet was falling in grey flakes that melted into dirty slush on reaching the pavement—the worst kind of day possible for her worn shoes, her feet would be wet even before she reached the library.

After a long wait she heard feet coming up the stairs and hoped they were Betty’s. She had managed the week’s payment for a morning cup of tea. When Betty, the little scullery-maid, brought it, she always brought a large cup of a strong hot brew and two slices of bread-and-butter; the superior housemaid, Madge, who looked on Betty as dirt beneath her feet because she came from a “Home,” would bring the tea half cold and slopping over the saucer on which would be the smallest scrap of bread or old bit of toast she could find—Madge being of the breed who like to trample on those who are down. Besides she could expect no tips from anyone so obviously poor.

No luck this morning. It was Madge who banged at the door and brought in a cup of weak, warm tea with a scrap of soaked toast in the saucer.

“Good morning, Madge,” said Rexie in her clear voice.

“It may be good for the likes o’ you, but it’s no’ fun for me tramping up all these stairs—after a bit rag and bone,” she added, *sotto voce*.

“No letters,” said Rexie, who had long kept silence under Madge’s insolence.

“There was not, and if there was I’ve something else to do than trail up here with letters,” the girl said rudely, then as she reached the door, “Letters!” she exclaimed with a sneering laugh and went out, slamming it behind her.

It was indeed a long time since Rexie had had a letter. None of her carefully written applications for posts had received any attention whatever. It was only when she tramped to places that she got any notice at all and then not much. There were too many people with her qualifications for a post as “typist or secretary” and the one thing she could do, and had made a success of, was not a job that one applied for, but which came one’s way, perhaps, if one were in an editorial office. In that manner she had obtained and made a great success of a feature called “The Chimney Corner” on the paper *Everyday*, where she had been employed when John, her brother, had been sent abroad to cover some happenings there for his own paper.

When the editor had ousted Rexie, she was sure he had lied about her to the Board of Directors, but she was much too humble and shy a member of the staff to do anything about it and John was far away.

Her last letter from him had only been able to give her an accommodation address. She had had a couple of brief notes from him since, but he evidently had had none of hers since her accident.

Then there was her friend, Sally, who was poor herself but would have helped her, only Sally was ill with pneumonia and hadn’t known her the last time she went to see her.

One could not very well ask for a loan from a friend who was ill, though in her desperate straits she might even have done that had Sally been able to recognise her.

Half cold though it was, the tea and the morsel of toast revived her a little and the despair retreated from her eyes. It was really light now, though the sleet still fell. She would start for the public library and see the papers early. There was nearly always a queue when she reached some address from which an applicant was often chosen before she even entered the door.

She put on her hat and knitted gloves wondering, as she saw a pile of pawn tickets in her bag, if there was anything else she could possibly pawn.

As she stood debating she heard steps coming up the stairs again and wondered dully why Madge was coming back. There were two other occupants of the attics at the top of the house, but Madge would have brought up their tea when she brought hers.

Then she recognised the soft clip-clap footsteps of Betty, whose felt slippers were too large for her.

She listened, fearfully, for she lived in terror of being summoned to see her landlady, a woman without a grain of pity or kindness in her heart. She let her bare rooms for as much as she could extract for them, but Rexie bore her no grudge for that, they were clean and respectable, but she had a system of mercilessly extracting a shilling here and a few coppers there by small meannesses that Rexie had been quite unable to cope with. She also had a gift for brow-beating the unfortunates who owed her money, and Rexie was literally terrified of her.

She grew rigid as Betty's slippers slopped past the other doors and came to her own. There was a timid knock.

"Come in," said Rexie, her lips shaking with apprehension. Was she going to be summoned to Mrs. Flint's office to be turned out at once?

The door opened and a small creature in a print frock and with a cap perched above a freckled face from which the hair was mercilessly dragged back and twisted into a tight little bun came forward.

"It's a letter for you, Miss," she said. "I thought I'd just slip up with it when I saw Madge hadn't brought it."

Madge was supposed to bring the letters with the tea as Mrs. Flint did not like her lodgers slipping down to collect their own letters.

"It lowered the tone of the house," she said, but Rexie was sure the rule was made so that she could examine them herself before they were claimed. Not that she suspected her of opening them, but just of greedily reaping all that she could from the envelopes.

It was plain to be seen that Rexie's letter had been fingered but that might have been Betty's dirty paws.

"It's been lying there since eight, Miss, when she put them out (Mrs. Flint was always "she" to Betty). Madge is real mean, she knows you'd be scared of coming down for your letters yourself."

"Oh, thank you, Betty. It was kind to bring it up when you have so much to do. I wish I could return some of your kindness, but I'm very hard up just

now.”

“I know, Miss, I thought it might be a job. It looks like an office letter,” and leaving Rexie to open it she slipped away—one of the small nicenesses of Betty’s that had made Rexie like her. Madge would have hung about if she had been curious, as Betty undoubtedly was.

When the door shut Rexie looked eagerly at the envelope. Her heart had given a momentary leap, thinking it might be from John, but a glance was enough to show it was not from John whose letters were always covered with strange foreign stamps and markings. But it was a large, white, official-looking envelope and her spirits rose again. It might be a belated answer to one of her applications for a job.

She slit the envelope with cold shaking fingers and read it.

It was from the offices of a firm of solicitors in the city and merely asked her to call as early as she conveniently could on receipt of the letter.

Evidently about a job, but, rack her brains as she might, she could remember no similar name or address among the many applications she had made.

For a moment she wondered if the lawyers might have news of John, but instantly discarded that idea. He had never mentioned the names of Messrs. Orr & Orr, Solicitors.

Well, she would start at once. She would walk till within a penny ride of the city and take the bus for the last part of the way, so as not to arrive too like a scarecrow that had been left out in the rain.

Her ankle hurt badly as she limped along. Not only had she broken it, but some poison had affected it from the results of which she still suffered because it had been impossible to rest it.

Her hopes, however, had risen so much that she gave up trying to limp the distance that would save one of her precious pennies and took a twopenny ride.

There was an Underground station near where the bus stopped and she slipped down and tidied her hair and rubbed some of the mud off her shoes on the mat, before setting off to look for the office, which she discovered after a long hunt.

She noticed several girls coming down the stairs as she went up and her heart misgave her so much that she entered the office despondently. A rather cheeky-looking boy in the outer room looked up as she nervously stammered out her name.

“No use,” he said, “the place is filled.”

He even seemed to enjoy saying it, Rexie thought in the bitterness of her heart, as she limped heavily down the stairs again.

The sleety rain was now falling more heavily than ever, but Rexie did not notice it as she turned down the slushy street. Bitterly she regretted the twopence she had spent on the bus, now she simply could not afford anything at all for lunch, she would just have to buy a roll, munch it in some public library as she looked at advertisements and make it last out the day.

Suddenly she stopped and stood gazing straight in front of her. What was she doing?

The letter had *said* to call. Surely after sending a letter, the firm would expect her to send her name in at least.

She hesitated. She was so shy it was positively painful to her to think of pushing her way in and addressing that boy again. No doubt he would ignominiously show her the door, perhaps say something scornful, and the other clerks would be amused; she had seen two of them speaking together in a corner.

Only sheer desperation made her turn and limp back. At the door she hesitated again, and might never have found courage to remount had not a sudden clatter on the whitened stone stairs made her look up to see a scared-looking boy rushing pell-mell down the steps, his face scarlet, his hair on end, and appearing indeed as if he had been propelled by a powerful push, not to say kick, from the top of the staircase.

He stopped when he saw her and stared as if he'd seen a ghost, then a look of relief spread over his snub features and wide mouth.

"Are you Miss Roxana Mary Drew?" he asked.

"Yes," said Rexie, "I told you my name."

He touched his hair, having evidently been rushed out at too great a speed to snatch at his cap.

"I beg your pardon, Miss. I didn't catch it properly. Will you please come up. Mr. Orr wants to see you."

It was a very different boy who climbed up the stairs beside her.

"Miss," he said, as they reached the office floor, "I hope you'll say a word for me. I thought you was one of the girls after the job."

She was about to ask if there was a job, then remembered it was filled as she was ushered into an inner office where a gentleman rose from his chair, shook hands with her, apologised for the mistake and said he was Mr. Orr.

Mr. Orr was not long in getting down to business. He would need proofs, he said, that she really was Roxana Mary Drew, but smiled reassuringly as

he said it.

But Rexie had been asked for birth certificates and such like before, and anyhow, knowing the habits of Madge and even Mrs. Flint, of prying into all the possessions of the boarders, she always carried her private papers and letters with her in her big shabby hand-bag, and was able to produce them at once.

“Yes, those seem all right—we’ve been trying to get into touch with your brother for some time, as a matter of fact,” said Mr. Orr, gazing so intently at Rexie’s small face, in which the delicate bone-structure was plain to be seen, that she wondered if there was something the matter with it, and put up a thin wet hand to tuck a wisp of straight hair behind her ear.

But Mr. Orr was only thinking, “Good gracious, the child must be starving,” and wondering what to do about it with such a sensitive little creature.

A glass of wine and a biscuit? She looked as if she needed a good meal, but a glass of wine would help her in the meantime. He rang the bell and ordered port wine and biscuits for “the frail, soaked little nymph in the shabby shoes and the pork-pie affair,” for so he designated the round astrakhan hat sent her by John from Russia, and beneath which her flower-like face looked so gravely bare and austere.

“Now to business,” he said, noting the tinge of colour that had crept into her cheeks as she sipped her wine. “Did you ever hear of a place called ‘Babylon’ or ‘Bendibus,’ or some such name?”

“Oh, yes!” she smiled. “Bendibus! It sounds like a latin word, but it’s the name of a bit of waste ground my grandfather bought on the Border hills. My Father used to laugh at the name.”

“Is that all you know about it?”

She drew her slender eyebrows together.

“I think so—it meant ‘bending bushes.’ ”

“You don’t know that it belongs to you and your brother?”

She shook her head. “No, you see my grandfather lost all his money—and everything.”

“Well, he didn’t lose Bendibus, possibly because it wasn’t thought worth anything to anybody, or possibly because when he died his oldest son, your Uncle Nicholas Wynne, was still living in the wooden hut which he built on it when he was attacked with tuberculosis and only given a few months to live. He was your half-uncle really, and very much older than your father. He persuaded your grandfather to buy him this bit of ground in the hills by

the Lammerside Valley, and there he lived, mostly in the open air, as a hermit, for forty or fifty years. He died some time ago, and the hut, I suppose, will now be gone to wrack and ruin. But, in the meantime, the town of Presterby, nearby, started a golf club, with links near Lammerside. These links have become so well known that one or two proprietors of big hotels are falling over each other to buy a site close to them and build a large hotel, and, as it happens the only good site is the bit of land called ‘Bendibus,’ and that has caused inquiries to be made for the owners.

“As your grandfather left your father all he had and the place is still in his name, it belongs to you and your brother since your father, in his turn, left all he had to be equally divided between you.”

Rexie sat looking at Mr. Orr, a puzzled frown on her face, while she tried to grasp all the implications of what he was saying.

“So—we’ll perhaps get some money for it—some day?” she inquired at last.

“Most certainly. In fact there is some money—not much, a hundred pounds and some odds—for you now. I needn’t go into particulars at the moment, but it is due to you from the golf club for encroachments. They used the hut for storing things.”

“Oh!” Rexie’s face at once brightened up, but she hesitated a moment before asking.

“Do you really mean there’s some money I can have now?”

“Yes. You can have half of that sum, just a little over fifty pounds, immediately, but we may get quite a tidy sum for the site, in due course. Yes, *quite a tidy sum*,” he repeated with some satisfaction.

But Rexie did not seem so interested in the “tidy sum in due course.” For one thing she had no idea what either a “tidy sum” or “due course” might mean, but with sevenpence halfpenny in her purse between her and destitution, fifty pounds seemed wealth untold.

In an apologetic voice, as if ashamed of asking, she stammered, “Could I have a little now . . . I mean soon . . . you see . . .”

But seeing her embarrassment, he put out a hand to stop her.

“My dear child, of course. I shall give you your fifty pounds, or as much of it as you require before you leave the office. You see, I think you ought to go to Presterby straight away. It is my brother, James Orr—I am Matthew Orr—who is looking after this affair. He wrote to me that, failing your brother, I must find you and send you down as soon as possible to see him——” Mr. Matthew Orr paused, looking at Rexie in her soaked and shabby coat and shoes. “She will need a new outfit,” he was thinking, “and there’s

her railway fare, and she will need to put up at a hotel and probably, she has debts to settle”—then he took the bull by the horns.

“You had better tell me just how you stand,” he said in his kindly, fatherly voice. “Any debts?”

“I owe my landlady for two weeks,” said Rexie frankly, and then went on to explain her circumstances.

He listened kindly, smiling a little at some of Rexie’s forthright revelations about pawnshops and landladies, as much to hide his horror and pity as because he was amused at her comical way of putting things, for Rexie had a fresh way of her own of expressing herself that was inimitable.

“Well,” he said, when she had finished. “We must get this all put right.”

When at last she left the office Rexie was walking on air. The wine, no doubt, had gone a little to her unaccustomed head, but Rexie needed no wine to send her at one bound from the depths of despair to a place among the gods.

She had thirty pounds in her hand-bag and two ten-pound notes in a little crocheted and beaded Victorian receptacle for sovereigns which she wore round her neck, though there had been nothing in it for a long time but a little cut-out photograph of John with his name and the address of his newspaper at the back, “so that,” as she briefly explained to Mr. Orr’s astonished appreciation of her gift for stating bare facts with no personal sentimentality, “if I were killed, John wouldn’t have to worry about me for long, he would soon get to know I was dead.”

Mr. Orr had suggested that she should collect the twenty pounds from his brother at Presterby, but Rexie believed that a bird in the hand was worth two in the bush. Besides she had already made up her mind what she was going to do. She was going straight off, that very day, to find that hut at Lammerside. If her uncle had lived there for forty or fifty years, she ruminated, why shouldn’t she live there? She had the deep longing of the homeless for a home of her own, however tiny and humble, and here was one waiting for her.

How she would keep herself she did not know, but neither did she worry. Even if she had to spend all the thirty pounds on debts and clothes and railway fares, the other twenty pounds would buy food for twenty weeks at the very least and by then John might be home or she might have got some of that money for the site Mr. Orr talked about. And then there was John’s fifty pounds. John would not mind her borrowing it. All this was perhaps at the back of her mind, but the truth was Rexie just wasn’t worrying. She had

fifty pounds in her purse and little crocheted bag and she had “a place of her own” in which to find shelter.

After the weeks of despair and dread of being turned into the streets with nowhere to go, the thought of even a wooden hut of her own was like magic. She was going there and going at once and the fact that it was “over the hills and far away” called to the poet in her soul, that inborn poet of the English whose only tune is really, in whatever diverse forms it may appear, “Over the hills and far away.”

CHAPTER II

“How many miles to Babylon?”

MR. ORR had commanded the boy to write out a list of trains to Presterby together with full details about stations, changes, times of arrival and departures, and so forth. Then he had sent for a taxi, conducted Rexie to the vehicle himself, and put her in with a private aside to the driver, whom he seemed to know, to look after her, take her wherever she wanted to go and not leave her until she was safely deposited at her address, and then to return to him for payment.

Once inside the taxi and started on her way, Rexie drew a long breath, opened her bag, stared at the money, and then took out the list of trains.

There was one leaving for Newcastle that afternoon. If she took it, travelled all night, and caught certain connections she would arrive at Presterby the following afternoon. She glanced at a passing clock. If she wasted no time she was sure she could do all she had to do and catch that train.

With a pencil she jotted down all she must get through.

Mr. Orr had told her to go and have a good lunch before she did anything else and had directed the driver to take her first to a famous shop where she could both make some purchases and have luncheon.

This exactly suited Rexie, although she was in such a hurry that the lunch was but a sketchy one.

“I’ll dine on the train to make up,” she thought. “I love dining on a train and being grand.” Rexie also loved talking to herself. She bought herself a warm blue dress and matching coat, shoes, and accessories and some undies and etceteras, first purchasing a suitcase to put them in. With this outfit for best and the garments and other things she had in pawn she would have all

she needed for some time. She did not like cheap or ill-fitting clothes, always having preferred a few of the very best to many second-rate things.

She loved shopping, so did not rush over it. She could hurry over the other things she had to do.

Next she considered the hut: from what she could gather from Mr. Orr some furniture must have been left in it, as it had been shut up and left as it was since "the hermit's" death. Well, it might not be much, but she was going there anyhow and must take some food. She went to the provision department and with the help of an assistant had a wooden case packed with the usual ingredients for a store cupboard from tea, sugar and salt to a few tins of provisions. She could buy bread and perishable goods at Presterby.

She had her case and box carried to the taxi and then went to the pawnbroker, an old Jew of whom she had been terrified the first time she ventured into his premises, but with whom she had struck up a rather comical sort of friendship. She had always thought both pawnshops and Jews were dirty and disreputable, but both he and his place of business were clean. Whether it was customary or not, she did not know, but she had carefully packed all the garments or objects she had taken to him, to borrow money on, in tissue paper and cardboard boxes and asked him to keep them so until a date fixed upon. With a twinkle he had agreed and though he gave her not one penny more than he could help he had kept the things apart, even showing her the old oak chest in which he had put them, for he combined a business in antiques with his pawnbroking.

He actually seemed pleased when she now collected all her boxes and even hunted out a plywood tea-chest to pack them all in when she told him she was going to the country, and getting his boy assistant to nail on the lid.

Her next and last call was the one she dreaded. She knew that, now she could pay for her room, Mrs. Flint would not let her go without a struggle, for when she did have the money she was what Mrs. Flint called a "good let," meaning she paid regularly without grumbling and could be cheated in all sorts of mean little ways without putting up a fight. Indeed, the fact that the place was scrupulously clean was its only recommendation for Rexie had a horror of dirt in any form.

She stopped the taxi and, having her own latch-key, was able to slip up to her room without being noticed. As she looked round the cold, miserable place, she felt such a rush of gratitude at being able to leave it that she stood still and sent up a little prayer of thanksgiving before she hastened to pull her old suitcase from under the bed and pack in it the few things she had

left. This done, she took out the bill handed to her the day before and counted out the money, laying aside a pound note for Betty.

Then she closed the door, slipped down the stair and knocked at Mrs. Flint's "Office" door.

As she guessed she had no sooner put down the bill with the exact money, than Mrs. Flint assumed that she was going to stay on. When Rexie said she was leaving, her face began to work with rage and she started to scream out about all the things she had "done" for Rexie, "feeding and boarding her for two weeks without the prospect of getting a penny in return," and so on.

When this had no effect, she told Rexie she couldn't leave without a week's notice and when reminded that she, herself, had told Rexie she must go to-morrow said Rexie knew perfectly well she would not be turned out and that she had no proof of her notice to quit in writing and would very quickly find out what the law had to say about people who tried to cheat poor landladies.

As she had surmised and dreaded, Mrs. Flint's loud harsh voice and brow-beating ways began to terrify her into submission. She wondered desperately if she would get away after all and would have paid the two pounds extra demanded if it had not meant taking the loose note she had ready for Betty.

The thought of Betty gave her courage.

"No," she said. "You know you gave me notice and if I have nothing in writing I have all the boarders and the maids for witnesses as you did not scruple to insult me by telling me I had to go before them all."

To Rexie's amazement this turning of the worm took Mrs. Flint so completely by surprise that she gasped, and had nothing to say for a moment.

Rexie wasted no time but, taking advantage of the pause, marched out so suddenly she bumped into Madge who was listening at the door.

Betty was in the hall, too, just closing the door on the postman. She handed a letter to Rexie who hastily shoved it into her pocket having seen at a glance it was not from John. Then she put the pound note and a piece of paper into Betty's hand.

"Here, Betty," she said, "is a little share in some good luck I've had, and thank you very much for all your kindness to me. And listen, Betty, I have written down an address that will always find me. You must keep in touch with me, for I mean to help you if I can and I do think I'll be able to later on and will you send on any letters that come for me to that address?"

They were at the other end of the hall, but Madge had seen with almost unbelieving rage and amazement a whole pound note pass from hand to hand and was instantly on the alert, stung with greed and jealousy.

“And what about me?” she demanded furiously, seeing Rexie was leaving her empty handed. “Is that little charity brat, who’s just the scullery-maid, to come before me that am the housemaid? Her that should never be seen by rights!”

But Rexie had made up her mind that Madge should have a lesson.

“Betty was kind to me when I was down in my luck,” she said, “but you were as insolent and unkind as you could be when you thought I was too poor to resent it. Perhaps you will be kinder to some other poor girl when you find out it’s a mistake to trample on those who are down. I’ll never forget Betty, because she was kind to me when she thought I had nothing, and she will share in the change of fortune that has come my way in more ways than a tip.”

And shaking Betty’s little paw, she marched off with the poor child running after her to take the case and repeat over and over again with tears that she didn’t want anything, she hadn’t “done nothing” and would send every letter faithfully on.

“Perhaps I shouldn’t have talked so grandly,” Rexie said to herself, “but I did want to help some other poor soul. If I know Madge she will be afraid to be too overbearing and insolent to poor people now in case she misses something—and the minute I can I’ll help Betty to get away from Mrs. Flint—she’s always pining for the country.”

When Rexie stood the next afternoon looking for a taxi outside Presterby Station, she found the rain had turned to soft snow as she came north.

She had left her luggage in charge of a porter while she collected the keys of the hut and bought herself bread and new-laid eggs, a bottle of milk and other perishables and he had just left her in haste for the arrival of “the express” after pointing to a private car that could be hired. There were only two taxis in Presterby, he said, neither of which could be seen and the bus to Lammerside did not leave for another two hours.

Rexie was in a hurry; she had missed a connection and she wanted to reach Lammerside before dark; it was one of those dull afternoons when darkness sets in early.

As she reached the car and stopped by the door, a tall figure in a shabby waterproof and battered tweed hat unfolded himself from behind the wheel and sprang out.

"Would you please take me to Lammerside," said Rexie politely, in the small shy voice her uncertainty with strangers produced.

As she spoke he had taken off the old hat and she noticed the electric look of the strong red hair springing up from his high forehead, on which a few snowflakes were immediately caught.

"Stratheilan of Morne at your service," said he, bending his head a little towards her. "Yes, I will take you to Lammerside," and he opened the door and before she had recovered from her feeling of astonishment at this method of accepting a fare, she was tucked up in the seat beside him, with her luggage at the back in which there was already a roll of wire-netting, a gun, a bag of meal and various other odds and ends.

"I do hope I haven't made a mistake," she said at last as they sped out of the town and took a moorland track, "the porter pointed your car out to me when I asked for a taxi."

He was looking straight out of the window, his grey eyes keen and set beneath the slightly drawn brows.

"That would be James Gow, he was quite right."

She noticed that he spoke with a slight Highland accent, or rather in the pure, rather precise English of the far north-west, which she had heard before when travelling with John beyond Oban.

"I am glad. It would have seemed so rude to ask you to take me." She hesitated. She was still uncertain. "But James Gow did point to your car."

He did not make any comment for a few moments, perhaps because, as they mounted upwards the atmosphere had changed and the soft wet snow turned to small dry flakes which blew in great gusts of white across the heather, forming deep drifts across the road which took careful negotiating.

"It is two shillings to Lammerside post office," he said, at last, after struggling through a high drift. "Where is it I will be putting you down?" and then, after another hesitation, "it is sixpence a mile beyond the *post* office."

He laid a stress on the first syllable in the Highland fashion.

Rexie had no idea where her hut was, but Mr. James Orr's clerk—he was not in himself—had said something about the post office when he handed her the keys, adding that Mrs. Postgate, the post-mistress, had a room she let if Miss Drew did not catch the bus back to Presterby.

"Yes, please, put me down at the post office; that is where I am going," she said.

She did not want him to accompany her to the hut, having a shy feeling that he would not approve of that empty and desolate place. The clerk had been absolutely shocked when she asked if he thought she could stay there—if it was habitable.

“Stay there!” His surprise had been comical. “Alone! Lord no! You couldn’t do that; it’s—it’s just a hut in the hills.”

But on further questioning it was plain to be seen he had never seen it himself and knew nothing about it, except that some kind of wild lunatic who “lived on nuts” had sheltered there when it was too cold to live entirely out-of-doors.

Then her mind reverted to the driver’s charge.

“Two shillings!” she exclaimed, turning round to face him. It was only his stern aquiline profile that she saw, however, as he did not move his head, “for all this long way?”

She stared for a moment at the side face presented to her as he kept his eyes fixed on the driving snow, sweeping across the road before him, noting the clean-shaven square jaw, the scrubbed look of his tanned skin, the bold nose the big proud mouth and the electric vitality of the red hair springing straight up off his forehead and looking too thick and strong for any hat or cap to press down. At the corners of his alert blue eyes were fan-shaped networks of lines and right across his forehead were two slight furrows; at one side of his upper lip was a healed scar which gave his mouth a decidedly sardonic look on that side of his face, though when at last he turned his head his tightly closed lips betrayed so much repressed humour she was afraid he was amused at her for some reason.

Rexie was much too young to be able to stomach being laughed at, and at once became very dignified.

“The bus charge is ninepence,” he said, with a great air of finality. “My charge is two shillings.”

From the way he said it she might have been blaming him for extortion.

They had now left the moorland heights they had had to crawl across and were dipping down to a sheltered valley far beneath them; the road wound and dipped through plantations of larch and fir, past a reedy little loch and down steep hills bordered with whin, till it suddenly met hawthorn hedges covered with snow, but not drifted up; a little further on, he drew up in a silence unbroken since his last words and stopped at a little wayside cottage with a wooden porch and a notice above the door, “Lammerside Post Office.” Over the window was inscribed “Janet Postgate licensed to retail tobacco,” but its shutters were up.

He helped her out, lifted her cases, her roped boxes and her bursting string bags and carried them into the porch. He was about to knock when she stopped him.

“Don’t bother knocking,” she said quickly, as if she were going straight in and began fumbling with her purse. She was sure two shillings was much too little, but a glance at his now haughty and distant face made her suddenly take out a two-shilling piece.

He put out a clean sinewy hand, opening it with a deliberate though graceful jerk, and held it towards her.

She placed the two-shilling piece on the palm, then glanced up to the head bent over her.

She had an idea that his lips straightened from a smile, as she did so, but his eyes were without any expression at all.

“Thank you,” he said. “Good-day.”

“Good-bye,” said Rexie, “and thank you very much.”

“At your service,” he said, with a gesture that was hardly a bow but which was extraordinarily graceful and—and—polite. Rexie, seeking for a word, felt she had not quite got the right one, but let it go at that.

She stood and watched his car till it was lost between the larch woods.

CHAPTER III

Can I go there?

“How many miles to Babylon” had rung in Rexie’s head all day, and although Bendibus were not Babylon it seemed as far away from anywhere in her known world as she stood in the snow and wondered where her hut could be.

Besides the post office there was no human dwelling to be seen, nothing but hills with the road winding through them. Just beyond the post office it turned past a larch wood which hid the further view.

The clerk in Mr. Orr’s office, who had given her the key, had said that Bendibus was close to the village of Lammerside. She could see no village, but it might lie beyond the bend in the road. She knew that this was the only highway across the hills, an old pass that went right on to the sea on the west coast.

She stood uncertain what to do and was about to make inquiries at the post office when she heard footsteps and looking along the road saw a tall, bent figure approaching her.

A tramp, she decided, noting his old and rather ragged garments. As he came nearer she liked his appearance still less. He had a very dark face and scrubby beard and one of his eyes was discoloured from a blow, giving his face a malevolent look. Close to his heels was a thin, lurcher dog. He had an old sack round his shoulders and a short, black clay pipe in his mouth.

He stopped when he reached her.

“Were you wantin’ Mistress Postgate? She be up at Muirside. She aye gangs there on her half-day.”

“Oh,” said Rexie and stopped there. She did not like the look of the man, far from it, but there was no one else to be seen and she was beginning to shiver with cold. She still wore the shabby coat and thin shoes she had put on the morning before. She had had no opportunity to change, travelling all night, and indeed had never thought of it. It was only when exposed to the sharp air with the snow soaking into her thin coat and her feet already wet, that she realised how cold she was and that she must get into shelter if she were not to be frozen to death.

“Do you know where Bendibus is?” she asked.

“Fine that.”

“Can I get there? I mean to the . . . the hut.”

“Oo aye, it’s no’ the maiter o’ five minits walk. Are ye gaun there?”

He betrayed neither surprise nor curiosity when Rexie said yes.

“Ye’ll be wantin’ a hand wi’ that lot.” He eyed her cases and boxes.

“Yes, if you would show me the way, perhaps you would carry a case and come back for the others.”

But that did not seem his way. Without a word he produced from his ample pockets lengths of rope with which he tied the suitcase handles together and swung it over his back, then with one wooden box on his shoulder and carrying the other, he nodded his head at the string bags and paper parcels and stepped out.

Rexie followed with the rest of her belongings, wondering at his strength for he was a thin man.

“He’s tough, like me,” she thought, picking her way after him through the snow.

He turned up a narrow lane, that bordered the side of a stream, following it, till the path forked, when he took to the right, up the side of a smaller

burn; a short way up this the path suddenly ended on an irregular semicircle of snow-covered ground around which were bending willows with a birch wood behind them.

Half hidden by the birch wood was a building that took Rexie's breath away, as they came in full sight of it.

From what Mr. Orr had said she had expected an ugly square shed, such as one sees erected on sea dunes for holiday makers.

As her uncle had lived in it for over forty years and it had been put up for him by a father who was well-off, she had felt sure it would be strongly built and weather-proof, though it might now be showing signs of wear and tear—but anything but ornamental. But before her eyes appeared a building rather like a sort of tiny Swiss chalet. Not at all like the ornamental affairs carved in wood and sold to tourists to represent a Swiss chalet, but a real peasant dwelling in all its strong simplicity with steep roof and deep eaves coming over a wide verandah. It was built of strong-looking logs that showed no sign of decay, and fitted so snugly into the landscape that people passing along the cart track by the burn might never notice it.

Part of the verandah was glassed in, no doubt for the “hermit” to sit in and enjoy the sun when he first came there as an invalid. As far as she could see, the glass was unbroken, the other windows along the sides of the house were shuttered.

It was small but larger than she had expected.

“Where's the golf course?” she asked the man.

His hands were full, but he gave a jerk of his head.

“It lies ahint the Spinney. Bendibus is at the tae end and the tither's nearer Presterby. Ha'e ye the key?”

They had reached the steps up to the verandah. She went up and opened the door and she saw there was another stronger door into the main part of the building. He set the things down on the floor and stood waiting.

“How much do I owe you?” she asked.

“Oh, the maitter o' a shillin' mebbe.”

She gave him half-a-crown and thanked him. He gave a grin that made him look more ferocious than ever.

“Thank ye, Mem. Would ye be wantin' some kindlin'?”

“Some what?”

“Kindlin'—wud for your fires? I could bring ye ower a couple o' bags frae doon-by.”

“Oh, yes, I would,” she said gratefully. “I have candles for light but I was just trusting to finding some bits of wood for a sort of picnic fire.”

“Cannels? Ye’ll no’ need ony o’ thae. The auld yin dammed the fall and put in the ’lectric licht. Wait ye there.”

He went down the steps and disappeared, but was back in a few minutes. He put down a switch by the side of the door and the place was flooded with light.

“I warrant ye some o’ the lights is broken, but there’s plenty o’ them. He was an awful man for light.” He gave a short guffaw. “Said his hoose was like heaven, there was nae night there. Well, I’ll be gettin’ along. If ye leave the door, I’ll dump the wood inside—it’ll be ninepence the bag.”

She gave him the extra eighteenpence and he trudged off with the dog at his heels.

She was glad to see him go. In spite of his help she felt rather frightened of him and did not even like the idea of his returning with wood, there was a wild sort of look about him.

She opened the other door, dragged her things inside, found another switch which also worked and having darkened the verandah went inside and locked the door.

She found herself in a room with a big fireplace at one end and two shuttered windows at each side. A rolled-up carpet stood in a corner and so many pieces of furniture were piled up together that one could hardly cross to the further door which led into a passage ending in another door. On each side of the passage were two doors. She went straight through to the end door which opened into a kitchen. Here the oilcloth had been left on the floor and a large kitchen table, with two chairs on the top of it, stood beside one window. The other was blocked up with a big dresser, while chests and other pieces of heavy furniture were piled higgledy-piggledy against the walls.

The plan of the dwelling was simple in the extreme. Across each end, taking up the whole width was a large room—sitting-room and kitchen, evidently—between them on either side of the passage were two rooms—four in all. Two of these were fairly large, the other two smaller. One of these had evidently been used as a bathroom, the other three rooms might have been anything though one had a bed in it.

She was not, however, at the end of her explorations. Opening a door at the far end of the kitchen she found steps leading down into a covered-in addition with sloping roof. Round the walls were divisions for coal, wood, etc.: a door from it led into the large space beneath the house which was

built on piles. A ladder led into a sloping loft, but she left that to be visited in daylight.

“Gosh!” said Rexie to herself on completing this survey. “Fancy calling this a ‘hut.’ ”

In spite of her bold front she was now feeling a little eerie.

“I must have a dog,” she thought, picking up some odd bits of coal and wood left on the floor of one of the divisions and putting them into a rusty pail.

Nevertheless, her blood was singing with triumph. “I knew,” she said to herself, “that if my great-uncle lived here for forty years, *I* could live here. The fact is, no one I’ve spoken to has ever seen it: they just knew it was built of wood and that my uncle was a ‘hermit’, so they called it a hut.”

She was to discover, too, that there was a strong feeling in the district against a house built of wood, to the people it was just a “wooden hut” and no one would live in it.

Suddenly, she realised that she was dead tired and very hungry, and her ankle was aching.

“I’ll make myself some hot tea,” she thought, “and go to bed, or at least go to roost like the birds.”

She had seen some kitchen utensils on a shelf and found there was a tap in the annexe at the back. She found the kitchen stove easy to light. It simply roared itself into a glowing heat in a very short time and she was glad to find a damper to regulate it, for it very evidently belonged to the species warranted to burn anything.

While the water boiled, she dragged forward a large, old-fashioned couch, and a small table and opened her case of groceries.

Never, she thought, leaning back on her sofa with boiled eggs, cold sliced ham and tongue, bread-and-butter and tea in front of her, and an interesting book and some magazines beside her, had she had a happier meal. She had taken off her old frock and wet shoes and stockings and got into the warm dressing-gown and slippers taken out of pawn. She had dressed and bandaged her ankle into comfort and could rest it at last. She was as warm and snug as a bird in its nest, the snow outside only making her feel more grateful for her comfort while the memory of that freezing cold room and the terror she had lived in at Mrs. Flint’s boarding-house was near enough to make her still feel the relief of waking from a dreadful dream. Bendibus was a little palace to the sort of “holiday hut” she had expected made from an old railway carriage, or sold in sections.

It looked as though the furniture and furnishings had been hastily put together to be taken away and then left, possibly because of the difficulties of removal in that lonely spot. It must have originally been brought up piece by piece in a cart over the rough moorland, for there was no proper road beyond the one main road.

The remoteness of the hut, she surmised, had made it difficult to sell, or let, as this was not a favourite holiday spot before the discovery of the golfing links had made Presterby known to golfers, and now these hotel people were eager to buy Bendibus because its site was the only large piece of flat ground near the links. Well, John would have to decide about that and anyhow she was very sleepy. . . .

She suddenly wakened with a start. She had been dreaming she was having an argument with the driver of the car who insisted on carrying all her boxes and then dropped the one with her groceries through a hole in the floor of the verandah.

It was the noise of the falling box that had awakened her, she thought dreamily for a moment, and still seemed to see the tins of mustard and salt and the burst bags of tea and sugar as she lay trying to pull her wits together.

Gradually she sorted out the facts from the dream. There *had* been a noise and it had come from the front end of the house.

She sat up and listened. It must have been a loud noise to waken her at this end. Then a solution came into her head. The tramp had said he would bring her two bags of wood. He may just have brought them, or he may have set one insecurely on the top of the other and it had toppled over.

She wished again that she had a dog and confessed to herself that it was a little eerie among the hills. She hadn't thought she would mind that, but she did. She wondered where Stratheilan was. Stratheilan of Morne—it sounded grand but was probably just a small farm in the hills, or Morne might be the village where he lived, near Presterby. Possibly the old car with which he was evidently meeting the train was his only means of livelihood. He had been so shabbily dressed that his scrupulously clean hands and face had come as a surprise. She liked his face, though, of course, it had nothing to do with her: a strong face you could trust, she never had liked red hair, but his looked so vital . . . as if life and strength were pouring out of it up into the air, as if it *wouldn't* lie down, however much you pressed it, up it would spring again . . .

She found herself half smiling into the darkness and shook herself. She'd been listening all the time but there was no other sound . . . perhaps one of the shutters had banged. She knew that everything was exaggerated in

dreams, a minute might last a hundred years, a loose eyelash in your eye became an insect the size of a dragon, two taps of an ivy leaf might send you off playing cricket with the moon for a ball.

She had not put on the light because it meant getting out of bed. Another night she would have candle and matches at hand.

There were a few red embers in the grate and she kept her eyes on their friendly glow and must have fallen asleep for the next time she awakened they were gone and all was in darkness.

Although she had not been startled so wide awake as the last time, she had a feeling that some sound or movement had aroused her and again she jerked herself straight up in bed and listened.

This time she had not long to wait. She could hear muffled sounds coming from the direction of the verandah or the sitting-room. They had a stealthy sound as if some person or animal were moving cautiously about . . . her hair rose with sheer terror as she listened!

Rexie was not a nervous person, far from it, she would walk boldly into any danger she knew of, or probably if intent on something else, would never see it, but once alarmed, her imagination took fantastic flights and unreasoning terror of the unknown would seize her.

At the back of her mind the tramp had been lurking subconsciously ever since she had seen his shuffling figure and met those strange-looking, wary eyes.

Now, he sprang with horrifying clearness before her. Her terror of him came from the recesses of her mind and took absolute possession of her for the moment.

She remembered how he had himself proposed coming back with the wood, hoping, perhaps, she would let him inside. She had promptly locked him out and nothing would have induced her to open the door again before daylight.

But he might have come back for all that.

When she had opened her hand-bag to pay him there had been some notes in it plain to be seen, one could never tell which way he was looking, but assuredly he had seen them. Perhaps he had then made up his mind to get them, to come back, probably to murder her, steal all he could get and make off.

He knew she had not been expected for, like a fool, she had said so, and that no one had seen them come to the lonely bungalow. The snow, which had been lightly falling, would soon cover up their footprints. He could kill her and make off and no one might inquire for her for days and days. Mr.

James Orr had been from home and his clerk had no interest in her. Oh, why had she come to this lonely place without even a dog? If she was spared she would go away at once—at once! She stammered to herself in her terror, praying for help with trembling lips.

Her too-vivid imagination, once awakened, knew no bounds. She saw herself strangled or stabbed with some horrible knife, lying dead in the empty house while the imperturbable snow fell slowly on, blotting out the hurrying figure stealing across the hills, blotting out the line of footsteps leading down the steps and across the immaculate white carpet round the lonely house.

Meanwhile, the soft muffled movements went on, there was the scrape of a chair or some piece of furniture, instantly stilled. Then, for a few moments, the very silence seemed listening, then came the shuffle of feet and the drag of something soft across the floor.

Suddenly a rattle of a door handle galvanised her into life. She sprang over the bed, stumbled to the electric light and clicked it on, but, to her horror there was no responding light. She stood a moment in frozen immobility, then remembered the matches! The candle! She had both in her hand-bag, having slipped in a candle and box of vestas in case of need.

She fumbled for the table and in a few seconds found the matches. As she lit the candle the feeble ray lightened up the disordered place. She glanced at the door: she had locked it but she saw instantly that a few blows could break it open. Then she suddenly remembered something else.

Among the earliest things she had pawned had been a pistol of John's. It was among the other things in the tea-chest, which fortunately she had opened to take out the warm dressing-gown she was still wearing, not having undressed but merely slipped it on in place of her damp frock.

She swiftly crossed over to the chest and drew out the pistol. She knew nothing whatever about firearms except that she could tell the barrel from the handle—as she would have put it—and had a very strong certainty that John would never have left a loaded pistol in her possession.

As she drew it out she heard the door, whose handle had creaked as it was opened, pushed back and then the sound of stealthy footsteps approaching down the passage.

Danger, once she had got over the first shock, always cleared Rexie's brain. She thought now with the swiftness of wildfire.

If she stayed where she was, seeming to trust to the lock, the tramp, when he saw the pistol, would probably guess it was unloaded, but if she boldly opened the door, he would think it was not the locked door but the

loaded weapon she trusted in, and if she was quick enough to point it at him before he got near her, there was just a chance that he would be frightened off. Attacking a helpless girl was a very different thing (thought she) to attacking “a determined woman armed with a loaded gun.”

All this had passed through her quick mind in a flash and she did not hesitate. In a moment she had crossed the floor, unlocked and opened the door. Then, candle in one hand, and pistol in the other, she shouted in what she meant to be a terrifying voice but which was really a rather startled squeak.

“Hands up or I f-f-fire.” (Rexie had been to “the Pictures.”)

This was a grand start, but before the quivering candle-light had time to settle on the figure she now discerned in the darkness, her wrist was seized and the pistol clattered to the floor, while a voice demanded:

“Is that thing loaded?”

Raising her eyes, for the head of the speaker, to her considerable surprise, was somewhere near the rafters instead of level with her own, she was dumbfounded to find that they were gazing into the steely blue gaze of Mr. Stratheilan of Morne.

His amazement was evidently equal to her own. Seconds must have ticked away as they gazed uncomprehendingly at each other, consternation mixed with the bewilderment on his face, relief and astonishment on hers.

He recovered first.

“Is your pistol loaded?” he repeated more gently.

“I don’t know,” said Rexie feebly, because she didn’t.

Not, to all appearances, being one who suffered fools gladly, this must have seemed to him an incredibly silly statement. Nevertheless, he let it pass without either a withering glance or a smile. He merely picked up the weapon, and examined it in silence. Probably, he as well as Rexie needed a few seconds to recover a little from the impact of their recognition of each other. Now, as John could have told you, whenever Rexie was at a loss she became Roxana Mary Drew, a very dignified personage indeed, and straightway mounted her high horse, a cowardly trick, she willingly admitted, since her only idea was to gallop away on it out of whatever contretemps she had got herself into.

“What are you doing in my house?” she now demanded in as lofty and dignified a mien as she could get away with, considering the pistol and the dressing-gown.

“My car is stuck in a snowdrift,” he said briefly.

“Oh!” She climbed down at once. “Oh! I *am* sorry, that was my fault.”

“Not at all . . .” he paused. It was plain to be seen that whatever else he was he was no talker.

“Did you get in by a window?”

“Yes, I did not know you . . . anyone was in the house,” he paused again, looked round. “You are not alone here?”

She nodded her head. “O, yes, I am . . . only I wish I had a dog, a good big one!”

He looked down at her and a slow smile moved his lips and wrinkled the corners of his eyes.

Suddenly Rexie’s spirits rose. Her incalculable sense of humour and dauntless temperament got the better of her.

“Gosh! What fun!” said she. “Let’s get breakfast and tell each other our adventures.”

“At your service,” said he.

It seemed to be a remark behind which he retreated whenever at a loss for words, as he well might have been at the sight of this valiant scrap with her candle and pistol inviting him to breakfast in what, to all appearances, was an empty wooden hut.

“But why are you in the dark?” he asked now. “It is already daylight.”

“Golly!” exclaimed Rexie. “I never thought of that! It’s the shutters. Let’s take them down.”

“I will take down the shutters,” he said and he marched off.

Not only did he take down all the shutters, but he hauled in the wood which had been faithfully delivered, together with a bag of coals by “the tramp.” “Heaping coals of fire on my head,” wrote Rexie later to John when she had discovered her terrible tramp to be the most good-natured soul in the world, a poacher and ne’er-do-weel, liked by every one. His name was “Tam o’ the Wood” because he had a little shanty in the wood where he lived alone and made a living by sawing up and selling logs, poaching and doing everybody’s errands.

He had brought the coals because he knew her cellar was empty, having emptied it himself and sold the contents when the old man died.

His sense of honesty was entirely an affair of his own. He had, for instance, simply purloined Rexie’s sackful from some coalhouse and, as he informed her later, would take a sackful back when she got some in! Then, everyone would be satisfied, though, no doubt, to sticklers for etiquette on these matters it was a somewhat original proceeding.

While the kettle boiled, Stratheilan—he had asked her with a slight smile not to call him “Mister”—that very slight, secret smile that crossed his firm mouth so often—it rather worried Rexie, she wondered if he was laughing at her, but, try as she would, she couldn’t see anything to laugh at in herself.

“Perhaps it’s my hair,” she thought and went to look in the glass, knowing well that “feathers” of it were apt to escape and stick up in all sorts of ways. If it had been curly, she felt, it wouldn’t have mattered, but straight hair simply had to be kept tidy or you were a fright to behold.

However, there was nothing wrong there, every hair was more or less in place, and there wasn’t a smut on her nose either, so she gave it up.

He had hastily added on declining the Mister, that everyone called him Stratheilan.

“Haven’t you got a Christian name?” she asked. “Not that I would call you by your Christian name, of course, it’s just curiosity.”

“My name is Ewen Delarouge Urquhart of Stratheilan, in the island of Morne,” he said.

“De la Rouge,” she repeated, separating the syllables.

“Yes”—that smile flitted across his face—“a drop of French blood on the spindle side.”

Then she knew where he had got that slightly alien air which had puzzled her and that polite gesture like the ghost of a “bow” with which she was already familiar.

“Rouge means red,” said she, and he pointed to his red hair.

“The Stratheilan Urquharts are all red, but not quite so fiery,” he said.

“Well, I like it fiery, if it has to be red. I expect they called you ‘Carrots’ at school.”

“No, ‘Cinders,’ ” with a quirk of his lips.

At that moment the kettle boiled and he left her to set the table while he went off on some ploy of his own. She heard him hauling pieces of furniture about as she made coffee and fried eggs and bacon.

He had asked her no questions about herself and was so reticent it was difficult to ask him any, but they were no sooner seated than Rexie, being of anything but a secretive nature, plunged into the story of her life.

By the time they were finished he knew all about John being sent out by his paper to accompany an expedition to discover two lost explorers, about the brother and sister being practically alone in the world, about the accident and losing her job, the surprising visit to Mr. Matthew Orr, with various side-lines about tramps, landladies, her friend Sally, pawnbrokers and Betty.

He ate and listened, bending his head a little sideways in the flattering interest he took in every word, but in return told her about himself, beyond his name—exactly nothing.

It never seemed to occur to him that his affairs could be of the slightest interest to her and she was too polite, at the moment, to ask personal questions, though not too polite to wonder and wonder about him. Underneath the shabby Burberry his clothes were, if not quite so old and stained, decidedly well worn: his old tweed coat had been patched again and again, his breeches had also many patches, but all of them neat and tailored looking, and there was no mistaking the good cut, the sort that can be worn threadbare and still have an air about it that speaks for itself. His large solid boots were, on the other hand, the kind that ploughmen wear for their hard work on the farms. Indeed, he might have been a gamekeeper, she thought, wearing a cast-off suit of his employers, had not his things fitted him so well, had he not been so excessively clean, and had he not had that sort of exclusive air about him.

Then there were his manners; but perfect manners, she knew, were to be found among the simplest of Highland folk, so that did not carry her very far. His long fingers and large hands, though so well scrubbed and with clean unbroken nails, were the hands of a hewer of wood and drawer of water, tanned, scarred and seamed with toil.

In the morning light she saw that besides the old wound at the side of his mouth, he had another jagged scar across his forehead beneath the strong upstanding red hair which had evidently been combed back with a wet comb but had sprung up again as stiff as a brush.

She felt she'd like to put her hand on it and flatten it down, knowing quite well it would just spring up again with electric energy.

He waited on her at table in his slightly formal way, cutting her bread, springing up to renew her plate, bringing the coffee from the stove to refill her cup and taking away her empty plate.

Although he was quiet, there was no impression of the talk being all on one side. There was something so intensely interested and kind in his manner of listening that she almost felt as if they were chatting together like old friends. She, herself, had the gift of entering at once into a human and personal relationship with anyone she met, so their intercourse was as easy as if they had known each other for years, as if she knew all about him, and there was no such thing as mystery attached to him.

It must be a special gift he has, she thought to herself, to make me feel as if we had a background of old friendship to all this, while we really have

nothing. His eyes could twinkle, too, if he did not laugh much, when all was going off happily and well.

He was smiling at some joke of hers while handing some buttered scones she had heated in the oven, when suddenly there was a loud battering at the outer door. Before they could even express surprise, it was opened, footsteps came along the wide passage and the kitchen door was flung back.

It all happened so swiftly that their very domestic setting was being gazed at by a pair of snapping, brown eyes, before they had time to draw breath. Rexie seated laughing at the disordered breakfast table, while Stratheilan, with a towel bunched in his hand, stood smiling back at her with the hot plate of scones in his hand just taken from the oven.

The smile was instantly wiped off his face, to be succeeded by a look of extreme hauteur and resentment at the unceremonious entry.

The bright, snapping brown eyes belonged to the astonished red face of a middle-aged woman, who had one of those surprising figures, that are very fat in some places and very lean in others. She was broad in the beam and in front her corsets stuck well out under her waist, but her chest was narrow and flat, and a long thin sinewy neck and bird-like face, with a beak instead of a nose, surmounted it, a face so like a hen's that Rexie almost expected her to break out into a cackle.

Then, on seeing the thin sticks of legs under their visitor's ample proportions, her quick mind instantly reverted to a dictum of Sally's that people with very thin legs were always stupid. Whether this was a serious and original observation that Sally had read somewhere, or whether it was just one of that delightful creature's own lightning conclusions over the peculiarities of the human race, Rexie had no means of knowing, Sally so often made perfectly outrageous statements that turned out to be quite true when put to the test.

Looking at this woman, so very round and plump in the middle, and so thin at each end, she thought Sally was probably right again though, of course, the almost idiotic look on her face might merely be caused by shock and bewilderment.

"Losh!" she panted. "I couldna' believe my ain eyes when I saw the reek comin' oot o' the chimbley—I thought mebbe Tam o' the Wood had set the place ablaze, he's aye moonin' aboot this auld hut." She paused for breath, panting, with her hand on her side, while they stared at her in silence, then she rushed on.

"Mind you, Tam tell't me aboot some leddie lassie askin' for me at the post, but I took it he meant a teacher lassie by hersel', mebbe wantin' a

room, I could ha'e put you up fine. Eh, me! and to think ye had to come to the auld hut for shelter!" She clicked her tongue but was off again before either could speak. "But mebbe you're for holidaying here. Folks are aye sayin' it would be a grand holiday place for thae hikers an' toonsfolk in the summer—but never in the deid o' winter—but there! Some folks like to get away be theirsels—I maun ask your pardon for bangin' in, but ye see——" She stopped dead. "Eh! ye've no milk! Fancy you drinkin' your teas wi' that stuff (her eyes had fallen on the condensed milk tin) and me at your gate wi' a coo o' ma ain and as much cream as would sar a hoosefu' o' folk—I'll be there in a meenit," and off she ran, scudding over the snow exactly like a hen, leaning forward and taking long strides with her thin legs, her black shawl flapping round her.

Rexie had jumped up to watch her from the window.

"I wonder who she is," she said. "She's funny, but kind, but then I expect she thinks I'm funny, too."

"She must be the Mrs. Postgate who keeps the post office. I know the name"—he was looking out of the window, too. "She keeps a little shop, too, the name 'Postgate' is written above the window."

"What a good name for a postwoman!" Rexie was gazing at the coverlet of unbroken glistening snow that covered all the landscape. "Isn't the snow lovely!" she half whispered. She had not seen untouched snow for so long, and its beauty took away her breath. "It must have snowed all night long, there's not a mark to be seen but the post-lady's zig-zag track."

"No," he said. "It stopped about eleven. I was anxious about finding my car again and kept an eye on it."

And then they resumed breakfast and thought no more of the snow.

CHAPTER IV

"Over the hills——"

"GOSH!" said Rexie, suddenly stopping as she was about to take a final bite of scone. "We never got time to explain anything. We'll have to clear it all when she comes back—I wonder what she's thinking?"

Stratheilan, though unfamiliar with the village of Lammerside and the rigorous and puritan spirit of the district would have known what Mrs. Postgate of the post office and all like-minded people would have thought if

he had fully grasped the situation and known the sharp eyes and sharper tongue of that lady.

But so far nothing seemed much amiss. If Mrs. Postgate had allowed him to get a word in, and not rushed off all at once for the milk, he would have explained that he was just a stranger whose car had run into a drift and stuck there. He had walked across the hills and seeing the hut had called there and Miss Drew had very kindly offered him breakfast.

He would say nothing about having spent the night there unknown to his hostess. He was never a talker in any case.

He must explain the moment she came back with the milk, some post-office business must have delayed her or she would have been back by now.

All the same he was annoyed with himself for having so ignorantly taken shelter under Rexie's roof and for staying to breakfast when he realised she was alone.

But it was for that very reason that he had stayed—because she was alone and so much in need of help, with a houseful of heavy furniture to be put into place, firewood to chop and carry, fires to light and outside shutters to take down and so forth, with no one to help her, and little chance of help from the few men in the neighbourhood who would all be out casting snow, even if she had known where to go for them.

He simply could not have gone away and left her to it: she had seemed to him, too, little more than a schoolgirl in her short shabby coat and round astrakhan hat, when he drove her out, and even more so when she had opened the kitchen door, with her hair hanging over her shoulders, and her absurd pistol, aiming at all the points of the compass, in her shaking hand.

Nevertheless, he was silently cursing himself with a string of Gaelic oaths, which, fortunately, Rexie would not have understood, even if she had heard them, while she sat there gazing at him with wide-open, slightly puzzled eyes, as if she were not quite sure if she should laugh or be serious.

In the snow-light her eyes looked grey, for Rexie had "cats" eyes. Eyes that changed colour in different lights, though as a rule they were blue. Stratheilan's own eyes were blue also, but quite different. They did not change colour, being always the sharp clear blue of a sapphire, while Rexie's were a softer hypatica blue, like the blue of the sea which turns grey under the whip of the wind or green under the setting sun.

At last Rexie spoke.

"We'll tell her when she brings the milk. Let's finish breakfast." Then after a pause: "Are you a stranger here yourself, like the people one asks the way from? I thought perhaps she might have known you."

“I know Lammerside from passing through it, and some of the people, mostly farmers and shepherds, from meeting them at the markets, but not Mrs. Postgate or any of the people in the village.”

“Is there a village then? I didn’t see anything when I came, but hills and snow and the post office.”

He smiled. “Not quite a village, a hamlet perhaps and very scattered. Round the corner from the post office there are a few houses and further on an inn, it has ‘The Shepherd’s Bush’ on its sign, all very staid and proper, but everyone knows it as ‘Clarty Meg’s’ or ‘Old Meg’s.’ Not that it is dirty nowadays: far from it. Mistress Alice Porter, the present hostess, keeps it scrubbed and shining, ‘like a good deed in a naughty world,’ but Clarty Meg kept it some hundred years ago and ‘Clarty Meg’s’ it will be for ever.”

Breakfast over, they started to restore some kind of order into the place.

However much he may have liked to live out-of-doors, it was plain to be seen, when they looked round in daylight and began to tidy up, that the hermit uncle had believed in being comfortable indoors when he could not be out.

There was the electric light for one thing. She learned later that he had done most of the work himself, even building the dam across the burn that tumbled down one of the steep hills and produced so much power that a much larger place could have been lighted. As it was, there were switches and plugs for light or heat all over the place and it was just one of those not in use that Rexie had switched on in mistake when she heard Stratheilan moving about in the dark.

They found plenty of heaters and spare parts packed away, bedside lamps and such odds and ends as a man might fancy, but not, to Rexie’s disgust, a single specimen of the things a woman demands at the very mention of electric power: no iron, no labour-saving gadgets of any kind, not even, she lamented, a vacuum cleaner.

The sitting-room was shelved round and there were boxes and boxes of books, all packed ready for removal. There were no carpets but plenty of rugs, large and small, for the polished wooden floors.

As for furniture, one of his hobbies seemed to have been cabinet-making and carving, for there were plenty of strong, home-made pieces, though there again, it was all a man’s stuff. There was no wardrobe, but plenty of chests of drawers and carved oak chests as well as tables and chairs. As for a mirror, the only one she could find was a small square one on the “bathroom” wall. For the bedrooms there was one large bed and two divans and some chests and chairs. The hermit seemed to have had many hobbies,

one of the side rooms having evidently been his workshop. Thrown into chests there were bits of half-finished carving, the cured skins of animals and a few stuffed ones, two or three half-made rugs and rolls of leather, together with all the tools he had used at his work. In other wooden cases, they found such things as the dishes, china and cutlery he had required. There were not many of these, but there was a considerable supply of linen, which, as embroidery seemed to have been another of his hobbies, was perhaps not to be wondered at.

"I suppose," said Rexie, pondering over her strange relative, "he got used to being alone during his out-door cure and could never bear to come back to civilisation.

"Or perhaps he always had had an inclination that way—John is like that, too, and though I wouldn't like to live alone always, I love lonely places. I think it must be lovely to live on a little island all of one's own—when I was young it used to be my favourite dream—and when I went to bed at night I used to think, 'Now I'll run away to my island.' "

Stratheilan gave her a curiously startled look and she wondered if she had said something she shouldn't have, but after a momentary silence he merely said:

"Yes—people say your hermit uncle lived out-of-doors all summer, working in the garden or at his power station at the burn, or watching birds and animals, it was only in the very cold winter weather he shut himself indoors—working at his hobbies, I suppose."

"Oh, it sounds lovely!" said Rexie. "I shall love to live here. I am going to live here. John won't want to sell it, he never will. If only I have enough money to last till John comes—I mean if he is a long time, I have nearly twenty pounds of my own, and that will last me a long time, and then there's some of John's."

"Do you want to live here so much?" he asked her.

"*Want to?* It's what I've longed for and longed for and longed for. A little tiny house of my own among hills, never, never, never in a town. Never London——"

She sighed. "If I hadn't Bendibus—the very name is lovely and home to me—Bendibus," she saw it lingeringly. "Bending bush—if I hadn't Bendibus I'd have to go back to London, to a bed-sitting room, because it's the only place where I can make a living. But I have got Bendibus and I never shall go back again." She had her hands nervously clasped. "Never!" she repeated. "It's mine and John's."

“But your brother, he will also need to live in London, won’t he? Because his job is in a newspaper office.”

“Oh, no! John won’t. He is writing a book—it’s nearly finished. It would have been finished long ago if only he had had time and somewhere to write. How we both longed to get away to the country—John to write his book and I because I loved it so much. And now, he will have wonderful material for another book, if—if he gets back.” Her eyes clouded over a little and turned a sombre blue-grey in her milk-white face.

At that moment they saw Mrs. Postgate hurrying up to the house with a large basket. They both moved towards the door, then he hesitated, and Rexie, sending him back with a gesture, went on, but before she even reached the verandah, Mrs. Postgate’s loud voice was ringing through the place, she was full of apologies for having been so long in coming, the lassie that helped her hadn’t turned up, the roads being all blocked and she could not leave the post office and telephone unattended to. She set down the basket and before Rexie had reached the door she was off again.

“She never really stopped talking,” Rexie said, smiling ruefully as she came back. “Her voice just died off in the distance, I expect she’s still going on.”

“I shall go down to the post office before I leave,” he said, “and square things up. Now, where do you want this chest?”

She was standing unpacking the basket.

“Oh!” she exclaimed. “There’s a hen in here. I don’t know if it’s a chicken or a grandmamma, but we’ll have it for lunch, and there’s a bottle of cream and scones and potatoes and—Oh! how kind!—a piece of ham and things from the shop. Here’s the bill for them and a scribble at the bottom to say, ‘no hurry,’ she’s ‘just sent a few things we might need which can be returned if not wanted, the bird’s a present.’ Oh, she is a kind woman! I wish I hadn’t said she ran like a hen. Bless her—I’ll put the bird on at once. You’ll stay to lunch, won’t you?”

“No.” He looked up from what he was doing. “I must go off as soon as I’ve got these heavy things where you want them. I will take back the basket to Mrs. Postgate and explain things and if there is anything more you need I can get it and that will save you going out in the snow—shall I ask if there is a girl or anyone in the village who could come up and stay with you at night?”

But Rexie had forgotten all her fears of the darkness, the sun had come out, the sky was blue and she was as happy as a grig. In any case, most of

her horrors had settled round the “tramp,” and Stratheilan who knew Tam o’ the Wood quite well had laughed away her fears about him.

Together they got things into some kind of order. Of course, there was work left for her that would take days and days to get through but the heavy furniture was moved into place and the boxes and chests of stuff moved into the rooms she wanted to unpack them in.

“Do you live far away?” she asked when he was pulling on the old Burberry.

“I am working with the Storrs of Storrs,” he said. “It is a place where they breed fur-bearing animals and are trying out experiments in marketable furs. It is in the hills above Presterby, not very far from Bendibus. May I come back to see you?”

“Oh, yes, please do! Come soon,” she said, warmly. “Haven’t you got a hat?”

The last remark was called forth as he reached the door, bare-headed. He stopped and ran his hand over the thick, upstanding red hair.

“Well . . . yes . . . I think I have a hat somewhere. Do you like a hat? I will look for it next time I am coming to see you.”

This was said with so solemn and anxious an air that she laughed, such a merry hoot that he paused, looked down at her and smiled. “I like to make you laugh,” he said, “even when it is at myself.”

“No, not at you,” she said, “at hats.” And on that note they parted, he holding her hand perhaps a moment more than was necessary as he made that stoop of the shoulders over it that could hardly be called a bow, and bid her good-bye, adding something in Gaelic that she did not understand.

“What was that?” she asked.

“I will be teaching you some day,” he said, and was gone.

“Yes, you must teach me Gaelic,” she called, but did not know if her words reached him, his long strides took him so quickly across the snow.

He had taken the empty basket, but he was again unlucky about Mrs. Postgate. There was only a young girl in the shop, who, he gathered, was the “Leezie” who had not turned up earlier.

“Mistress Postgate’s awa’ to the big hoose wi’ a tillygram; she’ll no’ be back for a bit, she aye likes a tell wi’ Mistress Burns the hoosekeeper,” Leezie informed him, seeming not at all reluctant to have a “tell” herself, but Leezie was of no use to him, except that she told him the men were “castin’ ” the Moor Road, where his car was, so he hurried off hoping for help to dig it out.

At Bendibus Rexie watched his tall figure till it disappeared and wondered, as she turned back to continue her unpacking, at the feeling of loneliness that swept over her.

“But I’m not really lonely,” she said to herself. “It’s just that I miss John.” This cheered her up and she had so much to do and was finding everything of such intense interest that the cloud over her spirits soon lifted and she began humming away as she worked.

Stratheilan had shaken and laid the rugs for her, moved the furniture where she wanted it and carried the boxes and chests of books, linen, utensils and such like, into their respective rooms so that she could unpack at her ease.

She was hungry and felt better, too, after a lunch of tinned tomato soup and a sandwich of some scraps of tongue.

She put Mrs. Postgate’s “auld hen” on to boil for soup, inwardly thanking her for the few onions and bunch of parsley beside it.

She liked Mrs. Postgate and wanted Mrs. Postgate to like her—and was glad Stratheilan had gone to straighten out any misunderstanding.

But she had too much to do to think more about it. The day had now freshened and the snow in the valley was rapidly melting. It had just been one of those sudden March storms when snow sweeps the hills but does not as a rule lie long in the valleys. Up on the heights, it would last longer, no doubt, but here she could already see the tops of the bushes and, in places, the green of the grass. The sun had come out at mid-day and soon the water was running down the garden path and she could hear the flooded burn gurgling as it rushed over the dam.

By tea-time she had one of the bedrooms finished, with the bed made and one of the electric heaters glowing brightly to air it. Except for the range in the kitchen with its rather ugly stove pipe, all the rooms, although they had coal grates, were heated by electric radiators. Electricity seemed to have been one of her uncle’s main hobbies. She rather wondered that there was no electric cooker, but, of course, if it was true that he had lived mainly on nuts and fruit, and other uncooked foods, he would have little use for a cooker. In any case, the little stove seemed a good one. There had been plenty of boiling water all day and when she put on the oven to heat the scones in the morning, it had got so hot in a few minutes she could have cooked anything in it.

The kitchen was also put in order with its big table in place and the dresser furnished with the odds and ends of the antique ware the Hermit seemed to have fancied. Indeed, the whole place was furnished either with

things he had made himself or such antiques and odds and ends as, no doubt, had come from her grandfather's house.

It was a good thing the old gentleman had built the hut for his strange son and bought him an annuity before he lost all his money, Rexie thought, as she fingered the few pieces of cutlery, for everything else had gone in the crash. Only Bendibus and all it contained was saved, belonging as it did to this half brother of her father's.

She left the sitting-room and the other rooms for a more leisurely setting in order. With the bedroom and the comfortable kitchen set to rights she felt quite settled in and at home.

She had thought of going to see Mrs. Postgate before darkness set in but by three o'clock her ankle had begun to ache again and she was glad to put her books and some magazines on a small table beside her and rest on the large, old-fashioned sofa that was part of the kitchen furniture and on which she had slept the night before.

She had an early tea, lying back with the ankle supported on a cushion, reading her book. Then she remembered that she had meant to jot down all the things she had got that she owed money for. There were the bags of coals from Tam and the chicken and the eggs. Mrs. Postgate had said she would not accept money for the bird, but she ought to pay for the eggs at least and the chunk of country butter. Once she had got them paid for she must go very carefully.

She was, she admitted to herself, not so sure now of that twenty pounds lasting for very long. She had forgotten about coals and wood and seeds for the garden and, if Tam came to help to dig and sow, things she knew nothing about, he would have to be paid.

Mrs. Postgate possibly thought that the price of a fowl would be nothing to her. She would have to let her know that she could not indulge in that sort of luxury.

Having toted up her expenses as well as she could without knowing what she owed, a process quite natural to Rexie who simply made a guess and put it down, she laid aside her pencil, feeling suddenly rather eerie: the freshening wind was blowing round the house but except for its occasional rather sad and lonely whoo—oo, there was not a sound to break the silence.

She wondered at herself for feeling lonely. As a rule she quite enjoyed being alone, being one of these lucky people who are good company to themselves.

Perhaps, she thought, the interlude with Stratheilan had unsettled her for the moment. Though no talker, he was extremely good company, he listened

with such flattering interest to all she said and was so ready with suggestions that helped her.

“That’s the kind of person he is,” she thought. “John’s like that, too, just nice to be there—I do wish——”

But there she stopped, not even to herself was she going to admit she wished for anybody’s company, though certainly it was a little eerie in the hills with nobody near. If John were back all would be well and in the meantime she would *not* feel eerie, it was just that she wasn’t used to the silence, she would get a book and read to take her mind off any such thoughts.

She started to go down the passage to the sitting-room where the boxes of books were, but a slight sound made her stand still and listen, then suddenly retreat to the kitchen. Then she remembered that a shutter in one of the empty rooms was loose, but instead of starting back at once, she stood shaking with fear. Try, as she would, she could not refrain from picturing the rather desolate look of the unfinished rooms, or from remembering how easily Stratheilan had entered the house.

There was no getting away from the truth, she was lonely and frightened. It *was* eerie in this wooden hut among the hills, she even felt that she understood why no one in the village would live in it; it must be so much more cosy and “safe-feeling” in even a tiny stone cottage among the other stone cottages in the little hamlet. She began to wonder if she could stay . . . if she could even stay to-night through the long, dark, lonely hours that stretched threateningly in front of her, especially the “witching hours” with their owls, bats, murderers . . . ghosts! . . . ghosts! She was another of those inconsistent geese who don’t believe in ghosts but are terrified of them. That’s to say in daylight. At night, like all sensible people, she both believed in them and was terrified of them. She stood shivering. She *must* go into the empty bedroom and look to that shutter.

CHAPTER V

“And far away”

SHE did not go into the bedroom. She certainly opened the door into the dark room, but paused and then retreated swiftly into the kitchen, despising herself for a coward but deciding to lock the door and spend the night there again on the sofa. Somehow the kitchen seemed less lonely, and, since it was a little higher from the ground than the front of the house, safer.

She occupied herself with putting rice and onions in the soup, chopping the parsley and making a white sauce, not that she felt hungry now, or wanted to eat the chicken, but simply for something to occupy her mind and keep that creepy feeling of terror and loneliness at bay.

If only she hadn't had a fright the night before, she thought, she would have been all right. But something had happened to her nerves, the bold Roxana was certainly not herself. Her small flower face was more like the wan primrose than ever and the pupils of her cat's eyes were so dilated, the whole iris looked black.

Her straight fair hair looked darker, as if it were damp with fear, and hung in "lingle-ends" which she kept tucking in behind her ears, revealing the bony structure of her forehead and depriving her of any claim to beauty, though increasing the look of fragility that could make her so appealingly plain.

She was scraping together the chopped parsley, when suddenly she stopped with the spoon in mid-air, her eyes staring, her head slowly turning, very slowly turning round, to the window behind her.

Then the spoon fell with a clatter—Hist! What was that?

She had heard a slight muffled noise.

If she could have turned and fled at that moment to the most crowded part of London she would have done it: she would have flown to Babylon or Yung-chow-chow or anywhere where there were people: instead she stood frozen, her hair lifting from her head.

Then there came a confident "tap, tap, tap" at the door.

Immediately, the eeriness vanished, the slight muffled sound she had heard with ears strained by fear to catch the slightest movement, had, of course, been footsteps in the snow. Neither ghosts nor murderers, neither ghoules nor owls knocked at doors. She began to relax a little.

Another tap came and she slowly went and unlocked the kitchen door and stole through the dark passage to the front door.

She did not open it at once, however, but weakly called, "Who is there?" before turning the key.

A short, sharp bark answered her. The only dog she had seen was the poacher's and expecting to see Tam and his thin lurcher, though, so far, that thin hound had seemed nothing but a shadow at his master's heels, she slowly opened the door, her heart still fluttering.

To her amazement Stratheilan stood there. A white puppy with one brown ear was straining in his arms, while at his side stood a large white

bull terrier.

“Oh!” she exclaimed in a loud squeak. Then “Oh!” again.

“Ah, I have startled you! I must devise a knock that you know—or a call, perhaps . . .” he uttered the low musical pipe of a red shank and then stooped to smile down at her.

The smile and the tender bend of his head went straight to her pounding heart, filling it with reassurance, but it was the sight of the puppy that took away her breath and all her doubts and fears.

“Oh!” she exclaimed. “A puppy! A puppy!” Then doubtfully, “It’s not for *me*?”

“Yes,” he said. “Of course, he is for you. This is Fan,” he looked down at the big dog, “and this is one of her latest pups, he’s not named yet. Fan will stay and keep you company and guard the house till her son is big enough to take on the job. She will train him well herself, though I may have to take him a while, later on, to lick him into shape. I expect you’ll spoil him if I don’t keep an eye on him.”

He had set the fat puppy down on his still rather uncertain legs, and passed his lead to Rexie.

“Oh, do come in,” she said, having now opened wide the door. “Do come in and have supper with me; it is just ready and I was feeling a little lone—I mean—I’m all alone.”

He hesitated, but must have noticed the quiver in her voice and how white and strained she was looking, for, after a moment’s doubt, he stepped inside.

“Not to supper,” he said. “I will not stay many minutes, but I will tell you about the dogs and bring up a box for their bed.”

Rexie now had the puppy in her arms and tears of joy in her eyes. A puppy! She’d never be lonely with a puppy in the house or frightened with a bull terrier to defend her. She knew the breed.

She had thought longingly but eagerly of a dog, just a dog, though she had had no idea how to get one or what it would cost, but she had never thought of a puppy. That imp of mischief had just had to look at her with his sad brown eyes set in his ugly little face to send her into raptures. She held him in a sort of desperate embrace as if she’d never let him go, rubbing her cheek on his brown ear, while Fan stood anxiously watching.

In the meantime, Stratheilan, after depositing a large brown paper parcel on the table, had marched straight off to the cellar and she heard him hauling

at boxes down below. He had said a word to Fan, and she did not follow him, but stood watching the door with eager eyes.

“Don’t touch her,” he had said. “Fan won’t bite, of course, but she doesn’t like strangers to be too familiar with her; just leave her alone and she’ll come round.”

The puppy had no such reservations. He adored Rexie straight off the reel and didn’t care who knew it, licking her face and twisting himself into every imaginable shape to show his appreciation of being fussed over.

Even when she put him down, taking off his lead, he was all round her, and as she rushed about to set the table, seemed to think her feet perfect playthings, he even enjoyed being pushed about and knocked over by her slippers, and kept coming back for more.

When Stratheilan returned he was carrying a large box cushioned with straw and odds and ends of carpet that had been thrown into the cellar.

“I must bring you a dog whip,” he said. “I’ve two or three knocking about.”

“Oh, but I’d never whip a dog,” Rexie burst out.

“That is foolishness,” he said. “You must have a whip and use it—not for Fan, of course. Never whip any dog but your own—but for your own puppy you’ll need a whip.”

“Oh, but——” Rexie had had time to reflect now and though she did not know much about dogs, she knew that well-bred animals might cost a great deal—“you must not give him to me, just lend him—you see, I haven’t enough money just now to buy a puppy, but Oh, if you will lend him to me, I shall take great care of him!”

“He is your dog. He did not cost me anything at all. Fan——” he smiled, as Fan looked up, “Fan gave him to me.”

This was explanation enough for Rexie, who, as he rightly guessed, was much too innocent on such matters to have any idea of the large fees a puppy might cost indirectly.

She looked relieved. “Oh, I would love him so much, I mean to have for my very own, I love him already for himself, if he really and truly did not cost you anything . . .”

“Not a penny. In fact, I was rather wondering what to do with him,” lied Stratheilan and hastily began giving her minute instructions about dogs. How a dog’s kennel or basket was his den, and it was his right to feel absolutely secure from any interference there. Never, never must a dog be struck in his “den” or even pulled out to be punished once he had gained that

sanctuary. That would be a betrayal and an interference with those inalienable dog rights which must be respected. But though he was so keen about a dog's rights he thought it foolish to be sloppily sentimental over animals, suiting the action to the word by giving the pup a cuff for making a nuisance of himself, which sent him flying, howling to his mother, who merely opened one eye to say, "See what you get for misbehaving," and settled herself more comfortably on the rug.

"Fan pokes them with her nose when they are mischievous as babies, slaps them with her paw later on, and finally gives them a good nip with her sharp teeth when they misbehave that sends them yelping to the nearest refuge they can find; there is no sentimental foolishness about not hurting them with Fan."

Rexie frowned severely. "Oh, but I am more sensible than I look," she said, "in fact I have a great deal of common sense. More than you, I expect."

It was his turn to laugh, for common sense and Rexie seemed to him poles apart.

He opened the parcel of food he had brought for the dogs, and told her exactly what to give them. He'd leave Fan for a while, he said, as both Rexie and the pup needed someone staid and elderly to look after them. Rexie could see that he adored Fan, and that Fan, on her side, couldn't bear him out of her sight, so she was reluctant to accept the loan, even for a short while, but he took no notice of her assurance that she would be all right with just the puppy who, he said, was still not old enough to be left without his mother.

"That is why I did not have Fan in the car with me to-day," he said. "She goes everywhere with me as a rule."

"But will she stay with me all right?"

"Yes, if I tell her to. She won't like it, but she'll put up with it with patience—she's a wise old dog, is Fan. You may not take to her at first, but she'll grow on you—girls like pretty dogs and Fan is anything but pretty. Are you, old girl?" He pulled Fan's ear. "Especially just now. You'll improve when you get your figure back."

This was true. With her long melancholy face and great shoulders Fan was not pretty at any time, but she was worse than ever at the present stage of motherhood, her body looking loose and ungainly and all pulled out of shape.

Time had passed as they talked, but Rexie had been busy and now had the soup on the table and the boiled fowl covered with thick white sauce and

decorated with parsley, while the potatoes were drying off in the pan with a clean napkin over them.

Nevertheless, she guessed that he would have gone without eating had it not been that he had seen her frightened face and that he knew Fan would settle more easily if she saw him having a meal in the house, having thoroughly digested the Highland creed that one did not eat the bread of an enemy.

In spite of the shadow of Mrs. Grundy in the person of Mrs. Postgate, it was a happy meal—for Rexie anyhow.

Everything had suddenly changed. She had been afraid that Stratheilan had gone for good, and she had been terrified of spending the night alone in the hut. She had known she was being extremely silly and that there was not the remotest chance of her being murdered in her bed or robbed of the little she possessed by some terrible tramp, but her nerves had had a shock and she was still not in control of them. She had been quite unable to hide her fear or control the shaking of her hands when Stratheilan came to the door.

But now, with a hefty dog to protect her and a puppy to love and to keep her amused, she was again as confident and happy as she had been on first stepping into Bendibus.

So she let herself go and chattered with her usual verve and abandon, making Stratheilan smile that slow, close-lipped smile that did duty for laughter in his grave, serious personality.

Indeed, she thought, he must not have laughed much in his lifetime; they were evidently not a light-hearted folk in the far north. His taciturnity was also unbroken, though he did tell her that he had dug the car out of the drift himself and then gone over to Storrs, the fur farm, for Fan, but that was about all.

She still felt, however, that he did not speak of himself simply because it did not enter his head that it would interest her. There was no secretiveness about it, just detachment and an unconscious modesty.

Nevertheless, in many respects, he was anything but modest. His face, with its valiant mouth, was exceedingly proud in repose and when he did speak, it was with complete confidence in himself.

He told her in no uncertain voice how she was to treat his dogs and seemed to expect her to obey to the letter, and when he saw her limping after supper ordered her to sit down with her foot up, put a cushion expertly under her ankle, and proceeded to wash up the supper dishes.

Having finished that job, he took his leave, saying he had left his car on the high road. By then Fan had got out of her box, lifting her pup in her

mouth and standing still, looked after him as he went to the door, her eyes pleading to go, her whole body ready to spring at the slightest sign of permission. When he had said a very firm “No,” she watched till the door closed after him—then got sadly into the box with her pup, turning her back deliberately on Rexie and giving now and then a funny little whimper that Rexie could not help thinking was remarkably like the hiccup of a child when forbidden to cry.

She would have liked to clap and comfort her but had sense enough to know when she wasn’t wanted. The puppy had fallen suddenly asleep, but she could sense Fan’s alertness to every sound and movement.

Before going Stratheilan had taken her all over the house and put her on guard.

“You needn’t have the slightest fear,” he said. “She will allow no one in until you say, ‘It’s all right, Fan.’ If you want to warn her you say, ‘Keep them off,’ but you’ll find she’ll know as quickly or more quickly than you do when there is danger about. She won’t bite, at least, not except in the last resort, but she has her own methods of striking terror to the heart of evil doers.”

Next day the pup was duly given a name. As he was a pure bred bull terrier and had “a long pedigree” she felt he must have a dignified title, and as he had already been into every nook and cranny of house and garden, it seemed he had the temperament of an explorer, so she gave him three taps with the end of an old spear that did duty for a poker and named him “Mungo Park.”

The following days were full of work and fun. She had all the rest of the house to put in order, the floors and furniture to polish and cases and boxes of books to unpack and put in the shelves that lined the sitting-room walls.

Unpacking the cases, she came on many small treasures. One or two pictures, some bits of old silver and many other odds and ends, evidently taken from her grandfather’s house, for his initials were engraved on the silver.

What lack there was, was mostly of feminine articles. She would gladly have exchanged some of the carved chests or an old tall-boy, or spice cupboard—full of tools—for a wardrobe and some of the Chinese bowls and pots for some proper dinner ware, or a tea-set. There was nothing in that line but a few odd cups, plates, mugs and dishes, antiques, doubtless, but not much use for the proper setting of a table.

Living alone, the hermit would, of course, have no use for sets of anything. She supposed he helped himself out of the pans when he did cook,

for there were neither vegetable dishes, ashets, nor sauceboats. She was thankful there was at least a tea-pot, two indeed, one standing on the top of a samovar, and the other in a padded basket with a basket-work handle over the top—the very thing for tea out of doors, she thought, giving her queer uncle another mark for knowing how to be comfortable in his own way. There was also a silver coffee-pot and a Turkish-looking affair for making black coffee, so he must have relaxed from his spartan diet to enjoy these stimulants. All the pieces of silver were black with age and neglect and might have been tin for all the care taken of them.

There were plenty of comfortable seats and a large writing desk, but if he had had any papers they had all been removed.

She found, however, several boxes of unused manuscript paper and some packets of notepaper and envelopes and arranged them in the drawers of the desk and wrote down, “ink and blotting-paper” on the list she was making of the absolute necessities she must buy when she went into Presterby by the bus, which she intended to do as soon as her house was in order. She must also see Mr. James Orr as soon as possible and get in more of the provisions one could not look for in the tiny shop at the post office.

One thing surprised her and that was that Mrs. Postgate had not paid her another call.

Two or three times she had decided to go to the post office, but she had been so busy that it was usually dark before she thought of it.

On the Friday afternoon, however, she felt she must go and pay her bill, as Mrs. Postgate might need the money if she were going into Presterby on market day, which was Saturday, as she probably banked her weekly takings there.

Rexie had seen Tam o’ the Wood several times and he had given her a good deal of information about one thing and another as she paid him for more wood, ordered a few more sackfuls of coal, for which he seemed to be some kind of agent among his other manifold activities, or discussed the garden with him.

He had said he would dig it and when she demurred because she didn’t think she would have enough money to pay him and to buy the seed potatoes and plants he spoke of, he had merely wagged his head and said that was all right, he’d “have a look round”.

The garden was a bit of the hillside and when the snow was all gone she could see it had once been a well-kept place, but now it was overgrown and neglected or eaten up by rabbits. Still, the underlying plan was there, she and John would restore it in time.

She got a basket and followed by the dogs started down the hill. It was a lovely spring day, cool and soft, here in the valley the birds were singing, the blackbirds, the thrushes, the wrens, the tits; larks were jubilant above the cornfields and the young grass of the meadows. Pussy willows were out and yellow celandines and ground ivy would soon carpet the ground.

Once on the road it was but a short way to the post office, but she passed it by to have a look round the corner at the hamlet. It was a scattered little place, with a stone bridge over a stream near the middle of it. There was an ancient well head with some carving on its stones, around which some little girls were playing at hop-scotch, while down below, boys fished and amused themselves at the waterside. It all lay at the bottom of a steep little hill which she did not descend; another day she would explore it and visit another little shop which she saw facing the bridge, but now she turned back and entered the post office.

Mrs. Postgate was serving behind the counter. In her small shop, besides groceries, she sold stationery, cigarettes, sweets and other odds and ends and she was now showing postcards to a woman customer.

They both looked up as Rexie came in, but neither of them answered her "good afternoon."

Perhaps it was not customary to say good afternoon, she thought, and stood back till the woman had chosen her cards.

As she did so she thought it would be nice if there was one of "Bendibus" among the local views, and in her quick friendly way had asked before she realised she was out of her turn.

"First come, first served," said Mrs. Postgate, shortly, and gathering up the cards put them away.

The woman went off and, feeling rather snubbed, Rexie meekly handed over the bill, thanking Mrs. Postgate for the chicken and the eggs.

"There'll be three and sixpence for the hen and ninepence for the eggs," said Mrs. Postgate briefly, and took the money but made no offer to show Rexie the cards.

As she gave the change, all in silence, Mrs. Postgate opened a drawer and took out a bundle of letters.

"Are these yours?" she asked.

They were all addressed to Miss Roxana Mary Drew.

"O, yes!" said Rexie, flushing with pleasure. "How silly of me! I thought the letters would be delivered."

"They're delivered when we know who they're for," said Mrs. Postgate shortly. Rexie looked at her. She knew now something was wrong. This was a very different person from the kindly chatterer who had rushed to help her and had said the chicken and eggs were a present.

"I'm sorry," she said. "My name is Roxana Mary Drew—Rexie Drew—I thought you knew my name."

"No, I didn't ken there was ony *Miss* up there—ye'll need to ca' for your letters till I see about it. There's a parcel forbye."

She fished under the counter and brought out a parcel.

"Good-day tae ye," she said, handing it over.

Rexie felt she was dismissed. She had a little list of odds and ends in her hand which she had meant to ask for. As she looked at it turning to go back along the road, she found she could not read it for tears in her eyes.

The thing had been so sudden she had been completely non-plussed and silenced. Knowing from Stratheilan that he had missed her, she had meant to explain to Mrs. Postgate about his taking breakfast with her and to tell her about his car being caught in the drift.

One or two other cars, tradesmen's vans, and so on, Tam had told her, had also been snowed up and had to be dug out. On hearing this she had thought everything would be all right, as far as she had thought about it at all, she had been living for years in a circle of writers and artists who, though strictly moral and decent, had not had much use for Mrs. Grundy or for condemning others without a hearing. All she had thought she needed to do was to tell Mrs. Postgate why Stratheilan was there—now she knew she was condemned.

It had come as a great shock, a shock which increased as all the implications of Mrs. Postgate's words came gradually home to her.

With Fan wobbling sedately at her heels and Mungo exploring every tussock of grass and heather on the way, she stumbled up the hillside, glad when she reached the shelter of her house.

Up till now she had felt glad the village was so near, now she felt it was actually very far away indeed and that she was very lonely. She sank on to a seat in the verandah and gradually got it all straightened out in her mind. Mrs. Postgate seeing them together at breakfast had concluded that she and Stratheilan were man and wife and had naturally passed the night together at Bendibus.

Then she had seen the letters and papers and parcel all addressed to *Miss* Drew and that had aroused her suspicions, then Rexie had confessed that she was Miss Drew and confirmed them all.

She remembered hearing how suspicious of strangers and narrow-minded the people of small villages often were. Her letters, too, were from London, "that haunt of evil and of loose-living," as she had heard it called in a comedy depicting country life.

She had laughed at the situations caused by ignorant suspicions in that play, but now she saw it might be more tragedy than comedy for herself.

CHAPTER VI

"Open your gates and let me through"

IT was not till she was in the kitchen, with Fan curled up before the fire and little Mungo worrying at an old slipper, that she even looked at her letters.

She had seen at once there was none from John. Now, as she listlessly turned them over she saw that there was one from her friend Sarah Fyffe, and one that she guessed might be from Betty, the little maid at Mrs. Flint's, besides one or two with typed addresses. There were also a number of copies of the *World's News*, the newspaper on which John was one of the staff. A free copy was always sent her, John having, she supposed, arranged that before he left. They were all re-addressed in Betty's uneducated hand, the same as that of the letter. John had also paid the subscriptions of one or two weekly and monthly magazines and, as she looked at them in their wrappers, she remembered how in her most desperate straits she had wondered if it would be possible to cancel the orders and ask for the remainder of the money to be given back to her, but she had always been too shy to do it, though she had sold one or two of the more expensive ones at half price. John was extravagant where books and magazines were concerned, looking on them more as bare necessities than luxuries.

After a while she made herself a cup of tea, and sat drinking it, wondering what she could do, whether she should go and ask Mrs. Postgate for an explanation and so make an opening to tell her the truth, or if she would only invite some deadly insult thereby with which she would be quite unable to deal. She never knew what to do or say when insulted.

It was, of course, the addresses on the envelopes that had opened Mrs. Postgate's eyes, to the fact that Rexie was not married as she had supposed. She had possibly kept them to be called for to make sure. Rexie had no idea if there had ever been a regular delivery at Bendibus, or if she ought to have done something about it, such as sending a notice that the house was re-inhabited.

To-morrow was Saturday. She was going into Presterby by the bus, she would be seeing Mr. James Orr and would tell him about it and ask his advice.

Having come to this conclusion, she decided not to go back to the post office in the meantime and turned to her letters, opening first the one from her friend Sally, whom she had left in hospital.

It was rather a sad letter. Sally was much better but had been ordered a long rest, by the sea or in the country. She was employed in a smart little dress shop in the West End of London. She was very clever at her work and would have had no fear of losing her job if she had been well. But she had been ill a long time and now was told she would not be fit for work for a few months and must take this long time off.

She had nowhere to go either by the sea or in the country and, besides, she needed every penny of her salary for she had to help to support a small orphaned brother and sister who were boarders at a good school. Enough money had been left to them to pay their school fees and so on, but any extras had to be squeezed out of Sally's earnings. She also had to keep them and provide a home for them in the holidays out of their combined income and her illness had run away with most of her savings.

The Easter holidays were not far off and she was in a terrible way about her beloved little brother and sister. She could arrange for them to stay at the school but they simply lived for the holidays, and she could not endure the pain of disappointing them. They had not only the days, but the hours and even the minutes counted up till they could come "home" to Sally, and she was, Rexie could see, simply breaking her heart about them, for she had no home for them to come to.

When John and Rexie had had a flat in the same house, and indeed on the same floor, as Sally had her bed-sitting room, they had practically shared everything, and the children had had the run of the flat, with its extra bedroom, bathroom and large sitting-room, in the holidays.

Both John and Rexie adored the two quaint children, John being especially devoted to little Dorcas—his Dorky-bird, as he called her—and Rexie rather favouring the boy, James, but both were the much-beloved darlings of the three young grown-ups who tried their best to supply the place of parents to the homeless children.

Now the flat was gone and though Sally had her bed-sitting room, there was no room in it for two youngsters and she had not enough money either to send them on the tour which one of the mistresses was going with some of the other boarders, or to take rooms for them in the country.

She was not complaining to Rexie, who she believed to be in as tight a place herself and quite unable to help since her accident and John's disappearance; she was just telling her friend her trouble, sure of the sympathy of which Rexie had such a fund—if she had nothing else. She apologised over and over for being so depressing.

But instead of being depressed, Rexie's spirits were rising and singing as she read.

She had already thought of having Sally to stay with her for a while when she was able to travel, but she had thought that would not be for weeks to come and that then Sally would only be able to stay a very short time.

This letter altered everything. Sally was evidently now as well as she could expect to be for some time, but she would not be able to work for quite a while. To go back to the confined atmosphere in the work-room in the city was not to be thought of, the doctors said, and, in any case, she had not the strength for work at present, only a long rest in the country or at the seaside would complete her cure.

“And what air,” Rexie asked herself happily, “could be better than that of the hills at Lammerside? Hadn't it cured her uncle when he was given up as hopeless? Not only cured him but enabled him to live on and on to a healthy old age, outlasting most of his contemporaries.”

Not only was the air good, but Rexie needed Sally and was dying to have her, and where could a lovelier place than Bendibus be found for Dorcas and the small James (for whom John was always finding a new sobriquet) to spend their holidays.

She was so excited that she wrote out a long telegram at once to Sally.

Then she remembered Mrs. Postgate. She hated to go back to the post office and was standing dithering with it in her hand, thinking how awkward it was going to be if she could not go freely back and forward to the post office, when she saw Tam crossing the hill, and running out, asked him if he would take it to the post office for her.

She thought he gave her a curious look as though he was going to say something, but if so, he changed his mind and after a remark about getting some seeds in, went off to do her errand.

The next day she set off in good time to catch the bus. She was not sure if it would be crowded and walked down to the stopping place in the village to make sure of a seat.

She had shut Fan and Mungo in the kitchen with the door open to the scullery at the back, so that they could have more room to move about, for

Mungo had just learned to manage to mount steps—spread-eagled out like a frog.

There were a number of people waiting and Rexie would naturally, in her hail-fellow-well-met way, have at once entered into conversation with them, but her snub in the post office had affected her sensitive soul and she glanced rather shyly at them before saying a rather tentative good morning, addressed to no one in particular. The woman next her answered with some remark on the weather and they chatted a little together with a dead silence round them till the bus came in.

Once in the bus, everyone began talking but Rexie, who had lost sight of her friendly neighbour, now seated next the woman who had been buying postcards the previous evening.

It was rather an uncomfortable ride for Rexie could not miss the many glances that were thrown at her nor ignore the fact that they were much more curious than kindly. She felt in the middle of a crowd, friendly among themselves, but leaving a vacuum round her, which made her both uncomfortable and unhappy.

She was glad when Presterby was reached, but when, on passing the woman who had spoken to her, she was about to give her a friendly parting nod, she was met by a blank stare, not so much of animosity as of curiosity, as if the woman, having heard some spicy tale, was too intent on having a good look at her to think of anything else.

It was an unhappy Roxana Mary Drew who made her way to Mr. Orr's office and once there she found Mr. James quite a different person to his brother Matthew.

Possibly, he was warm-hearted enough, when one got to know him, but to Rexie, sensitive and nervous, there was, although he was perfectly friendly and polite and very anxious to help, a certain stiffness about him that quite prevented any approach to more personal problems.

He regretted that he had not been in when she called before, told her that, while he would certainly not have approved of her going straight off to occupy the hut, he would have agreed that it was quite a nice little place and said that he had tried hard to let it as a holiday bungalow, but unsuccessfully, as that part of the country was unknown as a holiday resort. It was the golf course that was beginning to bring people to the district, but only golfers, who were usually fond of their comforts and much preferred hotel life to looking after themselves in a lonely hut. "It's the artist fraternity or people with children who like that kind of thing," he said, "not golfers."

He explained to her about the money that had accumulated from a small ground rent he had charged for the piece of her—and, of course, her brother's—land that was included in the course and about the offers he had had from hotel-keepers.

Rexie, however, told him that she could do nothing until she heard from her brother. She had been going to say they would never sell Bendibus, but was feeling too downed by her yesterday's experiences to be emphatic about anything.

He quite agreed that she could not sell in the meantime but advised her not to spend any money on the place for that would not increase its value in the least, as it was only the ground that was wanted as a building site. At the same time, he warned her that the man who had made the biggest offer was growing impatient and had been looking for another site, though admitting that Bendibus was perfect for his purpose. "And it's not as if we could fall back on another offer," he added, "since one hotel will kill any chances of another being built."

His talk was all strictly on the business side, though he did invite Rexie to visit his home and regretted that he could not take her out that day to luncheon, Saturday being his very busy day when all his farmer clientele came in to see him.

Rexie, taking this as a hint and having noticed the telephone calls that were constantly coming from the outer office, rose at once to leave.

He said he would have brought his wife out to see her, but she was an invalid at present, and so on, and then they parted, Rexie feeling a little guilty about taking up his time on a Saturday morning, especially when she saw how many farmers were waiting to see him on passing through the outer office.

She had lunch at a quiet little tea-shop and then did her shopping, going to the extravagance of one or two electric gadgets, such as an iron and a vacuum cleaner, seeing she had plenty of power that cost nothing, and Sally and the youngsters might be coming to stay for some time.

She was also persuaded into taking a stove and a few other things she had not intended to buy, the shopman's argument, that beyond the original price they would cost her nothing while all other kinds of heating would be a constant expense, seeming to her unanswerable and in any case the small range would hardly be enough to cook for five people if John came home. Both John and Sally loved cooking, and, though not gourmands, were something of gourmets.

“But they’ll have to supply the ingredients of their dishes if I supply the means of cooking them,” said Rexie to herself, “otherwise we’ll have to live on nuts like my famous uncle.”

“Nuts,” she had learned, was a term of opprobrium at Lammerside for anything but a good solid diet of meat and pudding.

Having arranged for the delivery of her larger purchases and filled her basket and string bag with all she could carry, she caught the early bus home and was glad to find it was nearly empty; most of the village liked to make a day of it and finish up by going to the “Pictures.”

The woman sitting next her in the front seat seemed a friendly soul. She did not live at Lammerside now, she said, but was on her way to pay a visit to her old home at one of the near-by farms.

Rexie guessed that she was a great gossip for she not only entertained her with stories about everyone and every place they passed, but frankly set herself to find out all she could about Rexie herself, of whom, it was plain to be seen, she had not heard any gossip.

Rexie was a forthright person at any time with no secretive inclinations and she thought also that this might be a good time to say clearly who she was and tell the story of her arrival.

So, on being asked if she lived at Lammerside, she told Mrs. Taylor all about her own and John’s inheritance, of how John was abroad and she had come alone to Bendibus, of her mistake about the hired car and of the fright she had got in the early morning on hearing someone moving about the house, who proved to be the Mr. Stratheilan, owner of the car, and who had been snowed up on the top of Tod’s Rig, as the moorland road was called.

“That Stratheilan’s a queer yin, right enough,” said the woman and straightway plunged into stories about him, not that she knew much, it was mainly of his taciturnity she spoke and his cleverness with animals. “They say Highlanders have second sight,” she announced. “I no’ ken much aboot that, but he’ll tell ye what’s the matter wi’ a beast afore ye’d think he’d had time to look at it, and they do say thae wild beasties o’ his are as tame wi’ him as puppies.”

Rexie did not ask any questions but she quickly learned all Mrs. Taylor knew, for it just came out in a spate, not that the woman was particularly interested in Stratheilan, she was interested in everybody, and jumped about from one to the other with equal verve and enjoyment.

He had come from the north, from the Island of Morne, she said, to learn about fur farming at Storrs and had lately started a tiny place of his own with a few sheds and some wire netting on the hillside near Storrs. He had

called it Morne, and people had been amused at his giving the ramshackle place on the hillside such a grand name, “though mind you,” she added, “they do say it’s because of some cross-breed he wants to give a name to—but I ken nought about that—if it had been pigs now, or yowes—though, deed, I hear enough about breeds there to sair me. What did you say your brother did?”

Rexie hadn’t said anything, but recognised the opening and told her about John.

She seemed a kindly soul, and invited Rexie to come and see her.

Stratheilan, Rexie gathered, was generally considered to be slightly “queer.” Nobody knew anything about him except that he was from the Highlands and evidently as poor as they usually are up in that bleak country, so different from the “fat lowlands.”

Rexie was also informed that at Storrs students were taken who paid a premium which included board and lodging and tuition and that the general supposition was—for there was a strong complaint that he kept his own counsel—that he had saved up to pay the premium but had very little left over, in any case he was older than most of the students who came to Storrs.

“Not that I’ve anything agin’ the lad,” Mrs. Taylor summed up, “he spent a whole night wi’ my wee Andy’s pet badger when it sickened, and then went off without even a cup o’ tea—but proud! As proud as the deil hissel—wouldn’t take a penny-piece for his night’s work, and him wi’ a coat on his back I wouldn’t offer to Tam o’ the Wood.”

But Stratheilan was only one of the local personalities she touched on in passing. She had a word about everyone.

“There’s Mistress Postgate——” as they passed the post office. “Eh, what a tongue! I wonner sometimes it doesn’t get tired o’ waggin’, but live and let live, say I, she’s a nice body, if ye get on her right side, but I’d be sorry for onybody ’at crossed Mrs. Postgate. Eh, well, here ye are—I go on to the next stop. Now, dinna forget Mistress Taylor o’ Howden—if ever you’re out that way, ye’ll get a cup o’ tea an’ welcome.”

Rexie thanked her and left her talking to the woman in the seat across the aisle, wondering what it would be like to listen to Mrs. Postgate and Mrs. Taylor if they got together. She could only imagine they would be like two old sisters she knew, who talked straight on when together, neither paying, as far as an outsider could see, the least attention to what the other was saying.

She found the two dogs wild with joy at her return. Fan was coming round, as Stratheilan had predicted, and would now come and stand at

Rexie's chair with great brown eyes fixed on her in question.

"He won't be long," Rexie would say, putting out a tentative hand and knowing quite well what question Fan was asking.

Fan had a way of wrinkling up her brows, as if trying to understand when Rexie talked to her, that was very human and was so patently eager to do the right thing that she had completely won Rexie's heart.

But she knew Fan was a one-man dog and did not attempt to be too familiar with her; it was enough that Fan trusted her and would curl up quite contentedly at her feet indoors, or go a walk with evident enjoyment when she saw Mungo's lead come out. She would trust Mungo to Rexie, too, and would leave them sporting together and sedately go and sit in the verandah with her nose at the glass watching patiently for her master's return.

But Rexie was very lonely these days. It was not only that no one came to see her, that would not have worried her if she had felt that the village people were friendly, she was busy and occupied herself and guessed they had not much leisure themselves for visiting. But she felt that the village was shut against her, that the gates were locked and barred, and she did not know how to find a way in.

CHAPTER VII

"Not without a beck, and not without a bow"

FAN was at her post at the verandah window one day when Rexie heard a sudden outburst of anxious whines, mixed with barks of joy and then fierce scratchings and shakings at the door which showed that Fan was beside herself with excitement, for scratching doors or furniture was forbidden and well she knew it.

When Rexie rushed along to the verandah, she found Fan upright on her hind legs at the door, her nose at the glass, every muscle in her body trembling with excitement, her whines growing into long-drawn squeals of anxiety.

When the door was opened, she vanished through it, streaked across the garden, disappeared and then reappeared on the hillside making for a figure approaching across the hill. Mungo at once started off after her, waddling mournfully along and giving reproachful squeals and barks at this desertion by his mother, who took not the slightest notice of her offspring's wails.

Rexie laughed as she watched her beloved Mungo, scrabbling time after time up a rocky scree only to roll down into the heather again. She was still laughing when Stratheilan himself strode up with Fan, who, lost to all dignity, was nearly out of her mind with joy. Stratheilan had picked up Mungo by then, who could not keep up with his long strides, and all three looked wildly happy as Rexie ran down the steps to greet him.

“Fan thought you were *never* coming,” she said. “She asks me every day what has happened to you and watches and watches for you from the window, and when we go for a walk she always stands still where the path divides and says, ‘Aren’t you going this way? Do go the way to Storrs today’.”

He came in and sat fondling Fan’s ears, and talking for a while, but Rexie could see he was not at his ease. She wondered why he was so stiff but chattered on herself as if she did not notice it.

She told him about Sally, and that piece of news seemed to be a great relief to him. Once or twice he sat looking at her as if trying to make up his mind to say something, but evidently decided to put it off when he heard that Sally was coming.

“Soon?” he asked.

“At once. I’ve wired for her.”

She was walking about with sandals and no stockings for her ankle had been hurting rather badly, and she thought it was easier in the sandals.

“Let me see that ankle,” he said suddenly, and pushed her gently back on the sofa where she was sitting, lifting her foot on to a cushion and then undoing the bandage. It was all healed now, she assured him as he unwound the long strip, but he took no notice of her protestations, lifting her foot in his big capable hands he prodded it all over.

“Ah!” he said at last, and then began to explain that with walking on it so much too soon after the accident she had allowed some small bone, whose ligaments were not properly tightened up, to spring a little from its proper place.

“I set bones among my other jobs, I’ll put it right,” he smiled reassuringly at her as she shrank a little. “You can trust me.”

“Oh, I do trust you,” she said ruefully, “my foot just shrinks back itself without me telling it to.”

“I’m going to hurt a bit—just give a good howl, it will help.”

He caught her eyes and smiled and then, before she realised that he was giving her no time to think about it, she felt a little click and an immediate

relief from the nagging ache. He held the foot firmly till he had bandaged it up but said he must have something stronger on it—a plaster bandage, perhaps.

“So, I’ll come back——” he hesitated again and then added, “I’ll leave Fan with you till your friend comes—Mungo will be all right by then and you won’t be nervous with your friends here. There is nothing really to be afraid of, you know—though it might be a good idea to have a telephone wire for convenience, down to the post office”—he stopped suddenly—“to the village,” he corrected, but Rexie knew there was only the post office telephone and wondered if he knew something about Mrs. Postgate’s change of front.

She did not like to ask so let it go, but when he refused to stay to tea—all his stiffness and reserve returning when she asked him—she felt sure there was something amiss.

She would not allow him to leave Fan, however, for she knew how unhappy the poor dog would be and couldn’t bear to think of her grief if her master went off again without her. She was sticking as close as a burr to him, alertly watching every movement, with her brows drawn into wrinkles over her anxious eyes. Stratheilan might have overborne Rexie’s objections if it hadn’t been so evident that she would suffer almost as much as Fan if he left the latter at Bendibus.

Besides, Mungo was showing signs of following in his mother’s footsteps in being a “one-man” or “one-woman” dog. He had adopted Rexie as his mistress and though pleased to see Stratheilan, curled himself up at once as close to Rexie as he could get. He had even given a little warning growl when Stratheilan pushed her on the sofa and had watched anxiously as he worked at her foot, giving another low rumble when her sandal was touched.

“He’ll do,” said Stratheilan at these evidences that Mungo was going to stand no nonsense where his mistress was concerned, “he’s just a pup, but the breed is there—he could frighten an intruder already. I’ll take him back in a few weeks to finish his education and teach him a few lessons but that will be when your friends are here.”

Rexie watched him depart, a wildly joyous Fan at his heels, with a feeling of something lacking. The ease had gone out of their relationship, though whether it was because he had heard of the village reactions or whether it was just that he did not want to be too friendly, she did not know.

He had been as kind as ever, but distant and stiff and not at his ease. This had affected her, too, and she had retreated into her own shell.

Perhaps it's really because he doesn't like me very much, she thought, or perhaps he thought I was too *oncoming*. He may be engaged for all I know and taking precautions in case I should misunderstand him, and she laughed a little ruefully to herself.

However, Rexie's spirits were never long quelled. "Sally will be here when he comes back," she thought, "and he's sure to like Sally—perhaps he'll fall in love with her and then it will be all right—with everything."

How it was going to be all right with everything she did not ask herself.

She cheered up a little at the thought of Sally and if there was still a little feeling of having lost something without being sure of what it was, at the back of her mind she was too busy making preparations to think of it.

But Sally did not turn up as quickly as she expected. There were all sorts of things to arrange. She had got a chance to sub-let her room for a month or two and had to go back there to make out inventories and complete other arrangements, then there was the packing for herself and Dorcas and James, besides some monetary questions that had to be settled before she left.

Rexie made one or two more attempts at friendliness in the village, but was so definitely snubbed that she declared to herself she could never go back, especially to the post office, where Mrs. Postgate was almost insolent and certainly as rude as she could possibly be without actually refusing to serve Rexie with what she needed.

One day Tam o' the Wood, who came faithfully to attend to the garden, arrived to plant some potatoes he had brought and put in a few seeds.

He had assured her at first that there would be no difficulty about filling her garden with plants and flowers. People always had a few seedlings over from their sowings, or were dividing their herbaceous plants, thinning out and so on and "giff-gaff" was one of the rules of village life—except in the case of preparations for the flower show, when prize leeks, cauliflowers, sweet peas, and so on, were jealously guarded from prying eyes.

"Giff-gaff," he explained to Rexie who had not heard this expression before, meant that you accepted something from your neighbour one day, and gave him something in return at another time. In due course, Rexie, herself, would have things to pass on, though, in the meantime, of course, she was just starting a garden and would have nothing to give for a while, but they all understood that and would be glad to help her get going with no thought of any return. Being realists they accepted a situation with practical common sense.

They were kind-hearted, too, and at first Tam o' the Wood came laden with stuff.

But he soon began to come empty-handed and one day when he was rubbing his head and looking at some ground he had prepared to fill with chrysanthemums, but which was still empty, he explained ruefully that his own plants had been a failure.

Round the old tumble-down keeper's cottage in the wood where he lived he had a garden crowded with flowers among rows of bee skeps. For some minutes he hummed and hawed over the reasons why he could not fill the garden as easily as he had promised and then Rexie, taking the bull by the horns, said:

"I know what it is, Tom. Nobody likes me. They won't give me any plants because they think I'm not respectable—but I really am respectable, Tom, it was just an accident."

Then she told him briefly of how Stratheilan had happened to be having breakfast with her when Mrs. Postgate arrived, early in the morning.

"Aye, she's at the bottom o't," he exclaimed. "Onybody lookin' at ye could tell ye're a' right. But ye're ower bairn-like, Mem, ye didn't see what the folkses wad think. Many's the time a' could ha'e telled ye things ye sudna ha'e dune."

"But why didn't you, Tom?"

"It's no' for the likes o' me to speak tae the likes o' you or Stratheilan aboot sic things," and he picked up his spade.

But Rexie, having gone so far, was determined to know more. To know what was being said, to know what really started it all. Whether, for instance, it was known that she had arrived the evening before with Stratheilan in his car, which the village people would be aware was not for hire.

Tam was certain that, though they might not have done so at first, they would soon have found out, as he had told Mrs. Postgate, himself, about seeing her.

Tam blamed Mrs. Postgate—who kept a sharp eye on his own activities—for everything.

She had seen the smoke from the Bendibus chimney, he said, and had gone up to inquire into what was going on, expecting to catch him there.

She had been told about a "lassie" coming to her door the previous afternoon but did not connect the two events at first. Being of a very inquisitive turn of mind, she had taken a good look round Bendibus when she approached the house and had seen from the carpet of trackless snow that whoever had lit the fire had spent the night there. Her idea had been that

Tam had visited the house for some nefarious schemes of his own that meant spending some hours there, for he had a cottage of his own close at hand.

As she, and the whole village, knew exactly when the snow had stopped falling, she had proof positive—and she made very sure of this by examining the snow all round about—that Tam had been there all night, possibly to see what odds and ends he could still purloin and to put them where they could easily be lifted and taken away later on.

She knew Mr. James Orr was in charge of Bendibus and would have enjoyed going to him with a sensational tale about the black sheep she was always, though rather unsuccessfully, fulminating against.

She had, therefore, been genuinely surprised when she discovered Rexie and Stratheilan there, having breakfast together like man and wife. Surprised and rather puzzled because, though she did not know Stratheilan, there was something familiar about him and she remembered afterwards having seen him in Presterby on market days.

She at once set herself to find out about him and discovered that Ewen Urquhart of Stratheilan was, by all accounts, a bachelor and something of a mystery, and, in the meantime, letters began to arrive re-addressed to a *Miss Roxana Drew* at Bendibus.

She immediately came to the conclusion that Rexie was what she described as a “kept” woman and that the villain Stratheilan had brought her in his car to the lonely hut on the hills where she would be near enough to Storrs for him to go and see her in secret.

The post-mistress’s sharp eyes had noticed Rexie’s confusion, and once having made up her mind that this Miss Drew was a wicked and abandoned creature, she began to take steps to clear her out of the district.

Tam shook his head while recounting all this as delicately as he could manage. Tam had his own reasons for believing Rexie’s story, having seen a great deal more with those queer eyes of his than he cared to speak about, for Tam had his own secrets about that night. However, he had done his best for her, but, unfortunately, Tam, himself, was a reprobate, who might be liked and laughed at in spite of his misdeeds, but whose word would certainly not be taken as gospel. He’d told too many lies in his time.

He told Rexie so with frank impartiality, for Tam never tried to don the sheep’s clothing of innocence. It was part of his likeableness that he wore his roguery with an air and was no hypocrite.

“I doot,” he said, at the end of his tale, “ye’ll no make it. They’ll run ye oot. Better sell out and go off—they tell me Bendibus is worth a thoosan’ pun’ thae days.”

And having said his say, Tom spat on his hands and lifted his spade: he wasn't over-fond of digging and certainly wasn't doing it entirely out of benevolence, a quality which Tam, to say the least of it, sadly lacked. In fact, it may be as well not to look too closely into his motives but leave them as mixed—very mixed. No use trying to make a hero of Tam.

Rexie took her way sadly back to the house, she had always been a favourite with everyone, she was indeed such a friendly soul that she made friends as naturally as a bee sucks honey. This was the first time she had come up against that dourness that is part of the Lowland Scot, particularly in those parts of the Borders where a suspicion of strangers is born in the blood and bred in the bone and where the spirit of righteousness is so strong as to be quite capable of cruelty.

At Lammerside forwardness or “forwardsomeness,” as they put it, was one of the deadly sins. Its folk liked to practise friendliness when the first signs came from themselves, but on no account must the stranger make the first moves, that was “forwardsomeness,” which had nothing whatever to do with the old, light-hearted English frowardness, but was a symptom of ignorance of what was right and proper to be sternly repressed. There, you not only had to make your beck and bow to enter the gates, you had to wait until invited to make them. Rexie's attempts at friendliness had, therefore, fallen on very stony ground. They were worse than useless, they were black marks against her. The first offers of friendship must come from the villagers themselves.

Gradually things grew worse and worse for Rexie. Totally ignorant of these laws of the Medes and Persians and hoping they would see she wasn't the bad woman they had thought, she kept trying to win them over by being kind and friendly, she might as well have tried to bend cold steel with her small fingers.

She was not only ignored in the bus, but an unfriendly silence settled down like a cold damp cloud wherever she went.

She tried going to the other shop near the bridge, kept by “the Leckies,” though the name “MacDougal” was over the window, making her first deadly error by calling Mistress Leckie, Mrs. MacDougal, though this insult might have been lived down had not her name been already a subject of scorn to the village. It was little use asking for anything there, it either “wasn't in” or “had been spoken for” or, at the best, served in a cold silence that chilled her heart.

She had to give it up, which was a great disadvantage as it was almost impossible to bring everything she needed from Presterby and she was

always running out of something. Luckily bread and milk and meat were delivered by vans.

But it was the post office that gave her the greatest discomfort, and humiliation. Of course, she could not be refused on the official side. She could buy stamps, postcards and such things, keeping tight lips as they were rudely pushed towards her, but she was never allowed to leave without some indirect sneer or insult. “Ye might shut the door—on the other side,” Mrs. Postgate would say as she was leaving, and if anyone came in after her, they were served first, even if the late-comer were a child it was asked, “What did *you* want, dearie?” while Rexie was allowed to wait.

She had still to call for her letters and parcels which were left by the mail van at the post office and taken round by a local woman who merely said, “Bendibus is no’ on my roond,” when asked about delivery.

Of her own stock Mrs. Postgate would sell Rexie nothing.

Yet it was all so indefinite she did not know what to do. Sometimes she began to think that she would have to go—and then she would say to herself, “No, I have done nothing to deserve being ostracised. I’ll try to bear it anyhow till John comes, and it would be a help to have Sally—if only Sally would come quickly.” But Sally still lingered and even Stratheilan seemed to have deserted her. Often as she hugged Mungo, a tear would drip on to his brown ear and many unshed tears were swallowed down with her daily bread.

CHAPTER VIII

“There’s a beck and there’s a bow”

ONE place Rexie did go to regularly and that was to “The Kirk.” She had always been used to going to church on Sunday mornings and she meant to keep up the custom even though it was not her own church but one of the many Scots ones whose differences she made no attempt to fathom.

The little kirk was some distance from the village and not very well attended. It had very hard narrow seats, with straight backs that seemed to push you off what space there was to sit on, but she liked the little, old minister, who she frequently met tramping long distances across the hills to visit his parishioners. He came to see her, too, and was sincerely kind, but she did not really count his visits as a friendly gesture, because, however nice he was, she felt they were duty calls.

Nevertheless, after he had gone the last time, she thought that she would speak to him about her ostracisation next time he came.

One Sunday, it was so lovely out of doors that she decided to make herself a sandwich after church and take a walk to a lovely spot she knew of where the Lammas Water narrowed to a gorge and the water took a leap over the rocks to a lower level before continuing its rush from the heathery uplands to the cornlands below. A pair of water-ousels had built a nest where the spray fell over the ferns and moss at the side of the fall, and she felt happy watching one of them as she ate her “piece.” He was diving for water snails, running under the water to pick one up and then climbing on a stone to break the shell, exactly like a thrush, and pick on the tasty morsel inside. Then a kingfisher flashed into sight like a green jewel, flying swiftly down the burn. He is the same green and blue, she thought, as a flame when you throw salt in the fire; as her eyes followed the flash they alighted on a heron standing like a statue, near some yellow flags, the grey of his feathers and the lovely lemon streak of his beak standing out clearly against the dark background of some rocks and blending in with the colours and shadows of the flags.

As she watched there was a sudden movement and then he rose with a big trout in his beak to settle on a stretch of green grass, beat the fish on the ground and then swallow it whole.

She was not used to country sights and sounds and sat fascinated, watching waterhens picking in and out the reeds on their long greenish legs, giving an occasional cluck and a jerk of their tails, or swimming leisurely back and forward, now in the swift water, now among the water crowfoot in the shallows by the bank. Sandpipers rushed hither and thither on a stretch of sand and pebbles, loudly piping all the time and a fly-catcher kept darting off his stance on an old tree trunk for flies. Even the water-wagtails, though old friends who loved her garden, interested her as they flew from stone to stone, flicking their tails all the time.

There was so much to fascinate her that she sat on and on. Behind her Mungo, in his explorations, had discovered a hole in the sandy, sunny bank, from whence came the warm, exciting smell of young rabbits. He had scratched and sniffed and dug with little excited whines and barks till now there was nothing but the tip of his tail to be seen.

Eloquent though it was of rapturous enjoyment she felt, as the sun began to dip over Lammas Rigg, that it was time they were making for home. He was far too far down the hole to hear whistle or call, so she had to grab his tail and pull—like pulling a door bell, she thought—till at last a ridiculous

object appeared, clogged up and covered with red earth and sand and with the hair all scraped off round his small black nose.

“I wish you saw yourself,” she said, severely. “Your own mother wouldn’t know you!”

But appearances did not worry Mungo. He made one or two attempts to dash back down the hole, but finding that was no use, lagged crestfallen behind till the sight of a large cock-pheasant in the brushwood on the hillside sent him dashing hopefully off to catch it. He was still young enough to be surprised and disconcerted every time a bird flew away just as he felt sure he had got it. You could see he felt that wasn’t sticking to the rules of the game.

She was going to top the rise when a muffled explosion made her start and turn round. As she had mounted upwards, a stretch of the river round the bend above the fall had come into her field of vision, and now lay exposed beneath her.

She was amazed to see a group of men there, excitedly rushing about the bank, and into the water and seemingly throwing stones out of the water. She stood frowning and puzzled for a minute, the wind blowing back her hair, her hand shading her eyes from the level beams of the setting sun which caught and dazzled them, then from her subconscious mind rose a half memory of having read or heard of a strange and cruel way of catching trout, absolutely forbidden by law. It was to dynamite the water, the resulting explosion killing all the fish in the vicinity. As this explanation of the scene came to her she took to her heels and went flying down to the river, Mungo excitedly following her with little excited barks and snappings.

As she neared she saw that the surface of the water was covered with dead fish, their white bellies floating upward. It was dead fish and not stones the men were throwing out of the water on to the sand and the grassy verge beside it.

They had their shoes and stockings off and the trousers of their Sunday suits rolled up above the knees of their white, hairy legs. At once she knew who they were, for now some talk of Tam’s came back to her of miners who came in groups to poach the water. Like all true sportsmen, Tam loathed, despised and detested what he considered unsportsmanlike methods of taking any creatures—bird, animal or fish. Indeed it roused him to fury. Clever poacher himself, he would no more have dynamited fish, shot a sitting bird, or killed a mother whose young depended on her than he would have shot a man and now, as she approached, something of Tam’s own fury boiled up and sent the hot blood seething through her veins.

At the edge of the group she stopped. The men had been too busy picking up the fish and cramming them into bags and creels to notice her, the wind had blown away Mungo's shrill little snapping barks, two men were even fighting over one poor little fish that each had grabbed at.

"How dare you? How dare you?" she shrilled.

Startled, they all looked up at the young fury shouting at them with high outraged voice and scornful eyes.

There was a moment's silence and then a thick-set man standing in the stream with his slightly bent legs wide apart and a fish in either hand, shouted at her:

"You get out of here!"

Immediately they all began to shout in chorus, "Yes, out o' here. Cut your sticks. This is none o' your business," with other rougher phrases.

But Rexie's blood was up, she stood her ground.

"Thieves!" she shouted. "Cads, to kill fish like that. I'll tell the police. I know who you are!"

Suddenly she remembered a small charabanc full of men that had passed her on the road returning from church. They had been drinking out of beer bottles and had thought it funny, seeing a girl alone, to greet her with whistles and chucks and hee-haws. "Donkeys," she had said to herself and thought no more about them.

But her quick eyes had noted a name on the vehicle, "Lamburn," the name of a mining village Tam had mentioned.

"You are miners from Lamburn."

Instantly the thick-set man left the water and came threateningly towards her, dropping the fish as he reached the grass and clenching his fists.

But there was the blood of the Border raiders in Rexie's veins, her mother had been a Dodds and she knew their shrill battle cry, "Yet! Yet! Yet!" Instead of retreating as he expected she took a step forward, she did not even shrink when he lifted his fist, but as she looked round at the other angry and threatening faces the first chill of fear stirred her hair. Not that she showed it, she did not move, but she knew she should not have mentioned the word "police" or told them she knew where they came from. She was all alone, she did not dare glance round, but she sensed the bare and empty hillsides all around her, the miners had chosen a safe place and there was no one to help her.

The man knew that, too, and took a step nearer. But he had reckoned without that little ball of fury and matchless courage, Mungo, the bull terrier

of the lion-hearted breed without fear and faithful till death. Like a streak of avenging fury he hurled himself through the air at the man's throat, hair up along his back, white teeth showing in a terrifying snarl. With a shriek of fear the man sprang back, but too late. Mungo was on him, his teeth showing, when the huge man, galvanised into action by his danger, grabbed him by the throat, pulled him off his shoulders and began throttling the little dog.

Then Rexie screamed, a long, terrible piercing scream, as she rushed forward and seized the man's iron-like wrists. She saw Mungo's despairing eyes as his tongue came out and gave another wild shrill scream.

Then she heard another shout, "Look out! the keepers!" and heard the men scattering. She heard dull blows, but all her mind was on Mungo and her efforts to wrench away those iron wrists. Suddenly, they loosened, Mungo dropped to the ground at her feet and she dropped with him and tried to gather him into her arms: his head fell back with a thud on the ground as if his neck were broken and with a moan she pushed her hands under it trying to raise him, her eyes turning round for help.

To her amazement it was not the police she saw, nor was it the thud of batons she heard. It was Tam her eyes first fell on, and then on Stratheilan. Both were armed with heavy sticks, three men were on the ground and Tam and Stratheilan were grappling with another two; the rest were making off. Even as she looked, the third man went down; Stratheilan leaped to Tam's help, but Tam needed no help and Stratheilan, springing forward, knelt on the ground and took Rexie's hands from Mungo's body. As he did so, Tam shouted and looking up she saw a posse of policemen and gamekeepers running down the hill.

"There's life in the old dog yet," said Stratheilan, a minute or two later, as poor Mungo began to come round under his quick attention.

Both he and Tam knew practically all there was to know about the treatment of animals, but Tam was helping the gamekeepers to round up the men and as soon as he saw signs of life in the puppy, Stratheilan joined the chase.

Both he and Tam seemed to be enjoying themselves hugely, they were both as lean and fit as greyhounds and what Tam lacked of Stratheilan's inches he made up for in hardness. The men had scattered and were running in all directions across the hillside, but they had no chance against the gamekeepers and their two helpers, who were not only quicker on their feet, but knew every nook and cranny of the hills.

Rexie lifted Mungo and tried to carry him, but Mungo was no light weight, he was no longer the soft fat puppy Stratheilan had carried to Bendibus but had already gained some of the brawn and muscle of his breed. After a moment she stumbled and they both came to earth and sat there, exhausted by their experiences.

All the fight had gone out of Rexie, and she wanted to cry, just to sit and sob and sob all the horror out of her mind of seeing the puppy being strangled while she struggled helplessly with those iron fists.

But Mungo was already recovering, though weak through the awful fight for air, once it began to flow freely and fill his depleted lungs he immediately perked up, but his legs were weak and wobbled under him when he tried to stand, so he lay there rather feebly licking her hand as if in apology for not having been able to worry the monster that had threatened her.

“We’ll take a rest,” said Rexie, looking round the now deserted hillside, “and then we’ll make for home,” and she pulled Mungo’s ears and rubbed her finger round them in the way that seemed to give him such exquisite enjoyment.

Suddenly she heard a shout and looking up saw Stratheilan running down the hill towards her. Her heart gave a leap at the sight. She had thought he would not get away till the men were all caught and locked up somewhere and the police had taken over.

She was sorry in a way, for she liked miners. She had met and had a great sympathy for them, since she could imagine nothing more dreadful than their work underground in the dark depths of the mines. If she had seen them having some sport and getting a few fish in ordinary ways of poaching, she would have turned a blind eye, but the cruelty and waste of simply destroying everything in a stretch of water had roused all her antagonism and her fighting spirit.

Scores of fish were uselessly killed, for it was only a few of the dead they could gather up.

“They didn’t even get any fun out of it,” she said to Mungo. “No skill was needed and they couldn’t have eaten all the fish they killed even if they could have got them. It was wholesale murder, that’s what it was.” But before Mungo could agree to all this with a weakly flapping tail, Stratheilan had leaped down the last scar and was beside her.

Rexie began to struggle to her feet, but he sat down beside her with one quick movement and putting an arm round her drew her swiftly against his side. She could hear the beating of his heart as her head came to rest against

his rough coat. He moved his arm round her shoulders, but so casually, that she was ashamed of feeling embarrassed. She felt he was merely making her rest comfortably without a thought beyond natural kindness, his whole attitude expressed nothing but a sort of impersonal helpfulness.

“Rest a moment,” he said. “It is all right, there is no hurry.”

Just for a moment she let her head rest. She knew it was just a brotherly hold in which he held her but—her heart was beating very unevenly.

“I’m all right now,” she said, quickly, but he held her just a moment longer.

“How soft and frail a girl’s shoulders are,” he said, smiling as he looked down at her. Then he let her go, but picked up her hand with its long slender fingers, delicately formed, though brown and stained now with sun and work, and looked at it with an amused and tender smile. “They are not made for fighting.”

“I was just going to *bite*,” said Rexie with such viciousness that he laughed, put out his arm in a swift movement as though he were going to press her against him again, then stopped and instead rose up and stooping, lifted her to her feet, saying something in a strange tongue.

“What was that?” she asked.

“I was saying you were the brave girl, but I was thinking——” he paused, “other things,” he finished, as she looked up, and he steadied her on her feet.

“That I wasn’t really brave,” she was going to say lightly to hide the sudden shyness that seized her, but realised the words were cheap as she looked into his serious eyes. They sounded too like fishing. “Was it Gaelic?” she asked instead.

“Yes, it was the Gaelic.” He pronounced it differently from what she did. “Now we shall go home. It will be dark soon on the hills.”

He lifted Mungo and put his other arm through hers.

They walked a few minutes in silence, then he asked:

“Have you heard from your brother?”

She shook her head. “No,” she said, “not yet—I wish he were home.”

“I also wish that he were home. There are many things I would speak to him about.”

“Not to me?” she asked, wonderingly.

“No, not to you.”

She looked up but his determined mouth was firmly closed.

She changed the subject.

“Did you get all the men? They used dynamite.”

“Yes.” Then he told her that Tam had seen them earlier on and warned the gamekeepers and telephoned the police and was rushing back to the river when they met on the hills and Stratheilan joined him. Tam had not seen Rexie or Mungo as she was sitting concealed by some rocks further up the water than he had reached, and Mungo was well down his rabbit hole. So it was a great surprise when they saw Rexie in the middle of a fracas with the miners on the banks of the stream.

They had meant to wait until the police arrived, just keeping watch as they were too late to prevent the mischief being done, but the sight of Rexie changed all that. They both had good strong sticks, and charged down the hill at once. Luckily two keepers and a shepherd were close behind, the keepers with their guns, so they managed to round them up.

“But I must have Mungo trained now,” he said.

“Mungo did very well,” said Rexie, indignantly. “He’s as brave as can be.”

“Of course, he’s a bull terrier, but he must learn a great many things. I shall leave Fan with you if your brother or your friends do not come soon, and take Mungo back to train him.”

“Oh, no,” said Rexie at once. “Fan is your dog. She would be miserable.”

He did not answer as Rexie stumbled just then, her weak ankle giving way as they crossed an outcrop of rough rocks and stones. He held her up and they paused a moment. Then he put Mungo down.

“I’ll carry you over this bit,” he said, “then it will be easier, we will just have the smooth slope down to Bendibus.”

“Oh, no! I can manage.”

It had now grown too dark for her to see his face very well, but his voice left her in no doubt of the fact that he had made up his mind and she had already discovered that, shy and hesitant as he might be in some ways, once he had made up his mind—well, that was that.

Having said he would carry her, he carried her. Before she could make any further protest, she was lifted up, carried across the rough stones with no more sentiment than he’d have carried Mungo or a bag of potatoes, it seemed, and set down on the top of the ridge up which she had been toiling, whence the hill rolled smoothly down to Bendibus.

"I'll get the tea," he said, as they entered; then, "Have you a bandage? That paw of Mungo's should have a little support."

He cut a small splint and set her to bind Mungo's fore leg where the skin had been torn in a flap exposing the bone, while he lit the fire, boiled the kettle and set the table according to his own ideas of that art.

In the warmth and brightness of the kitchen, the timidity and strangeness Rexie had felt on the dark hillside fled away, and soon they were cheerfully making toast together while she gave him a diverting account of her battle with the miners. He was soon shaking with laughter.

"I hit Bandylegs with a fish," she announced. "O, I wasn't doing nothing while you and Tam chased them. I laid Mungo down and got a big fish and hit that bandy-legged one slap, slap over his face while another was trying to murder Tam (Rexie's language never erred on the side of restraint). Then I lost it—fish are very slippery—but that was a good thing, for one of them put his foot on it and away went his legs in the air, and he sat down with awful swears! Awful! So I got another——"

He was laughing so much at this picture, that he dropped the toast.

"Butterfingers!" she said, and continued:

"And you know the fat one with the bald head? He got an eel!"

"Got an eel!"

"Yes, I couldn't see another big fish, but there was a dead eel—yards long—it was even better, you could *swing* it, you know—like this," she poked the slice of toast off her long-handled toasting-fork and jumping up swung it dramatically round her head, while he lay back in his chair, stretched out his legs and rolled about with laughter.

"And did you see Tam?" she went on. "Did you see him when *he* sat down among the fish? That was funniest because he couldn't see the funny side. He was just furious and then when he got up, a man was running at him with his head down to punch him in his middle and Tam swung out his fist—what great long arms Tam has, as long as the eel!—and just as he struck, the man slipped and shot out full-length on the ground and Tam lost his balance and spun round and put his foot on another fish—it was just where a basketful was dropped—and down he went again and there they sat looking at each other with long red solemn faces, so surprised they didn't even swear for a minute. . . . Of course, I wasn't wasting time. I kept picking up fish and throwing them—I did get some good slaps with those long ugly fish, what do you call them?"

"Pike!" He was drying his eyes with his pocket handkerchief.

“Yes, anyway they looked like that—Oh, it was a glorious victory—Do you know why?”

“You’d better tell me, I think.”

She was leaning forward, her fair hair sticking up like the feathers on the head of an angry canary, her eyes shining with the joy of battle. “Because the *fish* helped to win! Not much, of course——” she became suddenly thoughtful, “I’m always inclined to exaggerate, but they did help—and *that*,” she ended up, “is what I call poetic justice and a glorious victory. Gosh! I’m hungry. I could eat twenty of those fish, right away!”

This was said with such a sincere and regretful sigh that he went off into another shout of laughter, while she poured out the tea, eyeing him solemnly, till he stopped, then she smiled that wide disarming smile that could make her rather prim little face so fascinating.

“Of course I exaggerate,” she repeated, “I like to exaggerate. Do you know the difference between you and me?”

He sat up as she fired this question at him.

“Indeed, yes,” he said.

She waited for more, but nothing came, he had evidently said his say.

“You are always yourself, but I can never keep on being myself, however much I try. I mean, I keep doing things I didn’t mean to, and saying things I didn’t mean to. John says I speak first and then think. I do wish I could be more like you are in that way. John’s like that, too, a bit, and that’s why it’s so comforting to think of John.”

She was very serious now, the excitement of her recollections had faded out and the colour had left her cheeks so that you saw clearly the outline of her frail bones.

He sat looking at her without speaking.

“I am wishing,” he said, after a moment that seemed very long and tense and full of hidden meanings, “that you thought of me like that.”

His voice was very slow and deep.

She was silent, a surprised look slowly widening her eyes so that you saw the white below the blue iris.

Then he suddenly jumped up. “I must go,” he said.

He called to Fan and in another minute had shoved himself into his old Burberry and stood, with his red head bent, looking down at her with his slight smile, then he made that quick old-fashioned bow, and said in his stiff way, “I bid you good night,” and was gone.

“But not without a beck and not without a bow,” said Rexie to herself, with an attempt at lightness that did not quite come off.

“I wonder why his smile seemed sad,” she said to herself—and then sighed herself.

CHAPTER IX

“Weep no more, my lady”

“YOU mustn’t get to like him too well.”

Rexie opened her eyes and stared at the glimmering window-pane.

“What’s that?” she said, lifting her head from the pillow. “What’s that, I said? . . . I must have been dreaming. Goodness me, saying a thing like that.” She sat up with puzzled frown, trying to remember what she had been dreaming, but it was all gone, the dream was gone, only those few words left to worry her. “As if I would,” she announced so indignantly that Mungo, asleep in his basket, cocked up an ear and then prepared to spring across to her bed.

“No, you don’t! It’s not time to get up yet. It was just a dream awakened me, Mungo. Now, we’ll go to sleep again, it’s too early to be astir.”

She turned round and heard Mungo curl himself back in his basket. He knew as well as she did it wasn’t time to get up and that he had to keep quiet for a while yet. But he didn’t sleep; he lay curled round so that he could keep two bright eyes fixed on the still form in the bed. Something was the matter.

Rexie didn’t sleep either. She lay and listened to the sounds of early morning, the sparrows chattering under the eaves, a cock-crow from the village, a skylark jubilantly singing high above the young green corn of the lowlands, nearer, the short quick songs of the pipits—those hill larks that only rose singing a yard or two and then dropped back into the heather; grouse called, “Go back! go back!” and drummed near her windows. Among the fir-trees a pair of ring doves cooed their sweet monotonous call, “Tak two coos, Paddy, tak two-o coo-os”; a young sparrow, learning to fly, hit the window, and she heard the whistle of a shepherd guiding his dogs, but her thoughts would stray to that lost dream.

“I thought too much about him last night,” she said to herself. “It’s with seeing nobody else. When one doesn’t see anyone for weeks, of course, one goes on thinking about the merest caller—but to dream about him! . . . it was

a happy dream and then somebody said that—or I said it to myself, and I wakened. . . . Just as if I *would* like him too much! Why, I hardly know him and anyhow . . . anyhow, I don't belong to his kind of world. Now, I *will not* think another moment about a silly dream, I'll get up," and she threw back the clothes, jumped out of bed, colliding with Mungo, who had sprung from his basket at her first movement, smacked his ears for him and then drew the curtains.

To her disappointment it was raining, not heavily, just a silent misty rain, blotting out the hills and gathering in drops along the eaves and along edges of the bit of old wooden fence leading down to the dam where her uncle had put in his electric plant. It must have been an ugly place at first, she thought, but now it was all overgrown with tangles of honeysuckle, creeping vetches, and little yellow wild roses.

It wasn't seven yet. "Rain before seven, fine before eleven," she repeated hopefully and went off to her bath.

A few hours later she stood outside the post office in the shelter of the porch and glanced at her letters.

It was raining more heavily now or she would have waited till she was further away before looking at them, for she could feel Mrs. Postgate's sharp brown eyes boring into her back right through the door.

Something in Mrs. Postgate's look had made her think the post-mistress was particularly interested in her mail that day, so she turned them over quickly; there was a parcel, one or two magazines and several letters.

Suddenly her face went white and she began to make pell-mell for home without even thinking of opening her umbrella. One of the letters was covered with foreign post marks—it was from John. No doubt it was the one that had interested Mrs. Postgate.

Mungo was overjoyed at this sign of excitement and went racing along, now in front, now round about her, as if he'd taken leave of his senses, giving little joyous barks and leaping up as if he'd snatch umbrella and letters and all from her hands. He was learning to carry things but was still apt to lay them down if something more interesting hove in sight.

Rexie reminded herself as she ran that this might be an old letter, that had just been forwarded, that it might give her no recent news of John, that it was madness to get so excited before she had even opened it—nevertheless, with blood racing and heart wildly beating, she went splashing through the wet grass and heather of the short cut across the hill, and, once inside the house, rushed to the kitchen, where she sat down in her wet coat and tore open the envelope.

She was trembling all over and at first could hardly make out what it said. Swiftly she turned the pages—yes, John was safe, he was back from the interior, it wasn't just an old letter that had at last reached her after many wanderings, it had come direct and John, himself, was following.

Having made out so much she turned her head round to the back of the chair and had a good cry, what she herself called a "howl." There was no one there to see her and she knew she would feel better to let the tears come, to weep and weep and weep for a few minutes, emptying her heart of all the long grief, the months of anxiety and despair, the black hours when the fears that he might never come back had conquered her determination not to let them in to make her feel utterly bereft.

Mungo sat looking at her and then squirming up on to the chair, started to lick her face with his little warm tongue, and suddenly the storm was over as swiftly as it had begun.

"Gosh! what a fool!" she said to him. "Fancy crying when it's all over!"

She dried her eyes and beginning at the beginning read the letter all over again. John had had thrilling adventures and he and his companions had succeeded in their quest, but that must all wait until he came home when he would tell her all his story.

He had returned to their headquarters in Africa only to go into hospital, too exhausted even to read her letters, much less to write himself.

But he was rapidly recovering, indeed, expected to be well and on his way home before this letter reached her, so she might expect a telegram any day. He would wire on his arrival but would have to report at the office before coming on, but he would be with her as soon as ever he could get away and the fastest train could bring him.

He had had her own letters and those of the lawyers about Bendibus. Lord! what a surprise and what glorious news! He wasn't going to sell Bendibus for all the tea in China. Besides he did not need to. Two publishers had already wired to him about a book on his experiences, and he was going to make that book such a success that even her straight locks would curl with surprise at the shekels that would come rolling in!

"Goose," commented Rexie, smiling. When happy, John always boasted with great glee. He said he enjoyed boasting, it gave him an appetite for his meals. John, though as thin as a lath, liked good food.

Bendibus would be an ideal place for writing his book; he could give up his regular newspaper work, as he'd manage to earn enough to keep them both in a simple way—now they had a house over their heads—by free-lancing till his first book was finished, or longer if necessary. He had

material for several books. Meanwhile, Rexie was, of course, to use his £50; it was hers, he gave it to her.

His letter overflowed with good spirits and happiness and she thrilled as she read it, for, much as his other successes and prospects pleased him, it was the thought of Bendibus that pleased him most of all, a place where he could write in peace. Like Rexie, he loved the country, a love inborn in them both.

She was so interested in her letter from John and reread it so often that it was long after her usual tea-time when she began to feel hungry and not until after she had had it that she started on her other letters.

There was not only a lengthy epistle from Sally, but one from each of the children also, all three boiling over with excitement about coming to Bendibus and all the joys that awaited them there.

Sally now thought, however, that she would wait herself till the children got their holidays and all come together. Easter was very late this year, which was all to the good, as the weather would probably be warmer for the picnics, the bathing, the fishing and all the other fun they looked forward to.

Having read these letters she left the others, most of which had typed addresses and did not arouse the slightest interest in her mind, which was too full of John and Sally for anything else.

But, now that the first excitement was over, she began to think of the village and the position she had got herself into with the people in the district, and the more she thought of it the more worried she became.

John was hot-tempered and would be furious at any aspersions cast upon his sister and, far from helping her, that might just make matters worse. He would resent Mrs. Postgate's attitude and John would be needing the post office almost daily, it being practically his only link with all his activities in the outer world. She simply must get things put right before he came. There was Sally, too, and the children. How dreadful if they all found themselves ostracised by the community around them, they were all such friendly souls. John, too, would immediately want to know all the men folk, to go down to the inn and have a glass of beer, play darts and chess, and be hail-fellow-well-met with everyone he saw.

How could she face the thought of the dour looks he might meet if the men were as down on his sister as the women. Sally, too, was so friendly and sociable—and then, there were the children! Would the other children not play with them?

If only it had been something she could explain and be done with, but it was all so vague, and all treated as if being unmentionable. Whenever she

had tried to put things right by asking what was the matter or even suggesting that she knew what was the matter and wanted to explain, every woman drew into her shell and looked as if Rexie had not only committed the unpardonable sin but was adding to her outrage against their stern morals by having the effrontery to mention it. So she was either met by a devastating silence or some side remark that was a veiled insult.

She was so alone, too, in this horrible predicament into which she had got herself—if only there were someone she could discuss it with!

Even if Sally came before John and she told Sally, she felt it would be useless. Sally was town bred and would never understand how serious it was. Sally would laugh. She could imagine Sally almost going into hysterics with amusement over the thought of their prim and simple Roxana Mary getting herself into such a mess. They were always laughing at her simplicity. It would be a tremendous joke to them.

Yes, Sally would only see the funny side or, at least, it would sweep her off her feet in such gales of mirth at her first realisation of the incredible thing that had happened to the “wee, modest, crimson-tippet flower,” as she had more than once called an infuriated Rexie, that it would be difficult to get her to be serious again.

She might even—and Rexie flushed scarlet at the thought—she might even try to tease Stratheilan about it! Rexie could imagine nothing more awful or more humiliating. She would threaten to kill Sally if ever she mentioned it to him.

No, she had nobody and John would be so furious he would simply see red and want to “lay about him,” to use one of his own expressions, while Sally would explode with laughter.

Then there was Stratheilan himself.

She sat a long time with her elbows on the table, hands clasped, and chin on her hands, thinking of Stratheilan.

As far as she was aware, he did not know how she was being ostracised by the village and district. Perhaps he might be able to do something if he did.

She had sat for some time, fixed in a frowning study, when a quick bark and an excited rush to the window by Mungo, who knew enough now to climb on a chair with paws on the window-sill and nose at the glass to get a view down the valley.

As she glanced up, his tail began to wag and his body to tremble with excitement, while a series of anxious whimpers and barks told her who was coming.

The rain had now turned into a driving mist through which, when she came to the window, she saw the figure of Stratheilan with Fan at his heels, descending the hillside beyond the garden.

She went and set the door open, both as a welcome and to let the excited Mungo go off to greet his master. Then she rushed back to clear away her tea things, reset the table for two and put a dish of rice and tomatoes she had prepared into the oven.

She was feeling so lonely and so upset about the situation she hoped he would stay to supper, even if it did make things blacker against her.

Except for Stratheilan's rare calls, she had been alone now for several weeks with no one to speak to and not a single visitor, unless one counted a duty call from the old minister. Doubtless, Stratheilan came as seldom as possible to prevent any talk, but it was all quite useless, the harm was done.

Suddenly, as she waited at the door, she made up her mind to tell him all about it and ask his advice. He *must* stay to supper.

She was emptying a dish of potatoes into the frying-pan, when she heard him mount the steps and went out to greet him and Fan.

Both man and dog were soaking; the wet was streaming down his brown cheeks and running off Fan's white back. His old mackintosh, however, though stained and shabby, was of the best make, so his tweed suit was dry, while a rub down soon comforted Fan, who loathed being wet and would run to seek a towel if one was not immediately forthcoming.

Laughing, he scrubbed his own wet hair till it stood more on end than ever, while Rexie attended to Fan's.

"You are going to stay to supper," she announced, "though I've nothing but a risotto made with tomatoes and rice."

"I brought you a bird or two," he said, throwing some game on the chest on the verandah. "Can you pluck them? They must hang a little or I would do them for you."

"I expect Tam can," said Rexie, and they both laughed. There was no doubt whatever that Tam could do anything with a bird from catching it to eating it.

Stratheilan immediately noticed that she was limping. He had not come back to attend to her foot himself, but had sent the District Nurse with some stiffening sort of bandage that had been a great comfort.

"I must have a look at that foot," he said.

"But I've got my stockings on," said Rexie simply, and he instantly understood that the proprieties which would allow him to examine her bare

foot in a sandal might be outraged by her taking off her stocking.

“It would be a good deal better for your ankle to wear sandals always and not those high-heeled shoes,” he said severely.

“Yes, I do,” she said, “only I’ve been to the village and I never go there without stockings in case they shouldn’t be pleased—they don’t like me as it is.”

Rexie thought this remark a good opening to the subject on her mind, but he did not make any comment for a few moments, though the deep tan of his face darkened to a redder tinge.

“Why do they not like you?” he asked at last, and then to save her the embarrassment of answering, said quickly himself, “Is it because of Mrs. Postgate’s mistake that morning?”

Rexie nodded for the quick tears had pricked her eyelids and constricted her throat.

He drew his chair up close to hers and put his arm along the back of it.

“I came to-night because of that,” he said. “I saw Tam this morning. I have been thinking of what to do.”

It was a sort of heavenly relief to Rexie, even to hear him say that in the calm matter-of-fact way of one to whom difficulties were merely something to be overcome—not to speak of the relief of having her troubles shared.

She glanced at his broad shoulders and realised, rather to her surprise, that their very breadth and strength were somehow a comfort, they looked so well able to shoulder any troubles.

“Oh!” she said, and her eyes filled. “I’ve been so lonely about it.”

He bent down to see her face.

“Have you, little Bird-alone?”

She gave a tremulous smile at the epithet. “What a nice word!”

“Is it? It’s from *The Grey Steel Knight*.” A pause. “I know many nicer ones.”

Something in his voice made her draw back, a little frightened; he saw it at once and lifting his hand from her chair dived into his jacket pocket and drew out a few feathers and a ravel of silk threads.

“I was making some flies for the fishing,” he said. “I must teach you to catch the trout, not with the worm, but with the flies.”

She had guessed by now that when his speech took a Gaelic twist, however calm and matter-of-fact he might appear, he was either shy or feeling something deeply.

She was feeling shy herself and to hide it said quickly the first thing that came into her head.

“If I only knew what to do.”

“Tell me all about it,” he said at once, keeping his eyes fixed on a feather from which he was delicately stripping the fronds.

Oh, I shouldn’t have said that, Rexie thought, the moment the words were out of her mouth; it’s like asking for help. But she had said it and now he was waiting for her to go on, so Rexie plunged in. Once she had begun, it was fatally easy for her to go on. Rexie was a born raconteur. She could describe, she could appreciate any touch of humour, even against herself, and she was a perfect mimic: a dialect, a habitual pose, any peculiarity of speech or manner were repeated as to the manner born. She just could not help, in repeating Mrs. Postgate’s words, *being* Mrs. Postgate; it was as if she held up a looking-glass, and there the post-mistress was, every intonation, every flitting expression of her face reproduced. The same with Tam, with the woman who took round the letters, with “Leezie Lindsay” or Mrs. Taylor of Howden.

Stratheilan simply had to laugh again and again. Tragic though the whole thing might be it was irresistibly funny to hear Mrs. Postgate’s snort, to see Rexie’s small nose twisted to one side in the long-drawn sniff of Leezie Lindsay, or her slender eyebrows jerk up over a pair of queer eyes that somehow managed to be Tam’s.

Rexie herself never smiled, once well away, she went from scene to scene, till Stratheilan had the whole sorry and ridiculous affair before him.

Tam had also told him a great deal that Rexie did not know. Mrs. Postgate’s immediate examination of the ground to find out what footsteps had led to or from Bendibus on that snowy morning, his own observations and many extracts from the highly coloured tales that were going about, so that Stratheilan had a more complete knowledge than anyone else perhaps of all that had passed and all that was still going on.

But he said nothing of all that to Rexie, who, when she had completed her tale, immediately plunged into her anxieties about John and Sally and the children, and her fears that her sins would be visited on their innocent heads and all of them ostracised in their turn.

“If I could only do something,” she said, “like putting a notice in the paper that I am quite a good person and not a scarlet woman. But when I tried to explain that to Mrs. Postgate, she drew herself up and said she had no wish to discuss anything with me, and then suggested that it was my own evil conscience that made me want to talk. ‘I ken what I ken,’ she said.”

He sat for a long time saying nothing, seemingly intent on binding a piece of green silk round a few grey fronds.

At last he got up and walked to his favourite stance at the window, where he stood frowning and looking out at the misty hills.

"I must make the supper," she said, at last, and rising, came forward to the stove, but as she reached it he stepped towards her and taking her hands, lifted them and holding them in his own against his old jacket, said softly:

"You know, Roxana, don't you, that I love you—— Will you marry me?"

Rexie jumped like a startled hare. She was so utterly taken by surprise that for once she had nothing to say; she just stared at him, her eyes wide open, a lock of her straight, fine hair falling over her brow.

"I have startled you," he said, deprecatingly, and frowned. "I did not mean to ask you so soon, not till after your brother came home. I meant to give you more time, but . . ." he paused, and then went on rather hurriedly, yet hesitating at every few words. "You see, if you would become . . . engaged to me now . . . just between ourselves . . . we could go off to Carlisle and be married. Then we could just say we were married—we need not say when—you see, I have loved you ever since I saw you, ever since you stood in the snow in your little round hat and asked me to take you to Lammerside. See——" he put his hand in his breast pocket, brought out the two-shilling piece she had given him and held it in the palm of his hand, "I would not part with anything you gave me."

"But," gasped Rexie, "you *can't*. I mean, you don't know me, not really——"

"No? But I know everything about you." His voice, lingering on the words, had all the indulgent softness of Romeo's when he assured Julia that the sun was the moon if she would have it so. "I know how you turn your little head if a bird sings, how you bite your lip with your two white teeth when you've said something too quickly, without thinking, how your lashes shadow your cheeks, how the gold of your hair falls over your brow—I have always wanted to touch it, putting it so, behind your small ear——" he lifted a stray lock and put it gently in place.

She looked timorously up at him, all her usual bold front gone for the moment. Only his head was bent as he stood upright and gazed down with smiling tenderness into her eyes.

Did she like him? She asked herself quickly, and the answer came at once. Oh, *yes*, she did; she did like him very much—but *marry* him! Marry! She had never thought of marrying anyone yet! Marry Mr. Stratheilan!

(Involuntarily she put in the Mr., forgetting at the moment that it should have been Mr. Urquhart, if anything.) Why, she did not know him. She had never spoken his Christian name, Ewen, a strange name! and this was the first time he had used hers.

“Do not say anything,” he continued in a low voice. “We will leave it now.”

He attempted no caress or endearment, she was too like a shy bird ready to fly off at the slightest movement.

He turned towards the fireplace. “Now we shall just be friends.” He spoke more naturally. “I shall tell you what I have thought and planned and then Fan and I shall go away and you will think it all over, that is, if you do not hate me too much for what I have done—spoiling your life here when you were so happy.”

“Oh, no!” protested Rexie at once, rushing to his reassurance with her usual enthusiasm for putting people at their ease. “Of course not. Of course you didn’t! I mean, it was as much my blame as yours, and I do like you. I like you very much, only I couldn’t . . . but it was awfully kind of you to ask me. I mean, even if you felt you ought to because of what people were saying, it was most awfully kind of you to . . . to take the risk, and I *am* grateful.”

“Oh,” he turned quickly away, and said something in Gaelic that sounded remarkably like “Damn it all!” or words to that effect. “That is just what I was afraid of.”

“Afraid of? How?” She had gone towards the oven after her little speech, but turning, stood still and stared at him. “Don’t you like me to like you and be grateful to you?”

“No.”

He almost shouted the word at her and the crest of red hair above his forehead rose like an angry eagle’s.

Rexie’s quick temper rose also.

“Well, you ought to. I don’t think you are being reasonable——”

“No, I am not being reasonable.” He interrupted her. “I have no wish to be reasonable. You will be saying I am being polite next.”

“Well, you were, but you’re not now——”

“I was not!”

He took a stride and before she knew what he was going to do he put an arm round her, drew her close to him and with his other hand tilted up her chin, so that she had to look up into his fierce blue eyes.

“Don’t you understand? Don’t you understand how it is? I am telling you that I love you and you say I am being polite.” His voice began roughly and then suddenly deepened into such feeling that she shrank a little against him, thrilled and yet frightened.

He held her a moment, then loosened his arm. “No, you do not understand,” he said, and gently put her away. There was acceptance in his voice and no reproach, but somehow she felt as if she could have cried—and cried. For what she did not know. It was as if she somehow had been tried and found wanting. Not tried by him, for he was not judging her, but perhaps by Fate.

“But——” she cried, then faltered, knowing it was too late. Something, some magic in the air, had blown near and passed over, stirring her heart—in its passing.

“Now we shall have supper and talk,” he said in quite a changed voice, a voice from which all sentiment was driven. “Now we shall be sensible, and I am telling you what I am thinking.”

She noticed the Gaelic tendency and that his hand, resting on the table, was trembling a little. But she was relieved at his words, though still terribly embarrassed, and when, as if quite aware of that, he began talking quickly about macaroni cheese, she rose at once to the occasion. He had forgotten that it was rice and tomatoes—some dread mixture she called rizotto—and she could have laughed if laughing had been possible, as he remarked with great assurance, “Fan and I smelt macaroni cheese as soon as we got near the house—didn’t we, Fan? And we decided then and there we would stay to supper. Is this the cloth for the oven door?” He lifted one of her best tea towels—and from that moment embarrassment fled.

“Don’t you dare take my good tea towel!” She jumped up and rescued it, pushing the coarse oven cloth into his hand. “My Certes, you haven’t the sense you were born with!” They both laughed at her mimicry, and the ice that had been gathering round to freeze their intercourse was shattered into splinters.

“Do you like nutmeg on your *macaroni cheese*?” she asked, very innocently.

“Yes, I do,” he assented cheerfully. “I love it.” Then, after a moment’s pause, “What is it?”

“It’s a *nut*,” she replied severely. “How can you like it if you don’t know what it is?”

“Because you like it.”

"Well, I don't on sweet puddings, but I do on macaroni cheese—you tell me how you really like it and don't be a goose."

"Fine," said he, eating up his rizotto of rice and tomatoes and wondering what the devil this "macaroni cheese" was—*he* couldn't taste any cheese. "The nutmeg is a great improvement," he ventured.

"Liar!" said Rexie. "It isn't macaroni cheese, and you never smelt macaroni cheese, and I don't believe you know what macaroni cheese is."

He lay back and laughed. "A bad break," he said, "but I did wonder where the cheese was." He paused, looking sideways at it. "Nevertheless, it is very good. It is very good because you are there, because you are sitting beside me eating it, because you made it—because you have laughed at me again."

"But not because it's nice," she said, mischievously, but he was determined not to be caught.

"Yes, it is nice," he assured her gravely. "I like puddings."

"You're just a gomeril!" Rexie didn't know whether to be more insulted or outraged. "That's adding insult to injury. Pudding indeed! It's a wonder you didn't ask for the sugar—— We'd better have some coffee or this is going to come to blows."

But Rexie was herself again, her shyness flown. In two minutes she was off, airing her opinions about flavourings, about cheese, about tomatoes. Rexie was never short of opinions and aired them with such *éclat* that nobody minded. Like John's boasting, they seemed to give her an appetite, too, for the dish was empty when she exclaimed, "My! what an appetite you have—you've eaten all my to-morrow's dinner!"

He was too used to Rexie's forthrightness for this accusation to embarrass him.

"I shall pluck you a wood-pigeon," he said easily and passed his cup for a second cup of coffee.

It was not till this was finished that he returned to their affairs. Rexie had been half hoping he would say no more about them, but nothing seemed further from his mind than to leave them unsettled.

As he rose to fill her cup again, he asked if he might smoke.

She had never seen him actually smoking, but she knew he did so, because he so often took his pouch and pipe from his pocket absent-mindedly, only to put them back unused.

She had thought it might be one of his old-fashioned ideas not to smoke "when ladies were present," but it was a cigarette case filled with cigarettes

that he took from his pocket and held out to her.

“But you smoke a pipe! Do smoke your pipe.”

He shook his head. “My tobacco is very strong, it would fill your room with smoke.”

But it was plain to be seen he was not at ease with a cigarette. He took a few puffs, then jammed it out and threw it in the fire. Then he clasped his hands between his knees and leaned forward.

“I must be telling you now,” he said a little awkwardly, and with a shy air of constraint, “all that I was intending to tell your brother.” There was a brief silence, and Rexie felt the colour mounting to her cheeks as he went on:

“I am not a rich man, but I have sufficient to keep my wife in simple comfort when I marry——”

“Oh, but——” began Rexie, and then stopped. He had asked her to listen to what he had to say, so she would.

He pulled a feather from his pocket and started carefully stripping its fronds, as though he liked to have his hands employed while he considered what he was saying. His voice was a little stiff as though he were speaking from a sense of duty, and had thought it all out beforehand. “My home, it is in Morne, a little island we call Eileen Morne, or Eileen Sgid Cladaich—the island of drift-wood.” His voice was very tender as he repeated the name and suddenly she realised how deeply he loved his island home and also that he spoke so stiffly when he was moved, because English was a second language to him—the language of the head, but not of the heart. That probably, as a child and boy, he had run about chattering in Gaelic with the other youngsters and only used English at school, or with his family at home until he was grown up. It accounted for those pauses at times, as if making sure of the best words to use.

Indeed, as if in answer to her thoughts, he now said a few words in Gaelic and then looked up. “I am saying ‘little loved island of the drift-wood from the sea,’ and I am wishing I could talk to you in the Gaelic—*then* you would marry me—and not because of what Mrs. Postgate might say!”

He paused again and looked at her with a rueful smile.

“But you would love Morne. My home there is called Stratheilan, and I shall be engaged in fur farming there. I want to start the industry, not only for myself but for the island, because it is a very, very poor island. That is why I am with Mr. Storrs studying the work and the suitable fur-bearing animals.”

He twisted a bit of silk deftly to make the body of a fly, and then looked up rather deprecatingly. "Forgive me talking of my furs and myself. You understand now, do you not, that my surname is Urquhart—Ewen John Jean Urquhart (the Jean is from my French great-great-grandmother's favourite brother), so I am a little bit French," he smiled, and then went on, "I wished to tell your brother all this, but I must tell you now, because we cannot wait till he comes, it must all be settled by then."

She gave a little gasp but he did not seem to notice.

"I thought we could go to Carlisle where my widowed stepmother lives, and be married there, where we are not known. You understand, this is my plan for you to think over. I can arrange everything and after that it will be easy. I think I have told you that the Storrs do not take married men, I am older, too, than the students usually are. I am twenty-eight years old. So I could say that for those reasons I had kept our marriage a secret, that will easily be believed as it has happened at Storrs before. The people here will not bother about the exact date of our marriage, indeed, I am thinking they would all be glad to be friendly if their strict morals had not been offended against. If we were married . . ." he glanced up at her and then continued with his fly-making without speaking.

A few moments passed in silence because Rexie did not know what to say. "From the way he speaks," she thought ruefully to herself, "you'd think I was straining at a camel when there is only a gnat to swallow."

"Is there anything you would be wishing to ask me?" he inquired gravely at last.

She shook her head. "I don't think——" she faltered, then stopped. Never for a moment had she really thought of marrying him. She was not only surprised, but alarmed, that he still seemed to be taking his proposal seriously. She had thought of it as a *beau geste*, a chivalrous offer to be made, refused, with thanks of course, and done with. But, not at all! Here he was going on with his proposals and arrangements as if . . . well, as if she *might* consider them, to say the least of it.

But before she could finish her halting sentence, he had shoved his gear into his pocket and risen.

"It is too sudden for you," he said. "I will go now, but—you will think it over—you will think how easy it will make everything just to bear my name—and that is all it shall be—it will be a Scots marriage I will see about, a marriage that could easily be annulled. I think there is one that is only perfectly legal if one goes before some official to sign some papers. We might leave that out in the meantime, then be quite properly married in

church later on, if——” he paused, and she looked up, “when you love me,” he said boldly.

“But—listen,” she gasped quickly, “I’ve said No, I couldn’t, and I do mean it.”

“But you had not heard what I had to say, now you will think it over.”

He said nothing more but called to Fan, picked up his gun-bag and then held out his hand.

He held hers a moment longer perhaps than was necessary, but that was all.

Then she was watching him go down the steps. He put his hand in his pocket, pulled out an old battered tweed hat and looked at it a moment in surprise, “As if,” she said to herself, “he expected it to be a guinea-pig or a rabbit,” and then pulled it on to his head to get rid of it and strode off across the hills without a glance behind him.

She made her way back to the kitchen, which was now more like a large, roomy sitting-room, since she had removed so many pieces of furniture and banished all the kitchen utensils into the scullery below.

Slowly she washed up and put her few dishes away on the dresser, where, though they looked very well, they reminded her that they were quite inadequate for four extra people and that she would have to lay in a stock of china and other things before her “family” arrived.

There was to be a sale in a few days, however, at a near-by farm. The farmer was leaving for Australia and everything on the farm and in the house was to be sold.

She had decided to go in spite of the fact that all the village would be there, a sale being one of their rare entertainments. Not only would the things be cheap but it would be much easier to get them to Bendibus from a place so near at hand than from the town.

Having renewed her determination to go she made out a list of the things she most needed and then, like Mr. Pepys, went soberly to bed.

CHAPTER X

“Madam, will you talk?”

Madam, will you walk and talk with me?”

“WELL, there’s one thing,” said Rexie to Mungo, “he’ll make you into a bidable dog and that’s what you certainly are *not*—besides, there’s your

ears!”

Mungo sat beside her on a chair while she prepared jugged hare for their dinner, which was to be an evening meal, seeing that they were both going to the sale, which opened at twelve but might go on for ever as far as Rexie knew.

She had certainly asked Tam how long the sale would go on and Tam had said, “Till a’ ’oors,” which had left her as much in the dark as ever. It was Tam who had brought the young hare, skinned it, cut it up into joints and told her to make it into *proper* jugged hare.

“How?” asked Rexie, and Tam, who prided himself on being a better cook than any woman, gave her full particulars, which she had written down and was now studying at intervals between preparing the dish and talking to Mungo, who was to return very shortly to Storrs to be trained and to see what could be done about his brown ear which drooped a little.

But mentioning Storrs had sent her thoughts speeding in that direction, and as she put the brown jar into the oven to cook slowly away until whichever of the “a’ ’oors” it was needed, she wondered if Stratheilan would be at the sale.

It was not likely, she thought, but there was always the chance of his going to pick up some odd implement or tool and if he did she would see him, and perhaps he would walk home with her, in which case she must, of course, ask him to have supper and the jugged hare—though not for a moment would she have confessed to having thought of that—would just be the very thing, for, even though it was a small hare, it was too much for two persons (Mungo being the second and by no means the least important of the two). Having finished her preparations she sat down to put on her strong shoes, but her mind flew off again, off to Storrs and to Stratheilan.

She was not thinking about marrying him, she had never really considered that, but simply about *him*.

About the way his red hair sprang off his forehead with such fierce vitality, about the way she would have liked to press it down with her hand to see if it sprang up again as she lifted it. About his size, she had always thought—from listening to John on the subject—that small men were harder and more masculine than big men who, said John, were often soft. There was no doubt that the short wiry man was often intensely strong and masculine, but John himself, though six feet long, was anything but soft, although his profession of writer was not one that required, or produced, physical hardness, and Stratheilan was surely the outstanding exception to

John's rule for he was as hard as he was big—and that was saying something.

Of course, she would rather have a very strong slight man than a very big softy, but it would be very nice to have your own man both big and hardy—not that Stratheilan would ever be her own man. She had quite made up her mind—for the hundred and ninety-ninth time—that she would not marry him under *any* circumstances *whatever*, and for the nine hundred and ninety-ninth time she had decided that she would think no more about it. Her mind was made up, there was nothing more to be said—or thought.

Having reached this unalterable decision, she straightway went on to compare John with Stratheilan. John was tall and lanky, Stratheilan, tall and close knit. Neither of them had an ounce of superfluous flesh on their bones, but John, bless him, stooped, and his long lean figure gave no impression of strength and virility though he was anything but a weakling, but Stratheilan had a taut look, as if holding back a force that might flash out like lightning. . . . Her disjointed thoughts went on again: he held his head high, indeed slightly thrown back, which made that gesture of his particularly appealing when he bowed it to listen to her or to greet her, or to say good-bye, a gesture both humble and proud, neither a beck nor a bow, but something as slight as the one and as impressive as the other. Oh, well, she wasn't going to think about him. . . . Perhaps it was that shyness of his that was so attractive, she wasn't shy herself, except in bits and pieces. He made her shy though, but her shyness wasn't like his, hers was awkward and her face got red, he was proudly shy, like a deer. Perhaps he ought to be teased and laughed at to cure him of that Victorian oddness of his—it might be fun to tease him a little, partly because of the sense of danger!

He's so old-fashioned, she repeated to herself, I'm sure he believes in "ladies"—in women being made of finer clay than men and needing to be delicately and fearfully handled in case they break—"just come away in their hands." She smiled, then pulled herself up impatiently, but she could not help herself, her mind always returned, not so much to her problems about him, as to Stratheilan himself. She shied off immediately when it came to considering his plans, she simply would not consider them. "I couldn't even *think* about it," she had said, and it was true. But he always seemed to be there, at the back of her mind, sometimes very much to her chagrin, for she was always declaring she would not think about him.

She said it again now and jumped up to romp with Mungo, who was certainly getting a bit spoiled. Fan thought so and had more than once given her offspring a nip with her sharp teeth that sent him shrieking and flying beneath the dresser for safety.

“That’s what he needs,” Stratheilan had hard-heartedly declared. “Fan and I will have to take him in hand as soon as your brother arrives to look after you.”

She had decided to be at the sale in time for the opening, the things had been on view the day before and there were a great many odds and ends that she would like. She had arranged with Tam to have them carted over to Bendibus, but there was no one she could ask to bid for her and they might be auctioned at any time, so it behoved her to be there in time and to be prepared to stay to “a’ ’oors.”

She had taken John’s fifty pounds out of the bank for they had always pooled their resources. Indeed, neither of them had any money sense, it was Sally who had looked after the money when they had the flat together and doubtless it would be Sally who straightened things out when she came, for somehow, it seemed to Rexie, money seemed to go just the same whether you spent it or not.

This was one of the bits of wisdom with which she had solemnly regaled Stratheilan, much to his amusement. He was a Highlander of course, so he could laugh over money, it is only your true Lowland Scot who cannot laugh about such a solemn subject.

Rexie wished that Sally had been there to go with her to the sale, they would have enjoyed it so much together. Sally had an unerring instinct for what was a bargain, and what was not. But the sale was to-day and she needed the extra dishes, cutlery, pans and so forth for their coming, so she pulled herself together, assured herself that there was nothing to be really afraid of as nobody would kill her, and taking the largest basket she could find, she set off.

It was a glorious spring day, so she put on a grey country suit that had gone straight to the pawnbrokers after a visit to the cleaners, a striped silk shirt, strong shoes and a grey felt hat. The outfit had come from Sally’s shop, so had distinction in every line.

It was the first time she had really dressed to go out since she came to Bendibus. A coat over her frock had done for shopping and for church she had thought it best to be a little on the dowdy side, so she thoroughly enjoyed the feeling of being becomingly and suitably turned out and tripped quite gaily along the road with her big green basket, enjoying the sunshine and the change from muddy roads and sopping grass to dry springy turf and dusty lanes.

Mungo, hysterical with joy, raced along beside her, chasing birds, butterflies or rabbits with equal gusto. Rexie had not taken the high road

from the village to the farm but a quieter by-road. It was lonely, but secure from disparaging eyes, as all the village people naturally took the shorter and better road, and it suited Mungo down to the ground as he needed no lead to keep him safe from cars, but could roam the hillside or hunt the hedges to his heart's content.

Rexie was very shy of the village folk now, so shy that when she reached the top of the hill from which she could see the farm and all its outlying buildings, she stood hesitating before making the descent.

Indeed as she saw the roads and paths converging on the farm, all lined with hurrying folk, and observed the friendly groups chatting together, hailing each other from a distance, or laughing as they gathered round the "lots" set out in yard and field, she almost turned back. It was all so friendly and happy seen from her hill-top, and suddenly she felt desperately lonely and cut off—a peri outside the gates peering at the joy of others. There would be no welcome for her if she went down, no friendly voice would hail her from near or far, no laughing joke greet her appearance in her fresh rig-out.

No, she knew full well the silence that would fall on every group as she drew near, the cold critical eyes that would watch every movement, the whispers or over-loud remarks that would follow her departure to another part of the field.

All at once she thought of Stratheilan's solution. For the first time it came to her that it really was a solution that he had offered. That he had seriously meant it as such, that it was no *beau geste* to him, but had been gravely thought out and considered as the perfectly natural and sane way out of her difficulties. For the first time she actually pictured to herself the difference it would make to have her reputation cleared, her good name restored.

Only those who have lost them understand to the full what precious things an unsullied name and reputation are. At that moment Rexie felt that she would do anything to have her own good name restored, to be able to go down among those upright village people with her head held high and with no fear of what her reception would be.

A good name, she reflected wistfully, is worth anything, it is one of the fundamental things, for without it your life is like the house built on sand, you have no foundation to build security and happiness on.

Perhaps she did not quite put her thoughts into these words, but that was the gist of them, for Rexie, for all her light-hearted ways, was no nit-wit, she

was young but she could think and use her brain and always kept her wits bright and keen.

She knew that it was the truth that Stratheilan had spoken when he said he was sure the people in the district would have liked to be friendly. She knew they would, for they all were so nice to her until they heard the rumours about her. Apart from that she knew they liked Bendibus to be occupied, especially by someone from the outside world. Her brother's name was pretty well known even in that out-of-the-way spot, because of his regular articles in the popular Sunday paper edited by his famous newspaper firm, which was a favourite in the district. To have a sister of John Drew living in the village would have given it some standing in the outside world—if they could have talked about it. She had had lots of indications of that sort just before the rumours had spread.

Then she herself always got on well with people. She was friendly and open-hearted and intensely interested in all the simple everyday things of life, and had as keen an appreciation of their importance as the folk concerned themselves.

She liked people—in other words, she loved her neighbour as herself—not in any saintly, self-conscious manner but just because she was made that way, she was one of the warm-hearted at whose glow people of all kinds liked to warm their fingers.

This made her feel her ostracisation all the more keenly, and now she suddenly said to herself, “Oh, if I could only have done it!” and allowed herself to consider Stratheilan's proposal seriously for a moment. But only for a moment. “It wouldn't be fair to him even if I could do it,” she sighed, “for, of course, he had to ask me, it would have been going against his code not to—poor lamb!”

With that she went forward, propelled partly by the desire to run away from her own thoughts, for they had a way of leading her into all sorts of unexpected by-paths, including some strangely thrilling ones into which she had no intention of straying.

If she had expected any relaxing of the attitude towards her, she would have been disappointed, so it was as well that she had nerved herself for the ordeal. Wherever she went she created a vacuum, people faded away, or stood about in silence, and as she moved from place to place, she could feel eyes boring into her back, or see their veiled lids pretending not to notice her.

But Rexie was no coward. She had come to buy dishes, household utensils, some pieces of furniture and all sorts of useful odds and ends in

which her hermit uncle's house was lacking, and buy them she did, for these were the days when second-hand household gear could be bought for very little. She bid for several pails and baskets of odds and ends, simply because she saw some little thing she needed in them, that new, would have cost as much as the whole lot went for.

"A lot of rubbish," she heard people sniff, but a few odd egg-cups, or a rusty meat-saw weren't rubbish if you hadn't such a thing in the house and no plentitude of money to buy them all bright and shining new.

It was all very well for John to jest and boast of the shekels that were to come pouring in, but Rexie had had her fright, had endured the terrible fears, humiliations and horrors of abject poverty, and would never again be quite as light-hearted about money—careless and generous with what she had, no doubt, for that was the fundamental Rexie, but always in future with some touch of fearful care.

Nevertheless, her bargains mounted up and she was glad to see Tam arrive with a big farm lorry for her larger purchases when the household stuff was all sold and the auctioneer had moved off to the field where the farming implements were displayed. Tam was intensely interested in these, not only because he wanted to pick up a few things for himself and for the garden at Bendibus, but because he knew practically every implement and odd scrap on the place and all their past history, and intended to know exactly what happened to each and every piece.

Months afterwards he would say, anent the procuring of a wheelbarrow, perhaps, "There's that auld barrow o' Jem Logie's, Hiveacres bought it at the MacDuff's roup, but he only wanted the wheel, and I can get a wheel frae Jim Doig off that auld bogie he bocht for the bairns when Smith o' Lowes was sold up," and so on, till all the constituents of a wheelbarrow had been collected from past sales to form a serviceable one for Rexie. Much to the delight and entertainment of Stratheilan or John, Rexie would later go through the whole rigmarole, scratching her head at intervals or turning a glance on them that they could have sworn for the moment was from Tam's wary eye.

So Rexie left Tam to his own devices, knowing her purchases would all turn up in his own good time and set off with her basket, now weighed down with this, that, and the other oddment for home.

She went happily along, once away from the unfriendly atmosphere, counting over her bargains and chortling over her "finds."

Old Mr. Josef, whose pawnshop she had visited so often, had taught her a lot about antiques after seeing her interested glances round that part of his

shop, so she was quite able to recognise many of the old marks on china, knew what to look for on Waterford and other glass, and though she might easily have been deceived with good imitations of furniture, there was not much chance of imitations at a country sale like this where good old pieces had been shoved into attics because the new stuff was better liked. As for buying such things they would never have thought of it. "New art" was what they liked. Well-stuffed "three pieces," carpets with large geometrical designs in orange and green on a brown ground, wardrobes in limed oak, decorated with pink handles made of pressed milk, put old mahogany and rosewood completely in the shade. So Rexie had spent a lot of money but felt she had spent it well and rejoiced in the fact that the sale of household things had only been advertised by a few handbills stuck on trees in the district, though there had been a notice of the sale of stock and implements in the newspapers.

Neither did her conscience bother her about her china since she knew perfectly well that a brand new set of crockery sold in a clothes-basket (thrown in) with a guarantee that every piece was perfect and thirteen cups to the dozen would be infinitely preferred to her slightly imperfect set of green Rockingham, her Crown Derby coffee cups with the old marks or her odd lots of Chelsea and Bristol ware. Like most of her purchases they had aroused derision here and there but no jealousy.

Most people had brought sandwiches and were picnicking in the interval or enjoying the hospitality of the farmhouse, so her road home was quite deserted. Later on a few groups from the south side of the district would no doubt straggle along the old lane and across the moorland path, but now only a few rabbits, a sinuous stoat, a moor-hen, or a line of young weasels crossed her path, while the only sounds were the long "Who-are-you?" of a lonely curlew, or the bleating of lambs on the hillside.

Mungo was a bit tired now and kept at her heels for most of the way, sitting down on his tail now and then and giving her a reproachful look, as much as to say, "All this long road and no nice meaty sandwich in that basket—well!"

She had gone about halfway when she heard the sound of a vehicle approaching from behind and looking back saw an old-fashioned high dog-cart with a rough-haired beast, rather like a gawky cart-horse, in the shafts, throwing its hairy feet about and making a great noise as it came slap-dash over the stony track.

The trap was laden with odds and ends that shook and rolled and threatened every moment to drop off—rolls of wire netting, chairs with their

legs in the air, a dismantled churn and other bits and pieces and the man driving the cart was very drunk and noisy.

He had evidently been run off the place and was now shouting vengeance on the auctioneer as he swayed about at the top of the medley of furniture and alternately lashed or sawed at the mouth of the poor horse.

Rexie grabbed Mungo's collar and pulled him close to the hedge on the grass verge. As the outfit swung past she recognised the man. He was an old farmer called Wright, who farmed a small place a few miles from the village. She had always been sorry for him, although his appearance made her shudder. When quite a young man he had been returning home after a day at the local fair. There had been prizes for the best turn-out of horse and cart, and though he had not won a prize, his cart, like the rest, was gay with new paint and his horse a sight to behold with its bright coloured braids, its glittering brasses and jingling bells. It was a moonlight night and he was market merry. Indeed, it all sounded like a poem by his favourite Robbie Burns, for suddenly out of the black shadow thrown by a tree a frightful creature had risen up before the eyes of man and beast.

It was a camel whose owner had left the fair ground early. Immediately the horse took fright and in his own terror, Wright lashed out at the poor beast which made matters worse, for she leaped the hedge and overturned the cart and Wright was thrown on to the decorated Breechan across the mare's back. The sharp-pointed brasses round the bell had torn his face, ripping up his mouth and nose, as man and beast struggled on the ground, till all semblance of those natural features was almost gone.

Doubtless expert surgery could have worked wonders, but the poor man's wounds were simply allowed to heal without any attention being paid to the havoc they had wrought. The result was disastrous. He was also crippled, for the horse had rolled on him and broken a shoulder blade, so that altogether he was much to be pitied.

It was not to be wondered at that he had taken to drink, but he was one of those men who, mild enough at other times, become inflamed with rage when drunk. Whisky and beer had been passing freely at the sale and it was plain to be seen he had imbibed freely.

Rexie now slowed down her walk to let him get well on his way, but to her horror he stopped the horse when some hundred yards or so away and, looking back, began to shout to her to come on and he would give her a "lift."

Rexie was horror-stricken. The only possible space was the seat next the driver and even that was restricted by a collection of old rakes and hoes

bound loosely together and fixed across the seat. To accept a lift would mean being crushed up against that bawling drunken creature. She would have leaped over a precipice first.

She lingered behind pretending to pick some flowers, but he shouted more loudly and furiously, so, thinking it might appease him if she spoke to him, she went a little nearer and called out that she thanked him very much, but she wanted some flowers and would just walk home.

“Floo’ers! T’hell wi’ floo’ers—you get up here aside me, I’ll no meddle wi’ ye.”

Rexie shook her head. “Your horse has plenty to pull,” she called as good-naturedly as she could, trying to put on a bold front, though she was quaking inwardly.

He began to unbutton the leather apron strapped across the seat, and she made a few hurried steps backward, terrified that he was going to climb down out of the cart.

He saw her movement and her refusal infuriated him. With an oath he whipped up his horse, but stopped again a few hundred yards further on. There he remained seated in his cart.

Rexie did not know what to do. She did not want to go back to the sale ground now, or to show him that she was frightened, so she waited a little, then hurried on to pass him, as he was now sitting hunched forward as if he had fallen asleep, while his horse cropped the grass at the roadside. It was a mistake as she soon discovered.

He let her pass and then made his horse follow slowly on behind her, shouting all the abuse he could think of. That he “knew fine who she was—the ‘fancy piece’ that decent women wouldn’t speak to” was the gist of his remarks, translated into more decent language than he used.

He swore at her and cursed her while she hurried on, her head held high. She could only have escaped him by climbing the high hedge on either side and that she could not do. If she stopped to let him pass, he stopped, too, and she knew that, if she ran, he could whip up his horse and overtake her in a few moments.

She was at his mercy and he gave her no respite. His anger at her refusal of his offer of a lift had worked up now to a fury at her very presence in the village, at Bendibus, at the sale, on the same road as himself. Poor Mungo did not escape either but had to fly every now and then as the whip was cracked at him or some object hurled at him from the cart.

She tried to shut her ears to his bad language and to all he said, but it was useless, she heard everything that the vilest of tongues could say to her.

What horrified her till she trembled was the fact that he felt he *could* speak like that in her presence. After all, when not in his cups he was a decent enough man and the common decency of his kind would, she felt sure, have under normal circumstances prevented him from using, even in drink, such language to a woman whom he respected.

It was that thought that made her very soul quiver while she held her head high and kept her eyes dry, determined that he should not see any sign of her terror, but praying desperately for the end of the lane. She prayed, too, that no one would come and hear him, for she had no hope now of help. At first she had wished someone would come, thinking they might help her or that he would be silent in the presence of others, now she knew that nothing would silence him and she was so beaten down and bereft of hope that she felt certain that, if anyone did come, it would only be to join him in throwing mud at her, that a crowd might even gather to chase her home.

But no one came. Like Wellington, she might pray for Night or Blucher, or in her own case for Tam or Stratheilan, her only friends in the neighbourhood, but Tam was enjoying himself at the sale and would not leave till the last scrap had been put up and knocked down to some lucky bidder. He would know where everything went and it would be a remarkable occurrence if anything he himself fancied did not finally make its way to him by some devious route.

As for Stratheilan, unconscious of her need or her dire distress, he was riding leisurely across the hills to Bendibus, having something in his pocket he wished to show her.

Coming to the village and passing the post office he dismounted and going in, said a cheerful and smiling, "Good afternoon" to Mrs. Postgate, who was so taken aback she said, "Good afternoon, sir," before she could help herself, he looked so proudly secure and bore himself with such high grace.

"Any letters for—for Miss Drew?" he asked, the pause and hesitation were deliberate, and then he suddenly smiled at Mrs. Postgate as if she and he shared some innocent but slightly amusing secret.

"Aye," she said, reluctantly, "there's twa-three here."

"That is good," he announced, cheerfully, yet with the proud, reticent mien that distinguished him. "I am just going to Bendibus and will take them with me."

"There's a parcel as weel," and Mrs. Postgate handed it over.

He bought some cigarettes, said a word or two as if nothing whatever had happened since their last meeting, and went off.

Mrs. Postgate watched him go, a very puzzled look indeed on her face.

Rexie, herself, would have been puzzled, or, at least, have wondered a little if she had seen the smile of deep understanding with which he took out his pipe and lit it, with a hand round the bowl so that the red flame glowed on his features. He did not look in the least like the simple soul she sometimes thought him when comparing him with the worldly-wise, know-alls she knew in London.

CHAPTER XI

"If you will have me, I will have you"

No one came along the lonely lane and Rexie walked on, head in air, with burning cheeks, and dry eyes that stung in the hot sun. She had tried again to slow down and let the cart pass, but Wright at once drew up his horse in the middle of the road so that he could lash his whip from hedge to hedge.

She did not know if he would have struck her had she attempted to go past him, but she would not give him the chance. She walked on as quickly as she could while he followed as if driving her before him.

Indeed that was what she felt like, a helpless cow or sheep being relentlessly driven to slaughter.

She was beginning to feel exhausted, too; she had been on her feet for a long time, and her ankle was still rather weak and now hurt her unbearably. It was long past her luncheon hour and she had only had a nibble of toast for breakfast, being one of those unfortunates who cannot eat when in the least excited or upset, and she had certainly been more than a little disturbed at the thought of going to the sale.

Her tormentor now noticed the limp and began insulting her about that, but worse was to come, for he got on to Stratheilan and began shouting a horrible version of his side in the affair. Stratheilan, it appeared, was even worse than herself and punishments of the most humiliating and horrible kinds were being prepared for him in the village. Horse-whipping and ducking in the pond being some of the milder forms.

All this was shouted into her shrinking ears by the drunken maniac as he whirled his whip from side to side. Once or twice she thought of trying to get through the hedge but he at once saw what she was up to and, standing up, threatened to get down from the cart and follow her.

This was what terrified her most of all. She kept on, praying for the end of the lane.

When, at last, it hove in sight, she was very near complete exhaustion; only terror and determination not to show any sign of weakness kept her going on, trying to put her feet down firmly, trying desperately not to limp. But she was now nearing the end of the loaning, and could see the point where it joined the main road; once there, she had only a few yards to go before turning off up the track to Bendibus where the cart could not follow.

To her horror, however, he now whipped up his horse and made it go galloping past her. When he reached the main road he drew the cart across it, stopped and looking back sat watching her advance with a malicious grin on his face.

Mungo, all this time, had been making savage leaps at the cart, in spite of the lash of the whip, but he was just a puppy still and had not the strength to follow up his growled threats by springing up to the high seat. Now that the cart stopped, however, he made a determined rush and would actually have got at his enemy, for he had his front paws on the side of the vehicle, growling and showing his teeth and with the hair standing up along his back, when Wright pulled a bottle from his pocket, and leaning sideways, smashed it on the puppy's head. Mungo fell back, the blood streaming from his head, and Rexie, forgetting all her exhaustion and fear in her wild rage, ran forward and lifted her beloved Mungo from the dusty road.

"Coward!" she shouted, her eyes blazing. "Coward! Your mean soul is uglier than you are yourself—get out of my sight!"

Whether the sight of the blood running down Rexie's pale blouse and pretty suit, whether he had seen the exhaustion on her white face, and the horror and loathing of himself in her eyes, or whether her fury and the way she faced him up suddenly sobered him, no one was ever to know, but something certainly did.

He lifted the whip as if to strike her, and she was standing as firm as a rock expecting the blow when, to her amazement, he suddenly dropped it and sat staring at her as if fascinated.

"Why!" he said. "You're nought but a bairn!"

For a moment they gazed at each other, Rexie looking indeed very small and helpless, and then, hugging the heavy puppy she started off at a run, limping and stumbling as she rushed away. Twice she nearly fell before she reached the stile leading across the hill to Bendibus, but she pulled herself up, raised the puppy and stumbled blindly on. Behind her Wright stood up in

the cart and roared after her, "Let be! Let be! Canny now! Canny! Mind thae wires. I'll no hurt ye, ye young fule!"

But it was useless. She blindly mounted the stile, caught her foot in the tangle of snare wires he had seen from his elevated seat, toppled over and crashed to the ground on the other side.

He leaped from the cart, but Rexie was up before he could reach her. She rose, swirled round like a teetotum, and dropped, but she rose again and, hanging on to the puppy like grim death, went blindly forward, staggering from side to side across the grass.

It was at that moment that Stratheilan topped the hill on his horse. The shouting of the drunken farmer first arrested him, then he saw the small figure reeling from side to side and stumbling over the tussocks of heather.

He took the slope at a gallop and flinging himself off the horse, threw the reins to the shouting farmer who was now cursing and swearing by all his gods that he meant her no harm. "Stop that daft little besom," he roared at Stratheilan, "or she'll be o'wer the lynn!" For Rexie was now making straight for a deep "lynn," or cutting in the hillside, worn out by the stream and partly concealed by the heather. Harmless enough in the daytime it was dangerous at night or to anyone blinded by a blow, or by exhaustion and fear like Rexie, who was still possessed of the idea that Wright was following to strike her, or to beat the life out of Mungo, whereas the sobered man was now terrified and shocked at what he had done and rushing to her help.

Stratheilan, knowing nothing of what had happened, paid no attention to Wright except to shout to him to look to the mare.

He ran to Rexie, lifted her, with Mungo in her arms, and strode to the house. He knew where she hid the key and in two minutes had unlocked the door and carried her inside.

But when he tried to lay her down on the sofa, she clutched wildly at his coat with one hand, hanging on to Mungo with the other, and would not let him go.

He wanted to get her some brandy from the hunting flask he carried in his pocket and had just succeeded in unscrewing the cork when Wright opened the outer door and called in that he had tethered the mare to the gate.

At the sound of his voice up she jumped, knocking the flask from Stratheilan's hand and spilling all the brandy. "Don't let him in! Don't let him in!" she shouted in horrified tones.

Bewildered, Stratheilan held her so close that his rough shooting jacket scrubbed her face, while he murmured reassurances and endearments, which she hardly seemed to hear as she twisted about, starting at every sound and

gazing at the door and windows as if she expected to see the devil himself spring in amid flames and fumes of sulphur!

Stratheilan realised then that she was terrified of Wright, but put that down a good deal to the farmer's gruesome appearance. He had only seen the man sober himself and had no idea of what a maniac he became when drunk.

He was amazed, therefore, when Rexie suddenly stopped in the middle of the sobbing and croaking screams to gasp out wildly:

"Yes, I will marry you. Yes, I will. *At once*. I didn't know. I never knew they were saying things like that about you. Let's get married soon—at once—oh, at once! . . ." she faltered a little, then stopped dead. "That's if you don't mind," she added humbly, "I mean if you don't mind very much."

With a quick movement he drew her so close that his arms hurt her and kissed her again and again.

"Sweet, my sweet! I would die to have you marry me, but I will not have you frightened into it." He smiled into her eyes, but his mouth was a little twisted as he said, "You must not marry one ogre for fear of another."

"Oh, no!" she said, solemnly, and tried to rise. "You are not an ogre. I really do like you very much."

"Stay still," he ordered. "I am going to make you some tea. I will dress Mungo's head while the kettle boils."

Rexie was no weakling, nor had she in her composition a grain of that self-consciousness that makes many people rather inclined to linger over their recovery from any bad experience, as if they wished to get all they could out of it, or, more probably perhaps, to enjoy the sense of relief from strain.

As soon as relief came and Rexie felt better she was herself again, shaken indeed and a bit wobbly, but her whole instinct was to forget it and get back to normal. She wanted to prolong no pity, nor be the invalid a moment longer than she could help, though she was quite glad to rest while Stratheilan bathed and dressed Mungo's wounds and made tea for them both.

He asked no questions about what had happened while he set the table, cut thin bread-and-butter and hunted in her cake-tin for cake, and he only helped her when she needed it as she tried to tidy herself. Without asking, he got warm water and brought a dress for her to change into from her blood-stained suit, taking the first he found in her wardrobe, a blue woollen garment that she had made herself and hated, but which she meekly got into

when he went off after hanging it on a chair and putting her soft slippers beside it.

Mungo's wound was sewn up—luckily it was a clean cut—and did not seem to spoil his appetite or affect his nerves, for after a large meal he curled up and fell asleep, giving little snaps and growls as he dreamed of his enemy.

Rexie knew now that, before he took up fur farming, Stratheilan had trained at the Edinburgh College to be a veterinary surgeon. But by the time he was finished he had made up his mind to live in Morne and help the people of the island. As a veterinary surgeon this was hopeless, but he thought the whole of the little island might be employed in the breeding of fur-bearing animals and the dressing of their furs. He knew how very successful Storrs was and saw no reason why Morne should be less so. Indeed, Morne had many more natural advantages than Storrs and he, himself, had already succeeded marvellously in some new ways of dressing furs by methods of his own.

But Lammerside, as well as Storrs, had soon discovered his remarkable ability as a veterinary surgeon, and he was always being asked to attend sick animals in the district, indeed he had been attending an injured collie that very morning.

He entertained her during tea with some stories of animals, especially of a little fox terrier at his home who, when its back had been injured in a car accident, paralysing its hind legs, had taught itself to walk about on its two forepaws, balancing its hind legs above its head like an acrobat, a remarkable and comical feat that entertained the whole island for months until it was completely cured.

Nothing could have been better for Rexie as it took her mind off her experiences and made her chuckle over the clever little creature as he described the comical picture it made. Then he started to talk about Morne, and the poverty of the people and his eyes glowed as he described what his fur farm would do for them. "Of course, I have a lot to learn yet," he said. "I have only been here a little over two years and three years is the least it takes to go through all the different stages—so I shall be here at least a few months and, until then——" he paused and looked at her, "I must remain a bachelor. The Storrs only like to take young lads, they did not want to take me because I was so much older than the rest, and, of course, would not have taken me if I had been married."

"Why?" asked Rexie.

“Just a rule,” he said shortly, not wanting to tell a rather sordid tale. Then he smiled. “The rule has not always been kept, but the Storrs did not know that——” Suddenly he sniffed and changed the subject. “What is that in your oven?”

“Snakes and ladders!” Rexie jumped up. “I forgot about my juggled hare!”

The juggled hare, however, was doing very well and smelt very good indeed when they opened the oven door.

“You will have to stay to supper,” said Rexie. “It’s my dinner really.”

“Perhaps . . .” He stood looking out of the window a moment. “But now I must chop you some wood. I saw your box was nearly empty.”

Rexie knew quite well that Tam intended to chop some wood when he arrived from the sale, but said nothing. She knew quite well the wood-chopping was to give her time to think over what she had said about marrying him. He was not going to take advantage of her overwrought state when she had declared with such vehemence that she would marry him at once.

But Rexie’s mind was made up. It had come on her as a complete surprise that Stratheilan might share her ostracisation in the neighbourhood. She had heard nothing at all about his side of it until Wright spoke. Of course, the farmer was drunk, but it was then, she knew, that truth came out, when all the polite inhibitions of sobriety were absent.

She had heard before that the Storrs of Storrs were both of a very religious, stern cast of mind and thought that Wright was probably quite correct when he had said, in his own rough way, that Stratheilan would find himself turned out the moment the story came to their ears.

She was not going to have that, not if she could help it. She did not quite see how Stratheilan’s plan about their marriage could be carried out, she had really not thought much about its details as she had rejected it on the moment, thinking it was just his old-fashioned idea of “saving her good name.”

Now she felt there might be more in it than that, that there were other things involved besides her own good name. Storrs was, if not the only place where a regular course of training was given in the breeding and care of fur-bearing animals and the dressing of their fur, certainly the only famous one, with the name of its furs an open sesame to all the large markets and its training recognised as in a class quite by itself. It had no rivals. And now she realised she had not only Stratheilan himself to consider—there was Morne.

As he had talked, with his intensely blue eyes alight with enthusiasm of his island and his people, she had realised something of what it would mean to him to start an industry there that would suit the people and help them. She wasn't going to have a spoke put in that wheel!

"And I do like him," she reassured herself, "and I think he really quite likes me, even if he is being old-fashioned and polite, and I will try to make it up to him, in every way I can."

Exactly what she was going to make up to him she left vague, but there was a distinct feeling that he had asked her to marry him for her sake and to help her; the whole circumstances had imbued her with that feeling, the idea that his own fate and that of Morne might be also involved was quite new to her.

But thinking of it all made her feel awkward and shy again, and this had the unfortunate effect of making her look very miserable and white when, at last, he came in.

He had washed and had brushed his hair very flat with a wet brush, but even as he entered it was rising up again, which might have made her smile at any other time but now only made her remember him as she had first seen him with the snowflakes on his wet red hair.

"You are tired," he said, at once. "Shall I go away now? I could come back to-morrow."

But that only meant thinking about it all night and making the decision all over again. Besides, she knew that it was not always easy for him to get away.

"No," she said, a little shakily. "Let us decide now."

With a stride he reached her where she stood by the window and taking her hands, said softly:

"Tell me, Roxie, is it just a trouble I am being to you?"

She shook her head.

"Roxie——" he lingered on the name. "Roxie, tell me, is there anyone else?"

She shook her head again. "Oh, no!"

"Do you think you could like me a little? I would not bother you to love me yet, I would wait. I would be very patient. I would just woo you a little and a little—as I was meaning to do." He smiled. "And I would be teaching you the Gaelic, love is much easier in the Gaelic."

"But I do like you, I like you very much . . . only . . ."

"Well? . . . Only? . . ."

“Do you like me, too?”

He shook his head slowly.

“No, indeed, it is not liking only, I am loving you, Roxana.”

“Oh, no!—I mean you couldn’t.”

“Couldn’t I?”

He was looking down at her, her hands held fast in his own, and there was no smile on his face now, just a strained line where his lips met.

“Shall I . . .” he drew her a little nearer, but she instantly pulled back with a frightened gesture.

“No, do not be frightened, sweet, it is all right. Will you marry me, Roxie—the way I said? Say No if you feel you could never like me enough. We will think of something else perhaps, but—won’t you try to like me. Won’t you trust me a little when I say I think it will all come right?”

She looked up and nodded.

“Yes, I will and . . . Stratheilan . . .”

“You must call me Ewen.”

“Ewen, don’t let us speak about it any more just now. Not about loving I mean, just about plans and things and let us go on just being ordinary.”

“Yes, I promise. We shall just be ordinary and——”

“Common-sensible,” she supplied, always ready to find a word, or to make one.

“Common-sensible,” he repeated. “But——” She looked up as he paused.

“I think we should seal the bargain with a kiss,” he went on, “a common-sense one, of course.”

If a smile lurked in the corners of his eyes, he did not allow it to reach his mouth, though its lines were tender enough now for any lover’s smile.

She lifted up her mouth and very gently, very slowly, very solemnly, he sealed their bargain with a kiss.

A very, very careful common-sensible one it seemed to be on his part: almost, indeed, as if he were afraid of not quite reaching her standards in that matter.

“Now,” he said, briskly, when the small ceremony was over, “let us be quite ordinary friends again, shall we? Like we were before all this happened.”

“Oh, yes, I would love that.”

“There’s just one thing, I think you might wear this now. I have had it some time.” He had put his hand in his pocket, brought out a small case and opened it. In it was a platinum ring set with pearls. “All girls have engagement rings and later on you will wear yours, when there is no need for secrecy. I have brought a thread to wear it round your neck till then . . . I am wishful for you to wear it,” he added after a pause, as though he had first tried the sentence over in the Gaelic.

The thread was a fine silver cord with a catch which he fastened round her throat.

“I think pearls are your stones.”

“Yes, they are,” she said in a quick, pleased voice. “How did you guess?”

“I did not guess—I knew. Now what about that dinner you spoke of? I can stay to dinner with you now—now we are engaged—and then I shall tell you all I have arranged and we shall make all our plans.”

CHAPTER XII

“THE day after to-morrow,” said Stratheilan.

They had dined off the jugged hare in great contentment. Rexie was always at ease with Stratheilan as long as he kept off the subject of love and marriage.

Even marriage, she found, wasn’t such a nerve-shaking business when taken with the ease with which he took it. She could not make him out. He talked as if running away to Carlisle and getting married were the most ordinary affairs and might happen to anyone.

In fact he was so calm about it all that she found she was calming down herself.

Of course it wasn’t as if they were going to start married life together at once. If it hadn’t been for Mrs. Postgate, he said, he would have asked her to become engaged to him and be married as soon as he had finished his time at Storrs. But Mrs. Postgate had ruined all that. They must be able to say they were married to clear up all that unfortunate misunderstanding about the breakfast.

“But will Mrs. Postgate believe we were married? I’m no good at telling lies, I just hate them,” protested Rexie.

“We shall not need to tell any lies. We shall just say we are married but want to keep it secret until my time at Storrs is up. At least *I* shall say it. You will not need to say anything. Everyone knows the rules at Storrs, and there are so many of them,” he laughed a little, “it is impossible to keep them all.”

Rexie had heard Tam on the subject of Mr. and Mrs. Storrs of Storrs and their manifold rules, so could smile, too. The students had all to be in at certain hours; they had to attend “a place of Divine Worship” at least once on Sundays; they must not keep pets (because of the wild animals)—Mr. or Mrs. Storrs must always know where they were, and so on.

Nevertheless, the students were all very happy with the Storrs. In spite of their austerity they were both extremely kind and not devoid of a sense of humour. It had worried Rexie terribly to think that Stratheilan would be deceiving them so he now confessed that he had told Mr. Storrs the whole story and suggested to him what he proposed to do. Mr. Storrs had agreed that it was the only way to put things right but said that, officially, he was to know nothing, and that it must, at all costs, be kept from Mrs. Storrs. As it was one of the jokes of the establishment that Mr. and Mrs. Storrs each used the other as a threat of the extremist severity, even Rexie could smile at this in answer to the slight twinkle in Stratheilan’s eye. Tam had been very comical on the subject.

“The day after to-morrow,” repeated Rexie, doubtfully.

“Yes, it can be done, and the sooner the better. You are not to be angry with me. I was not taking you for granted, but I have been arranging things so that we could be married at once if you would consent—I wanted all to be ready if you needed me. You see, don’t you, Roxie, that if it is to be of any good, it must be now. People are talking, but they are only repeating what Mrs. Postgate said. It must appear that I explain about us being secretly married as soon as I hear of the gossip.”

“But—John!” Rexie drew down her brows. “What will John say when he hears I am secretly married—and Sally! What will Sally say?”

“But, of course, I shall see John at once and explain everything to him. You must let me do it all. You must leave everything to me—and you know, Roxie” (he had quite fixed on “Roxie” as his name for her, lingering on the “o” as if he loved it), “if John and Sally did not get that shock they would get the worse one of finding you ostracised and then John would immediately hate me—and I do not want your brother to hate me, or your friend either.”

Rexie’s heart lightened. Stratheilan had told her all his plans and now she was getting used to the main idea, everything seemed easier. Besides,

she assured herself she did like Ewen—she did like him very much. She shied off the word love, but “liking” was all right.

Now, for the first time, she let herself think of the difference it would make if she could hold up her head again in the village, if she need not have those horrible fears and nightmares about John and Sally and the children, if she had not that foreboding at the back of her mind all the time that they would be forced to leave Bendibus—Bendibus, that she had loved from the moment she saw it—Bendibus where they could all be so happy!

She drew a deep breath and smiled at Stratheilan who was bending anxiously towards her, his high brow furrowed under the upstanding hair that gave him such a gallant air.

His whole face changed at once when she smiled. He took her hand, kissed it quickly and then jumped up.

“I must be going now. I will see if there is any sign of Tam—and I shall come to see you to-morrow.”

Tam had not arrived yet and as Tam liked his glass occasionally Rexie had grown a bit anxious.

But when they went to the door there was Tam with the cart laden with her purchases.

“Man, that’s fine,” he said on seeing Stratheilan. “Ye’ll can gie us a lift wi’ a’ this gear. Sure as daith, the Missus has bocht the hale o’ the steedin’.”

This exaggeration of Tam’s made them all laugh. Rexie was sent back into the house, Tam remarking with his usual candour, that he had no use for “weemen” when there was a job of lifting to do. Rexie would just get in the way—“under his feet” was his way of putting it, as if he thought of her as something between a mouse and a kitten.

The next day was a busy one for Rexie. Not only had she her purchases to arrange in some sort of order, but she had to prepare for the morrow and the visit to Carlisle.

Stratheilan was to call for her at seven with the oldest car from the Storrs’ garage. It would look anything but bridal, he had said, but it had a perfect engine and a good engine would be needed to take them to Carlisle and back in a day.

Ostensibly they were going to see his stepmother, who lived there and was in the secret and seeing to all the arrangements at that end.

Rexie was, of course, intensely shy of meeting her and would rather have gone to Newcastle where they knew no one. But Carlisle was further off and more out of the ken of the village folk and, as Stratheilan pointed

out, it was much better that his mother should be at their marriage and that Rexie should get to know her.

She would like his stepmother, he assured Rexie. She lived alone and wrote books about animals which she illustrated herself. Stratheilan had them all and indeed, Rexie had read a couple of them herself, without knowing who they were by, as Mrs. Urquhart wrote under the pen-name of Jane Pym.

“If she’s like her books, I’ll like her,” said Rexie.

He wrinkled his brows a little, then gave up any attempt to describe his stepmother.

“You’ll see,” he said.

After the marriage at the Registry Office they were to return to his stepmother’s house for tea before the return journey.

He would bring her back to Bendibus and hoped they would arrive before midnight—however, a late hour would not matter so much then.

“So that means supper,” thought Rexie, wrinkling her brows.

Tam, however, had come back that morning to help her, possibly at a hint from Stratheilan and Tam would be quite able to see about supper; he would do anything for Stratheilan, besides having constituted himself Rexie’s right-hand man.

When they returned after their marriage Rexie was just to go on as usual and leave all the explaining to Stratheilan. Not that that silent and self-contained giant would do much “explaining.” He had ways of his own of doing things that were efficient if perhaps a little open to the accusation of high-handedness. But Rexie had enough faith in him to leave it to him.

Tam soon solved the difficulty of a meal on their return. He knew all about the birds hanging up in the cellar and informed her they were just right for the oven. Snipe and woodcock were grand eating, especially cooked as he cooked them. He’d have them all ready on their return next day, the hour didn’t matter to Tam who was just as likely to be out and about at midnight as at any other hour.

How much Tam knew Rexie had no idea and she did not inquire.

She was well aware that there was not much that Tam did not know and that he had mysterious ways of his own of acquiring information. He knew, for instance, exactly what had happened on the first night and morning of her arrival at Bendibus, but, for some reason, he never spoke of it, possibly he had been up to no good and had his own secrets to keep, as she had surmised on other occasions.

She had no time to unpack her baskets and boxes of china and other odds and ends. They would all need washing and sorting, but she got Tam to put her mahogany wardrobes into place—she had bought two old-fashioned roomy wardrobes, for she knew Sally would have lots of clothes, since dress designing and making was her job, and she loved pretty clothes—and to unpack all the extra chairs and other furniture she had bought, before she got down to the question of what she was to wear.

“It’s not exactly a real, conventional wedding,” she sighed to herself, “but I like old customs and old ways. Custom must be indulged with custom, or custom will weep, so I simply must have something new, something borrowed and something blue.”

Luckily she had a new blouse to go with the outfit she had bought that wonderful day when Mr. Orr had told her about Bendibus. This was a grey country suit, not exactly a wedding outfit, but well cut and complete with overcoat and a lightweight felt hat that really matched. Sally’s horror of anything that made a sort of half match had been well hammered into Rexie. She had worn the suit but not the blouse, so that was something old and something *split* new, besides her best silk stockings which, though unworn, had been washed. Something blue was easy. But of whom could she borrow anything she did not know. She must think about it, she might borrow a penny from Tam, but that wouldn’t be something to wear.

Stratheilan—Ewen, as she was trying to call him—came in after tea but did not stay long as he had so much to do himself because of his free day tomorrow. He had brought her a golden sovereign to put in her shoe. “My sister had a bit of gold in her shoe,” he told her, “it is an old Scots custom so I want you to have a bit of gold from myself in yours.”

“And I’ll have your ring,” she said. He had asked her if she would like platinum or gold for her wedding ring and she had at once chosen gold because in legend and ballad and poetry it was always a golden ring that was sung.

“I know it’s a wedding of convenience,” she said to herself, rather ruefully, “but I’ll try to wrap some poetry round about it for a little warmth to keep out the cold and make up a little for its not being a real romance.”

“I would have liked a real romance,” she sighed to herself a little later, “with an adoring bridegroom who ‘worshipped the ground I trod on,’ and a wreath of orange blossom and ‘the voice that breathed o’er Eden,’ and indeed the whole old-fashioned rik-ma-tik, but I dare say I wouldn’t have looked the part—no indeed, I could never have been the glamorous bride—so I’ll just have to be contented with my lot like little Lord Fauntleroy, only

his was in Latin—*Laetus sorte mea*—and indeed, I mean to make the best I can of things. Anyhow, Ewen isn't a reluctant bridegroom, at least, I hope he isn't, though he'd never let me know if he was, and he likes me, at least (Oh dear, what a lot of 'at leasts') a little bit, and I like him very much—so cheer up, you old Job!" The last admonition had come at the sudden sight of her white face in the looking-glass of the grand mahogany wardrobe, which stood rather out of place and self-conscious among the carved wooden chests and chairs of her great-uncle's fashioning.

She set the table for supper the following evening, as she rather doubted Tam's ability in that line, laid out her wedding garments as she facetiously called them in a last spurt of trying to be funny so as to keep her heart up and not cry. A wet bride she simply would not be at Stratheilan's wedding, because, after all, it was his wedding, too, wasn't it? And he'd been so kind she did want to make up to him for it. She did want him to be happy—poor I—— No, she simply could not call him "Poor lamb," he just wouldn't look the part . . . Poor lion!

CHAPTER XIII

"Pack clouds away"

REXIE opened her eyes, awakened by the crowing of a cock. There was something . . . then she remembered. She was married.

She drew out her hand and looked at the ring on her finger, it was a little big for her third finger, but she hadn't liked the thick rings then in vogue and anyhow perhaps it would fit better when she really wore it. Stratheilan had wanted her to wear it all her wedding day.

Her mind went back to her wedding. It had been a lovely day with no mist even on the top of Shap Fell, so they had had lovely views all the way.

Stratheilan had taken Fan with them. He hadn't meant to, had made indeed elaborate plans for her consolation in his absence and kept the journey a dead secret from her. He might as well have saved himself the trouble for Fan knew all about it and hid herself under the rugs at the back when she was supposed to be safely asleep in her basket.

Naturally she let the car be well on its way before she put out a humble-looking nose to beg pardon for her misdemeanour.

All she got was a forceful swearing in Gaelic, but she seemed quite contented, gave a huge sigh and curled herself up with an air of entire

satisfaction.

“You’ll stay in the car the whole time, and you’ll get neither bite nor sup till we get home again,” Stratheilan informed her sternly.

But he reckoned without his Mother. As soon as Rexie saw her she knew why Stratheilan always called her “Mother.” It was plain to be seen she adored him and that he was as fond of her.

To Rexie’s surprise she was tall and rather gaunt. In her books she always represented Jane Pym as plump and round. She wore a black and white silk dress with a sort of thin cloak of the same material that was always slipping off her thin shoulders and gave her a fly-away look. She might once have been pretty, there was no knowing for her pale face was now worn and furrowed, with large faded blue eyes that looked as if the colour had been washed out with many tears. But she had a cheerful, matter-of-fact way of talking that put Rexie at once at her ease. They might have called for an afternoon cup of tea for all the fuss she made. In fact, she never mentioned their marriage except to talk over arrangements when necessary, as she might have talked over a visit to the dentist or a call on the Vicar.

She at once noticed Rexie’s surprise at her appearance.

“Expected me to be little and plump, didn’t you? I always wanted to be small and dimpled when I was a girl. Gad! how I envied a creature at school who had dimples instead of knuckles! So I always imagine Jane Pym as nice and round. I’d feel more at home inside her than I do inside myself. I wouldn’t be the least surprised to see her in the looking-glass one fine morning—— Oh, there’s Fan!”

And when Stratheilan said Fan was to stay in the car, all the answer he got was “Fiddlesticks.”

She didn’t draw Rexie into her arms, look at her and say, “So this is my son’s bride,” or words to that effect, as Rexie had dreaded.

She just shook hands and said, “How do you do?” when introduced, but she had cheerful fires not only in the drawing-room but in the bedroom where she took Rexie to wash and fix herself up a little for the visit to the Registry Office, and she said as soon as they were alone:

“I wanted you to wear something of mine for ‘something borrowed,’ ” and gave her a little lace handkerchief. “You won’t forget to return it, will you? I wore it at my own wedding and if I’m alive, you’ll have it for your real wedding—a registry office doesn’t seem real to me. I dare say you and Ewen feel the same, but it will serve the purpose for the moment.”

She went with them to the registry office and took the old butler to be the second witness. He had been with Ewen’s father when Ewen was born,

was looked upon as an old friend of the family, and as far as Rexie could make out, ruled the roost at The Howe, Mrs. Urquhart's house just outside of Carlisle.

There was a magnificent tea awaiting them on their return with a small wedding cake, beautifully decorated, which Mrs. Urquhart had packed up after tea for Rexie to take home with her.

Then she took her upstairs to see her own wedding present. Ewen had already got his, a cheque to help to furbish up Stratheilan, his home, when he took his bride there.

"I only meant this for you if I liked you," she said to Rexie, "otherwise the cheque would have done for both. It isn't new but neither of us will trouble about that." She took a case from a drawer and opened it; a lovely string of pearls lay on the cream velvet.

"We shall take it down and Ewen shall fasten it round your throat. You must wear it, pearls like to be worn—and now," when Rexie had tried to thank her and let her know what a wonderful and perfect gift it was to her, and they had exchanged a warm embrace and kiss, "now we must decide what you are going to call me. Ewen tells me your own mother died long ago, so would you care to call me, Mother? Ewen does but he was just a baby when I married his father, otherwise, there is Jane, which is really my name, or Mamma, or just Mrs. Urquhart——"

"What would you like me to call you?" asked Rexie rather shyly.

"Mother," said Mrs. Urquhart, with no hesitation at all. "That's the old usage, so why not stick to it—but just if you would like to, Rexie. But I do think I'd like a daughter. Sandra, Ewen's sister, calls me Jane, but she is much, much older than you in every way. Much older than Ewen, too, nearly fifteen years indeed; he was a very tragic afterthought, for his mother died when he was born. Indeed, people always thought he was my own boy and I've always loved him as if he were. But I'll tell you all about the family when I come to see you. You'll ask me to come, won't you—I mean to Bendibus. I'd like to come to Bendibus. Indeed, I'd just love to see it."

"Oh, yes!" exclaimed Rexie. "Come back with me if you like. There's no one there but me."

She smiled as she said it, never thinking her invitation might be accepted, but a voice from the door suddenly broke in. Stratheilan had come to hurry them up.

"Mother! You're a genius. Of course, that is what you must do. Then everything will be all right at once." He turned to Rexie. "You are not

minding, are you, Rexie? It would make it all so much easier if my mother comes to stay with you—don't you see?"

"Yes, I thought of that," said Mrs. Urquhart calmly, "so I packed a case for a couple of nights. I'll be ready as soon as Rexie. Everything is arranged here."

In a very few minutes they were all in the car. Mrs. Urquhart saying she'd much prefer to sit with Fan at the back, though she had so much to say she would have to talk to Rexie over her shoulder.

"I know I've rushed you into this," she leaned across to say as soon as the car had started, "but I know it's a good idea. Now don't start worrying because the beds aren't made and the breakfast dishes still standing on the table. I'm no good at housework myself, so I won't be much help, in fact I'll just be a nuisance, and I like my breakfast in bed, but I won't get in the way, and I enjoy a laugh and it's all for your own good, so let's not bother. We'll just get rid of Ewen and picnic. I've brought a basket full of provisions."

After that it was a happy journey home. Rexie knew that her house was not very tidy but felt convinced that that wouldn't bother Mrs. Urquhart, and Tam would have good fires going, the birds cooked to a turn and the potatoes ready to pop on when he heard the car and if he'd got her kitchen turned upside down in the process she'd soon put that right.

"I'm not a very good housewife either," she told her mother-in-law. "I'm just learning."

"That's fine. We'll be birds of a feather. I say, I do like you, Rexie, Child!"

"And I do like you—Mother."

"Gad!" (this was Mrs. Urquhart's favourite expletive; such a Georgian expression sounded very funny coming from her Victorian personality and Rexie could only think she had had no expletive of her own and had picked it up from a grandfather).

"Gad! I do admire Stratheilan for picking you up and carrying you off the moment he saw you. I say, Ewen"—she called him "Stratheilan" or "Ewen" indiscriminately—"What about Isobel Rose? I'm telling your wife I admire her." Then she laughed. "*More than Isobel Rose!*"

But Stratheilan was steadily gazing ahead as he drove the car at great speed to get over Shap Fell before the mists of evening gathered on the top to delay them.

"That is good," said he, and said no more till they were over the fells.

“You won’t have a rattle-pate for a husband anyhow,” said Mrs. Urquhart, “so it’s a good thing you can talk.”

For Rexie as usual, once her fear of her mother-in-law had departed, had kept her entertained. She told her about the sale “lots” waiting about the rooms in boxes and baskets to be unpacked, one large clothes-basket full of odds and ends having been purchased for eighteenpence because it contained a sandglass for boiling eggs. “Eggs get me down every time,” sighed Rexie. From that it was but a step to the sale, itself, including a lively account of the purchase of her own egg-basket by a farmer’s wife who had left it standing about, and the description of the wild bidding for an old topee, whose use in a Scottish summer Rexie could not imagine.

“Oh, they’d just like to have a topee,” said Mrs. Urquhart. “I can remember my tongue hanging out of my mouth for a Ming jar when I was in my twenties, though I hadn’t the remotest idea what a Ming jar was.”

“Oh yes!” gasped Rexie, joyously, at this sign of sisterhood. “I’ve always wanted a Ming jar, too.”

“You’ve got one—in Morne,” said Stratheilan, turning to give her a quick understanding smile, and somehow, that secret smile, so much between themselves, so slight, and yet so full of intimacy, cheered and thrilled her and felt warm in her heart for miles and miles.

“It makes us seem like belonging to each other,” she thought, trying to explain why it had affected her so much.

They arrived to find that Tam, true to his word, had cooked the birds to perfection, nor had he broken any of Rexie’s precious dishes as she had feared, while the kitchen was as tidy, or tidier, than she had left it.

Tam had not ventured into any of the other rooms even to put a match to the fires, the carpet on the sitting-room had been too much for him, he had quailed at the idea of touching it with his “muckle buits.”

However, that was soon remedied and fires merrily burning.

After supper, Stratheilan departed; he hesitated after kissing his mother when saying good night and then, seeing her eyes on him, stooped and kissed Rexie’s cheek, quickly called to Fan and went hurriedly off.

So that was how it was that old Mrs. Urquhart arrived and spent a few days at Bendibus, much to the surprise and bewilderment of Mrs. Postgate and other village worthies.

Stratheilan continued calling at the post office as usual—though it was not the proper office for Storrs it was regularly used as it was more convenient than Presterby. He said nothing for a day or two, allowing the fact of his mother’s visit to Rexie to sink in, then, in asking for letters one

afternoon, he deliberately said, as if thoughtlessly: "Are there any for Mrs. Urquhart—for my mother, I mean, not——" and then stopped. Sharp Mrs. Postgate was staring at him, he smiled.

"Nearly gave things away, didn't I? Oh, well, in your official position you must have guessed at our secret." This flattered her a little, both about her "official position" and her integrity in keeping the knowledge of people's affairs she must gain thereby to herself, and when he added that he would be grateful if she would still keep the secret—she could say there was an engagement—she felt as if she had known and been keeping secrets all along, and absolutely glowed with importance when, with a final smile that suggested a humorous understanding between them, he took his leave.

But when he left her Mrs. Postgate sat suddenly down on the chair she kept behind the counter. She had had a slight shock and she was also a little puzzled. But soon everything became plain to her—of course, those two were secretly *married*! She remembered how it had all come out, some years ago, that Alec Boyne, another student at Storrs, had been married for months. She might have remembered that before condemning Stratheilan, she reflected. Bendibus belonged to Miss Drew's—to his wife's—brother so, of course, she had come there, to be near Stratheilan. "It was that auld sinner, Tam o' the Wood, put me wrong at the start," she assured herself, "saying a bit lassie had wanted to take a room frae me." Mrs. Postgate wasn't going to blame herself entirely if she could get someone else to take a share, but all the same she felt guilty. She had been so quick to think evil and to spread it.

"Auld fule that I was!" she said to herself. "I might ha'e known that the likes o' Stratheilan wouldn't keep a fancy woman—and I aye liked that lassie, but mebbe that made me harder on her— Eh, dear!"

Once convinced that Stratheilan and Rexie were married, and the fact of his mother staying at Bendibus left no doubts about that, Mrs. Postgate, who was not really a malicious woman, and was now rather ashamed of herself, started at once to put things right as far as she could.

She dearly loved having a secret and the feeling that she shared one with Stratheilan, who was locally supposed to be some great laird in his own countryside, bucked her up no end.

That very morning she began dismissing gossip about Rexie with a superior air. Those stories were all stuff and nonsense, and she knew as a fact that she and Stratheilan were engaged—"bespoke" was her word—and that it was his mother who was now staying with Miss Drew at Bendibus.

To accusations that she, herself, had believed the tales she had her answer. Tam o' the Wood had "told her a lot o' lees, but she had had it out with him" (she had indeed had a row with Tam), and as for that story of Stratheilan being there to breakfast, it was quite true that he'd been snowed up on Tod's Rigg and Tam, if you please, *now* said that he had himself seen him "making his way ower the hills, no ten minutes before echt o' the clock when she (Mrs. Postgate) had gone up to Bendibus."

"All a lot of tittle-tattle," she declared, valorously, whenever the stories were mentioned.

She hugged to herself the knowledge that she alone knew the truth and looked forward to the day when she could boast of it.

Then she took the opportunity to say to Stratheilan within hearing of some customers, the next time he called, and with something as near a wink as she could manage with decorum, "the folks is a' sayin' you and Miss Drew are engaged."

"Lammerside is a great place for gossip," he said, with an answering smile, taking up the letters for Rexie that he had called for, not that Rexie needed to call for all her letters now, however.

The morning after Mrs. Urquhart left she had put on an old frock and an overall and started to put all the things she had bought at the sale into place. In the first place, the "lots" had to be sorted out to see what was really rubbish and what she could use and everything she kept had to be washed and polished. When that was all done she would have all the house to clean and prepare for John's homecoming and the arrival of Sally and the children later on.

One of the difficulties of her position had been that she had not dared to ask anyone to help her with housework, although Tam had told her there were women in the village who would be glad to make an extra shilling or two by doing housework or taking in washing, laundering, sewing, and so forth, so she had everything to do herself.

She was very busy washing a pile of crockery when a knock at the door startled her, for she was very unused to knocks at her door. To her amazement it was the postwoman with her letters; she had just been thinking she should have gone for them before starting work.

Not only was it the postwoman but she actually answered Rexie's "Good morning" with a broad smile.

"I'll be bringing your letters every morning now," she said.

"Oh, thank you. It's very kind of you," stuttered Rexie, too taken by surprise to speak quite normally.

“Oh, Bendibus should be on ma roond, but we didna’ ken the rights o’ things. Glad to obleege ye.”

Rexie let this pass; she wasn’t quite sure if it referred to post office matters or to her own private affairs, so just took her letters and papers with a few friendly words and thanks, and with mutual grins of understanding they parted.

She had not returned many minutes to her labours when there was another rap at the door.

Her heart beat rather quickly when she saw that it was Mrs. Postgate.

“Can I come in?” she asked in her quick way, and Rexie led the way into the kitchen, so nervous that she never even thought of the sitting-room (now to be John’s study), the only tidy room in the place. The kitchen was in a perfect hotch-potch of a mess. There was straw on the floor, half unpacked boxes and baskets stood about, soiled or wet or newly dried dishes stood about on every available surface and damp cloths, scrubbing brushes and bits of soap ornamented tables and chairs together with dishes of soapy water. Rexie was no grand housewife!

As she realised the mess she gasped and half turned to lead the way to the study—too late! Mrs. Postgate was standing taking everything in with her sharp brown eyes.

“I—I was at the sale,” faltered Rexie, but got no further.

“Aye, I ken a’ aboot that,” Mrs. Postgate burst in. “Auld Wright’s in a fine takin’! Losh, ye sobered him up a’ richt! But that’s no what I’ve come aboot, though he’s been at me tae speak tae ye. No, it’s aboot the way we’ve yased ye. No bit what it was your ain blame, ye donnert lassie. No’ to speak o’ Stratheilan, tho’ I *will* say he tell’t me the truth when it couldna’ be expected I’d believe it. But things ha’e been just as ye might ha’e expeckit if ye’d had ony sense. But niver mind that, ye’re but young and ye’ll larn tae avoid, as the auld book says, even the appearance of evil. I’ve had Stratheilan in, and his mother tae, pur body. I wonner at you askin’ her to this auld wooden shanty—no’ but what ye’re a lady-body yoursel’, but ye’re young—auld folks likes their comforts. I could ha’e put her up fine. What for did ye no’ let Stratheilan ken afore this, the way the folks was usin’ ye? He’s your man, isn’t he?” She paused, but this was merely a rhetorical question, and Rexie, hunting wildy for a convincing answer, need not have worried. Mrs. Postgate was too fond of talking and explaining everything herself to let Rexie get an oar in. She was off again in a moment. “Eh, weel, nae doot ye didna’ want to upset him and him feared that auld Storrs would put him oot if the truth got to his ears. Ye needna’ mind me. I’m no tellin’

anything, just a hint here and there, ye ken. We a' ken fine what Storrs is. A kindly man, mind ye, but as thrawn as Jock Nicholson. He and his wife never got over Alec Boyne, they were that sair approntit at the lassie having the bairn in the hoose amang a' the lads, when she'd come to see Alec! Eh, that was a howdy-do!"

Mrs. Postgate paused to savour the old scandal and would, no doubt, have enjoyed telling Rexie the whole story had her post office duties not called, she never liked to leave her official duties to Leezie. "Aweel, I'll no' say I was a' to blame, but I'm right glad we were all in the wrong and I canna say fairer than that. It's no' the auld fules but the young fules that are the worst is what I say. You're nobbut a couple o' bairns, thinkin' to bring that off. Howsomever, I ask your pardon," and she held out a rough, but clean old hand which Rexie took in both her own, the tears starting to her eyes, for never could she have imagined Mrs. Postgate asking her pardon, under any circumstances.

"Oh, I'm so glad to be friends," she said. "Oh, do be friends with me, please, Mrs. Postgate. I'm so lonely and you were so kind that first morning and I liked you so much, and then I couldn't think what I had done to hurt you. But it wasn't your blame. Of course not, it was all Ewen's and mine and I beg *your* pardon, and oh, Mrs. Postgate, would you tell people I am quite a respectable person—they won't speak to me, you know. Look!" She held out her left hand with a smile. Her wedding ring was on the middle finger, *but it was there*. After much discussion about wearing her ring, Rexie had thought of this way out. People who guessed that she and Stratheilan were secretly married, could see it if they looked for it, and there would be no unanswerable questions for people who knew nothing. Anyone could wear a plain ring on their middle finger.

Rexie was thankful for Stratheilan's forethought when the next remark came.

"Aye, a wedding ring's a fine thing, but it's aye the engagement ring that's the bonniest."

She had Ewen's ring on its silver cord round her neck and drew it out.

If anything had been needed to convince Mrs. Postgate it was that slender hoop of pearls.

"Eh, my, that's bonny! I aye likit purls. Postgate never gave me a ring, he bocht me something that would do for the hoose, instead. Aye, he was a real Scot, a good man in his way, but I aye had a grudge against him in ma' heart for that."

“Poor girl!” said Rexie quickly, thinking of the girl who had wanted her pretty ring long ago, and pressing the hard hand in hers.

“Eh, weel, the past’s forbye, and I’ll need to get doon to the Post, that Leezie Lindsay has nae sense o’ responsabeelity.”

She glanced round. “Sakes, Lassie, ye’ll never redd this up! I’ll send Flindy Peterson up to gi’e ye a hand. She’s no’ much to look at, but she’s a good worker. Eighteenpence and her meat is what she gets for the day, or saxpence the ’oor, and she’s aye glad o’ a few scraps for the bairns. Noo, if there’s ony thing ye want, just let me ken. As for the folks, ye’ll no’ need to fash yoursel’ aboot them,” and having produced a peace-offering in the shape of a round of creamy butter, she departed, clip-clapping down the path in her ancient slippers.

In a very short time Flindy Peterson appeared. She came to the back door and at first sight of her, Rexie got rather a shock. Flindy was as broad as she was long, if not broader. For some reason or other she had cut off her thick black hair in a sort of “bob,” but having done it herself with a pair of blunt scissors, it was exactly like a very old mop. Everything about her was broad, her nose and her hips, and her mouth and her smile. She looked untidy, but she wasn’t dirty, far from it, if she had washed her hair less often, it might have settled down into some kind of shape. She wore huge cotton overalls, with huge flowery patterns on them and brought a pair of carpet slippers with her to wear in the house, real carpet slippers made by herself out of bits of gay carpet.

“Oh, dear!” thought Rexie, seeing this vision standing at the door—Flindy never wore a hat so her hair stood out in all directions. “What a dreadful creature to send, she’ll just flap-dash and make everything worse.”

But in less than ten minutes she had begun to change her opinion. Flindy was the very antithesis of her appearance; she was as swift and light as a bird on her flat-looking feet and in a very short time had cleaned out the cupboards—she had no opinion whatever of Rexie’s attempts at cleaning—washed and polished and arranged the dishes, and started to turn out the rooms. Here, however, Rexie drew the line.

“To-morrow is another day,” she quoted and arranged with Flindy to come up for an hour or two every morning.

“It’ll need to be at the skreich o’ day, then,” said Flindy, “for I ha’e the bairns to get awa’ to the skule, but I can come back of an efternin if a’m needed.”

She undertook to do the washing and launder the clothes and went off later on, staggering under a great bundle tied up in a sheet.

On that first morning Rexie and her henchwoman were very silent to begin with, each being much too awed of the other to speak. But it was not in the nature of either to hold her tongue for very long—they were both born chatterers. It took them about an hour to make the remarkable discovery that, in spite of their extraordinary appearances—for Rexie in a gay artist's smock and with her hair bound tightly in a pale blue scarf was just as queer-looking an object to Flindy as Flindy was to her—they were both ordinary human beings and would not bite if approached too heedlessly.

Rexie, as usual, took the lead, having had the brilliant idea of rousing up their courage with a cup of tea.

Stirring her tea she asked tentatively about Flindy's children. Two minutes later they were off!

Both being simple souls themselves they were genuinely interested in the simplest things of life; and each in her own way was a raconteur of the first water. Sometimes they found each other's language a trifle mystifying, but having no inhibitions about asking questions, they soon got over that. Rexie simply had to get over it to enjoy to the full Flindy's story about the children's dog, Tinker, who had, that morning, achieved a miraculous feat. It appeared Tinker had got a thorn in its paw and they had poulticed it. Tinker, being a sensible dog, had eaten the poultice, and licked the paw clean.

Then it was discovered that Norman, aged six, had dropped the threepenny bit, put aside for the milk, into the poultice. Great consternation accompanied by howls from Norman, who promptly got "his licks" for meddling with the threepenny bit.

At this stage in the proceedings, Tinker, who, it appeared, couldn't bear any of the children to get "their licks" had promptly, if a little inconveniently come to the rescue and vomited up, not the threepenny bit indeed, but the whole poultice including a hundred per cent interest on the contents—to wit, a *sixpenny* piece!

This tale was told with such verve that Rexie could hardly bear to suggest anything so commonplace as a sixpence being mistaken for a threepenny bit.

When at last she did mention it she found that she had suggested something even more incredible than the miracle.

"Mistake a threepenny bit for a sixpence? *Not in our house!*" said Flindy with such intense conviction that Rexie forthwith believed in the miracle.

"Then I'd give Tinker a shilling to swallow," said she in her reasonable way, and this kept Flindy laughing till lunch time.

After an entrancing story like that shared together they simply could not remain terrified of each other. Rexie recounted the adventures of the fishes and by lunch time they were, so to speak, old pals.

By tea-time Rexie had heard most of the village gossip about herself and how one tale after another had arisen with all their embellishments. But what surprised her most was to hear that Wright “was fair past hissel” with dismay at the way he had treated her when returning drunk from the sale.

“He’s a canny soul—wouldna hurt a flee (a fly, a “flea” in Border parlance is a “flay”) when he’s sober, but the deil’s sel after a glass or two. He’s awfu’ feared ye’ll be for hevin’ him up afore his betters (the Court) ——” Here Flindy paused, and looked inquiringly at Rexie.

“Oh, but, of course, I wouldn’t do such a thing!” she exclaimed at once. “Do you ever see him, do you know him well?”

“Ken him weel? Fine that, him and me gaed to the skule the-gither. I’m up at Muckleside maist setterdays, gien’ a bit hand to his auld mither.”

“Well, would you tell him from me that I bear him no ill-will, and that I’m sorry I refused to have a lift. I’m sure he meant to be kind, so say, will you, that I’d like to be friends and forget all about our little misunderstanding.”

“Eh, but that’s right kind o’ ye. Sure as deith, the man’s fair dementit ower it. Ye see, he’s real fond o’ young folks. He never saw ye recht until ye stood up to him ower the doggie, and then he saw ye were juist a bit frightened lassie and that sobered him up.”

Rexie laughed. “He’ll get another surprise——” she had been going to say, “When he sees me when he’s really sober,” but Flindy at once chipped in, “Aye, none o’ us jaloused ye were a mairrit woman. Et, weel, it’ll be a while or that gets oot. We a’ ken you and Stratheilan are nae maire than bespoke the noo,” and she smiled knowingly at Rexie.

“I do hope our secret will be kept,” said Rexie anxiously, “a lot of people seemed to have guessed it.”

She was making no pretence as she did not know how much was really known at Storrs, or if Mrs. Storrs, herself, knew anything about it. In any case, the Storrs would not like it to be known that their rules were being broken.

“Oo, aye,” said Flindy, confidently. “Nae need to worrit yersel’ aboot that. It’s no’ as if ye were yin o’ oorsels.”

Whether she meant that Rexie and Stratheilan being outsiders, were not of great interest to Lammerside, or whether she meant their ways were different, Rexie did not know.

In any case Flindy was now preparing to go, having arranged to make everything spick and span for the expected arrivals and to come up daily when she was needed.

When she was gone Rexie turned to the letters the postwoman had brought that morning. None of them had looked very interesting, being for the most part notices of one kind and another, papers sent on from John's office and a few communications re-addressed by Betty, whom Rexie had not forgotten. She hoped some day to be able to offer Betty a job at Bendibus but had neither the money nor a room to spare in the meantime.

As she turned them over, she noticed for the first time that "Urgent" was written across one of the envelopes from the office. Thinking at first it must be for John, since she was no longer a member of the staff, she was about to put it down when she saw that it was quite definitely for Miss Roxana Mary Drew and that her pen-name, Rachel Wynne, was in brackets beneath it.

Besides John's newspaper and the weekly Rexie had worked on, the firm published many papers, and expecting a plea for money for some cause or a request for the renewal of a subscription to one of their magazines John had subscribed for in her name, she slit it open.

To her surprise, it was neither. It began with expressions of surprised regret from her old newspaper that no answer had been received to former communications. The offer, it said, was still open and the directors would be glad to see her if there were any points she would like to discuss personally.

"Goodness!" she exclaimed. "What is all this about?" and, her curiosity now well aroused, she rushed to the basket into which she had deposited a lot of unopened papers, and typed envelopes from the office, thinking they were just impersonal notices of one kind or another.

At last she found two with three-halfpenny stamps and opened the one with the earlier date, the colour rising in her cheeks as she read it.

To her complete and almost bewildered surprise, it was a letter from the general secretary requesting that she would renew her association with the firm, and once more take charge of her late feature, "The Chimney Corner."

The directors knew, he said, that she was no longer living in London, but they did not think that would be any great drawback as so much of the "Corner" was occupied with correspondence which could be sent on to her from the office.

Although little or nothing was said about the reason for this change, Rexie was newspaper woman enough to guess what had happened.

When the then editor—possibly he had now been superseded—had taken her job away from her to give to a favourite of his own, she had had to

give up any rights she might claim to the feature, the title and so forth—even her pen-name was claimed as belonging to the paper. The last dispute, however, was short-lived, as the new “Rachel Wynne” who fancied herself a genius had no intention that her fresh and overwhelmingly successful feature (to be) should be mixed up with any other name than her own. She would even have liked to change the title of “The Chimney Corner,” but there the directors were obdurate.

In any case, “Rachel Wynne” was much too plain and uninteresting a name for Miss Winsome Brown (Winifred originally) so “The Chimney Corner” had changed its signature from Rachel Wynne to “Dolly Varden,” after a few more flowery suggestions had been turned down by the directors. “Dolly Varden” was easy on the tongue and they had a vague idea the name was connected with dress and fashion.

So “Dolly Varden” had started off with great éclat, flags flying in all directions and her photograph at the top of the column. She was pretty and photographed well, unlike Rexie who looked so depressingly plain in hers that it simply could not be used to win the hearts of the great British public, it would have frightened off a sea-lion.

But there was one snag for Dolly—not that she thought of it as a snag, it was to be one of her chief triumphs.

The “Corner” had a brief article each week, but the space was mostly taken up with answering letters from correspondents. It had gone very slowly at first with “Rachel Wynne,” but she had gradually made it a success. Now, it was the rule that all the letters to the writer of the “Corner” had to be addressed to the office of the newspaper and there a strict tally was kept of them, week by week, so that it could be seen at a glance by the directors whether the feature was going up in popularity or going down.

Dolly had done very well indeed at her prior job of writing up advertiser’s goods. Her sugary style and exaggerated enthusiasms for Myra’s face powder, Mother Welcome’s baby foods, or Nancy Grace’s children’s frocks, had been the very thing the advertisers wanted and Dolly would have done well to stick to her last. But Dolly had literary ambitions; she thought she was an unrecognised genius and she hated being on the advertising and not the literary staff.

On the advertising staff, too, she did not sign what she wrote and so, as she complained, her name could never be “known”—become a household word of world-wide reputation, in other words.

The editor was in love with her and may have honestly thought that women liked her sugary style since it was such a success at selling things.

Anyhow, he behaved rather meanly to Rexie at Dolly's instigation and managed to get "The Chimney Corner" for his beloved.

Rexie had read a few of her first effusions, been bored and given up the attempt and lately had been too busy to give them a thought.

Now she realised that, far from mounting by leaps and bounds, the correspondence had dwindled and dwindled, and there was no hiding that fact from the sharp eyes of the directors; Dolly had lost her post and now they were anxious to get "Rachel Wynne" reinstalled.

Nothing could have suited Rexie better; she had loved her "Corner" and made many friends through it. Though she knew perfectly well she was no genius, writing came easy to her and she loved it. She had indeed been terribly hurt over being so summarily dismissed and supplanted, though she had tried to hide her feelings of pain and humiliation. Now, to have her post reoffered to her lifted a great weight off her heart. She had grown used to her loss, but the sense of failure had always been there and now she felt like a plant that had had a stone placed over it, and then suddenly lifted off, or as if she had had a crick in her neck and could now raise her head again.

Besides the work would be of great interest to her, especially when John was busy too, and lastly, but by no means least, the money would be most welcome. John had written to say he was sending on "stacks of books," mostly his own library stored away when he left London, so she would have no lack of reference books with all his at hand.

Having read and reread her letter, she opened a large envelope and found it contained a few letters addressed to Dolly Varden at the office and a note from the secretary asking her to reply to them (as Rachel Wynne) in her first contribution, if she accepted the post.

She wondered what had happened to Dolly, for she was not vindictive, and hoped she had married her editor and settled down to be happy ever afterwards.

She looked forward more than ever now to John's return, for he would tell her all the office news, which she had missed since leaving the community life of a large newspaper office and all its interesting gossip.

She went down to the post office and sent off a telegram of acceptance, already dreaming of some of the things she would do with her thirty pounds a month. Her delay in answering had after all been all to the good, as the firm had increased its offer when she had not accepted at once.

She could have Flindy in to help her every day now and she would write to Betty and tell her she might soon be able to offer her a post—a room was

the only difficulty now, but there was the large attic right across the house that might be made into extra rooms when John had been consulted.

She was glad of Flindy in the next few days because people began to call; the minister's wife and Mrs. Storrs were the first, but others followed. The villagers themselves were, of course, too shy, and in any case, did not belong to the "calling" class, but they all tried to catch her eye and give her a friendly nod when they saw her, or spoke if they got the opportunity, and a note actually came from Leckies' shop to say that they *now* had Heinz soups in stock if she wanted any.

Rexie bore no ill-will; she was too happy to be accepted and have smiles and friendliness wherever she went instead of cold, still faces or dark frowns.

She rejoiced, too, because John and Sally and the children were now safe from insult. She need have no worries about how they would be treated.

CHAPTER XIV

"No bigger than a man's hand"

THERE were three short taps at the door of Bendibus and Rexie's heart stood still a moment and then went racing off. She was in her bedroom and went to the glass to look at herself, a thing she had never been wont to do except when necessary. A bright spot of geranium red had come into each cheek and her eyes were very bright.

It was Stratheilan's knock. Nothing would have induced Rexie to confess even to herself that a knock at the door could cause all that excitement, that it could thrill her through and through, and fill her heart so full of joy she felt it might burst—but there it was!

And there also, buried, deep, deep down, was a tiny misgiving, "no bigger than a man's hand," but it was unconfessed, too. . . .

Quickly she put a lock of hair into place; as she did so her expression changed to a slight look of anxiety. She did not allow the thought that brought it to come really to the surface, but there, again, it was. She wished, oh, how she wished that she were prettier, much, much prettier! She wished she were *lovely*.

Not a hope! By this time she was making sedately for the door, the red spots faded, no sign of perturbation on her face. Not a soul must guess about that wild flutter at her heart—not a soul, but least of all Stratheilan himself.

Mungo had heard the knock, too, and knew just as well as she did, who was at the door. He was there already, giving little barks of welcome for, though his mistress was first with Mungo, he had never forgotten Stratheilan.

He was standing waiting with, as usual, a gift of some kind in his hands. To-day, it was a large blue and white Chinese pot of preserved ginger. He had heard her say she liked it and had got it in the town.

He was always shy about his gifts and tried to leave them unnoticed, to drop them casually on the chest in the verandah, or smuggle them into a dark corner of the corridor when talking about something else.

A large pot of ginger, however, did not lend itself to any subterfuges of that kind; it had to be openly confessed to. However, he could always pretend it wasn't worth speaking about, or that, as he announced to-day, it was, in spite of appearances, merely a miniature of the real thing.

"I've brought you a little pot of ginger," said he, putting down the huge jar in a guilty sort of way after they had sedately shaken hands.

But that was too much for Rexie. She began to chuckle.

"I knew as soon as I saw that monster of a jar that you'd try and pretend it was about an inch high—I believe you would call yourself little—if you were offering it—or him—never can cope with grammar—to somebody!"

"I have already done that," he said at once, "to you." He smiled down at her, speaking in his deliberate way.

She coloured up quickly.

"Yes, I know—I didn't mean—I didn't mean to joke about that——" and before he could say anything, she rushed on, "John is coming to-morrow, I'm so excited. I wonder if he has shaved off his beard. You know he grew a beard, and he said he'd keep it on to let me see it, but I said No, to take it off at once. I simply couldn't bear a beard—I'd rather have a bare bear. Do you know about trains? He says about four, but I'll go about three if I can't find out the exact time, John isn't very good about trains."

By the time she had got all that out, she was feeling less breathless. He was still smiling as if he knew perfectly well she was just talking because she was shy of that unfortunate remark.

In fact, since that day at Carlisle, they were both much more shy, and self-conscious with each other. Before all the mischief had happened they had been as free and easy with one another as brother and sister, and Rexie was always wishing and hoping that those times would come back. She even tried to bring them back but never very successfully.

She made a brave attempt now, putting out a hand to take his and pulling him towards the sitting-room.

“Come and see John’s study, it’s all ready for him.”

His fingers closed instantly over hers as he allowed her to pull him along. As they stood at the door and admired it he still held her hand and she tried not to be so conscious of the firm clasp of his fingers over hers.

She glanced up at him as she tentatively tried to draw her hand away; he was looking at the room as if quite unconscious of the fingers held so firmly in his own.

Perhaps he has forgotten he is holding my hand, she thought, a little wryly, and began to call his attention to all her improvements.

The room was indeed a temptation to any writer. It was shelved out as it had been left by her uncle, and, as John’s books had come she had unpacked a number of them and put them in their places. “Just to look homely,” she explained now. “John likes to arrange his books himself, but he can bring in the rest of the boxes and carry on when he has got settled in.”

Across the window was a large table with inkstand and blotter and everything ready. Little could be seen of the walls for the shelves, but over the mantelpiece was a full-sized reproduction of Da Vinci’s *Lady with an Ermine* which John had once admired so much in one of the galleries.

Her uncle must have been a great admirer of Da Vinci’s, too, as the few pictures she had found packed ready for removal were reproductions of his works. She had kept the *Madonna Benois* for herself as she loved that picture of the happy Girl-Mother above all others of the Madonna. It had surprised her to see these pictures at Bendibus and she could only surmise that, like her other few treasures, they had originally come from her grandfather’s house. She did not suppose they were of any great value as reproductions, but the colours were fresh and lovely. She had put the *Madonna Benois* above the fire in the large room that had been the kitchen but was now turned into a living-room, the scullery having been made into a kitchen. It was not a very nice kitchen, but she had great plans for Bendibus once John was home, and the scullery was to be metamorphosed together with the attics and other rooms.

In John’s study, one of the carpets she had bought at the sale had been laid. It was old but not worn as it had long ago been banished to a spare bedroom when the farmhouse dining and drawing rooms were refurnished according to “new art” ideas. She had been glad to find it and another beautiful carpet of ancient lineage for the living-room as well as a number of lovely but despised Persian rugs.

“Far ower dull” had been the verdict of some at the sale. “I like a bit o’ colour masel’,” while others wanted to be up-to-date. “As I say, you might as weel be oot o’ the world as oot o’ the fashion.” There were two comfortable arm-chairs by the fire and two of the hermit’s carved chests made nice window-seats, and served as dumps for winter curtains and such like.

With the fire glowing and lights lit, it would be cosy in winter and now, with its newly laundered covers and curtains, it looked spring-like and fresh. There were still daffodils about the place and Mrs. Storrs had sent her a great basket of lovely tulips, so she had plenty of flowers.

“Flowers and books!” she said. “I think one could make any room nice with flowers and books—and one good picture,” she added, her eyes falling on the *Lady with an Ermine*.

This time he let her hand go, not quickly, but with a final close pressure as he stepped forward to examine the ermine in the picture.

“I would like that reproduction,” he said. “Some day we must have one at Morne.”

He had spoken dreamily but he suddenly turned and looked at her after he had spoken.

To his amazement he saw that her eyes had filled with tears.

For a moment he hesitated, then putting his arm around her drew her close and held her for a moment without speaking. Then he let her go without a word.

It was nothing more than a swift light caress, but her heart fluttered like a bird’s with its wings caught in some invisible cage. She was terrified he would feel its wild beating, but he was so calm and looked so unconscious, she was reassured.

“It was those silly tears,” she said to herself, but could not have told why they had risen to her eyes. “I expect if I’d been five years old he would have kissed me and thought as little about it.”

But he had stepped to the picture again and now turned to say, smiling:

“It is a little like you.”

“John said the *ermine* was,” she laughed a little gurgle of amusement and then frankly wiped her eyes. “I think it was that made my eyes water—I’m so glad he is coming home, for I’ve been so frightened about him. . . . I’m not really an emotional person, you know,” she went on to assure him after a pause. “You mustn’t be afraid of me crying. I hate weepy women and so does John. He’ll be frightened I’m going to cry when I see him to-

morrow, but I won't. I expect that's why he threatened me with the beard, he'd think I'd laugh so much I'd forget to cry."

"I am not afraid of you crying," he said. He turned from the picture and smiled his slow, secret smile. "No, indeed then I am not at all afraid of your crying . . . Indeed——" and there he stopped, although he was not given, like Rexie, to half-finished sentences. Perhaps, she thought, it was finished. He had a way of saying "Indeed" as if it were a whole sentence in itself and meant quite a lot.

Fan, who had at first greeted her offspring with a few sniffs and a tentative lick, then put up with his ebullitions of joy for a few minutes, now showed her disdain of emotionalism by giving young Mungo a sharp nip with her teeth, which, after one yelp, sent that young hero exploring under one of the large chairs with his tail well tucked in between his legs.

They both had to laugh and that relieved the situation for Rexie who had, for once, nothing to say in reply to Stratheilan's last statement.

"Come on," she said. "It's chilly in here. I didn't want to light the fire until the morning."

Stratheilan since their marriage at Carlisle had come to see her two or three times every week, and she now wore her engagement ring and it was generally accepted that they were engaged, only a few, including Mrs. Postgate and her cronies, had any idea that they were married, and, though that was also whispered about, it was too indefinite to take any hold.

As Stratheilan had said, no one seemed to bother about when or where they were married.

He had come over to-day for the puppy as, he said, it was high time the youngster had learned his lessons and been trained in the way he should go. To Rexie he was perfect just as he was, but Stratheilan took no heed of that prejudiced opinion. He and Fan were going to knock some sense into Mungo's head, for he had the makings of a good dog in him, Rexie having stuck well to the rules about regular meals and no over-feeding and observed all the injunctions about having a very few rules and insisting on them being kept.

Mungo had, moreover, taken possession of his basket and knew that he was safe there. It was his den, and once in, he knew he would never be struck in it, or routed out for punishment, though his sins were paid for when he did come out in the end.

He already accepted this and stayed snuggled up there as long as he could, after which he guiltily tried to keep out of the way till caught and whacked. This was the end of his trials and well he knew it. Not till he'd got

his deserts did he cease to creep about, the picture of misery and guilt. Then, all was over. Though, it must be confessed, his joyous ebullitions and overflow of spirits were often in danger of getting him into disgrace again.

But even Rexie could not say he was obedient, and as for coming in to heel, he just didn't, and Rexie was always too sorry for him to keep him on the lead for long, his dejected look as he padded along behind was too much for her.

"Will you stay for supper," she asked Stratheilan now as they crossed the corridor.

It was not long after tea but she knew they had dinner in the evening at Storrs and just a very light snack for lunch, often carried in their pockets, as so many of the animals were housed in the hills at some distance from the house, so she liked to prepare a good substantial dinner when he stayed at Bendibus for it.

But he said No, as he was spending the next afternoon with John and herself, he would go back at once to get on with some work. But he wanted to arrange about meeting the train. He would call for her in the car and take her to the station, but they could start early if she would like to do some shopping in the town before train time.

This arranged, he sat for some time playing with a lead he had brought for Mungo and answering Rexie's observations in an absent-minded sort of way.

At last he looked up, a frown on his brow.

"I am having a letter from my mother," he said. "She is sending you her love."

Rexie knew something was disturbing him when he seemed to translate his thoughts from the Gaelic.

He continued softly. "She put a kiss in a little square in the corner for you—for me to give you."

He did not look up at her as he continued to pleat the leather thong, but he smiled to himself, his mouth going up at one corner.

"Oh," said Rexie, "that was kind—I mean sending me her love—I must write to her—and you send her——" she stopped; she had been going to say, "a kiss from me," but thought the less said about that the better.

"My mother does not quite understand how it is . . . with us," he went on.

Rexie gazed at him. She had nothing to say to this.

“She has a great many plans—she is writing to you. She is wishful for us to go and stay with her for a week-end.”

“Oh!” Rexie was still innocently gazing at him, wondering why he spoke so jerkily and seemed so disturbed about his mother’s letter if that was all there was in it.

“Yes, it is her birthday next Sunday—she knows I had arranged to have that week-end off to go to Carlisle.”

Rexie thought then that he must be anxious for her to go, as it was evidently arranged that he should get away, but did not want to press her, so she said at once:

“Well, yes, perhaps I could. Flindy could look after John, though it’s a pity Sally won’t be here but she doesn’t come till the following Tuesday.”

To her surprise he did not seem at all as pleased at this as she expected.

He said nothing and to all appearance was intensely interested in the way the buckle on Mungo’s strap worked. He kept putting it together and then pulling it out as though he’d never seen a strap buckled before.

“That’s if . . . I go,” she said doubtfully.

“Yes . . .” he said, just as doubtfully.

Suddenly it dawned on her that he was not being very pressing with his mother’s invitation. Why! He doesn’t want me! she thought, and the thought brought such a pang that she jumped up as if to shake the pain out of her heart.

He rose as she did so and began fastening the lead to Mungo’s collar.

“You will be hearing from my stepmother,” he said. He always used the words mother or stepmother indifferently, just as they came and as if it did not matter which he hit upon, then he seemed to be hesitating again.

“But whatever you do I wanted you to know it is being all right. I will see to it,” he added slowly.

Suddenly Rexie was sure he did not want her to go and her pride rose up in arms. He need have no fear that she would go where she was not wanted. Perhaps that mysterious Isobel Rose was to be there. Her face went white as Fan jumped up and they made for the door. She was bitterly hurt, though she would not have confessed it under the rack. No, indeed. She assured herself she was perfectly indifferent and even managed a careless laugh as she bid Mungo good-bye.

“I expect Mungo is just as glad to get away from me for a bit,” she said to herself, having, of course, at once decided that Stratheilan was tired of her.

So she did not hold out her hand as usual when he stood at the door ready to go, his old Balmoral tucked under his arm, Mungo's lead in his hand. She pretended she thought he needed both hands.

"Well, good-bye," she said lightly and casually. "I'll see you to-morrow, but I'd really rather not go with you to the party."

"Yes," he said and hesitated. For one brief moment Rexie persuaded herself he was now going to excuse himself from meeting John. Then he spoke.

"You see," he said, gently, "my mother is very old-fashioned . . . and she does not quite understand about . . . about us . . . and . . . *and she has only one spare room.*"

With that he was gone, striding hastily off across the garden, not even lingering or looking up to wave his hand as he shut the garden gate.

He was gone, leaving Rexie staring after him more scarlet than any boiled lobster and for one moment glued to the doorstep.

Then she went through the door with a rush, shut it and stood there staring at it, one blush following another.

Oh, what a fool she had been! What a complete and utter and hopeless fool. Why hadn't she thought of that at once? Why could she never see things? Why had they to be banged into her head with a sledge hammer?

Of course, anyone else would have remembered that his mother's house, in spite of its rather grand name, was just a small cottage. Probably there were no more bedrooms than her own, the "butler's," who was really just a handy man about the place, the maid's, another "ancient of days"—and the spare bedroom, and in any case, he would loathe mentioning their private concerns, and instead of helping Stratheilan out, as anyone—*anyone* with the brains of a beetle would have done, instead of understanding and rising instantly to a hint, as any creature with a grain of modesty would have risen, she had forced him, yes, absolutely *forced* him to say . . . to say . . . to say . . . Well, to say *that*.

Poor Rexie! All her gay light-heartedness over John's arrival was quashed by this awful happening. She could neither work nor eat.

Whenever she took up anything, she stopped and laid it down again to ask herself how she could be such a nonentity. Why, in his mercy, the Lord hadn't given her at least a grain of wit.

No sooner did she sit down than she got up again. She tried to take her tea but could not swallow because another reflection on her crassness would choke her—to think that he had *had* to say that to her! Nincompoop! Chump! Dunderhead!

She thought she would never get over it, not even if she lived to be eighty. However, things were not quite as bad as all that!

The terrible affair was gradually driven into the background by other happenings. As a rule Rexie's sense of humour would have come to her aid, but she seemed to have lost it altogether in regard to Stratheilan, at least at the moment; no doubt it would pop up again, for a real sense of humour is irresistible and often betrays its young possessor into laughter when tragedy is the accepted order of the day.

But there was one serious thing that she did not notice in the midst of her perturbation over this trifle. Somehow that cloud between them had grown a little bigger, not over the incident itself, but because in railing at her stupidity she did not include her suspicion about Isobel Rose as part of it. Oh, no. Isobel stuck like a small thorn in her heart.

CHAPTER XV

"I have a tale to tell"

"MY goodness, gracious me!" exclaimed Rexie, too perturbed to be polite. "Do I look as old as you?"

She had just been set down on the platform after a bear's hug from John, whose lean face was covered with lines and wrinkles, whose fair hair had now been sun-dried to the colour of hay instead of being tinged with gold, and whose rather sallow complexion had been changed to a rich burnt sienna, under tropical suns.

"Gosh no!" said John. "Nor half as good-looking! I thought all this country air and cream would have made a beauty of you, fattened you up and given you some colour, but you're as peaky as ever—— Who's this?"

For John now saw she was leading him to a red-headed figure who was not only much broader than himself, but topped him by an inch or two. As they approached John straightened himself up from his customary stoop as if the other's straightness had unconsciously affected him.

"It's—it's Mr. Urquhart, but you must call him 'Stratheilan,'" said Rexie, quickly under her breath. "I will tell you about it later."

John gave her a startled look. "Doesn't seem much of an 'it' to me," he said to cover with his usual half-humorous acceptance of Rexie's statements, the slight shock he had received, not so much by her words as by her decidedly guilty air. He was as quick in the uptake as Rexie herself and did

not miss the small red flag, shaped like a geranium petal that had flown into her cheeks, nor the slight stammer on mentioning the name.

“Stratheilan,” John repeated rather doubtfully, but had time for no more as they had reached the tall stranger who was being introduced.

Rexie had been glad of Stratheilan’s offer to meet John with the car, as taxis were rare birds in Presterby and John had said he had a lot of luggage. Though the old car might be shabby, it was roomy and built to carry big loads as befitted a farm car meant for all sorts of uses but not for ornament.

But the drive to the station had been a little uncomfortable, not that Stratheilan showed the slightest sign of discomfiture or self-consciousness; he did not! But Rexie could not help remembering his departure on the previous afternoon and whenever she did, that tiny flag flew into her cheek and she became very still and stiff.

Stratheilan, however, had not seemed to notice, or to consider there was anything to be awkward about, and had talked neither more nor less than usual.

Mrs. Urquhart’s letter had come that morning and Rexie had more than ever appreciated his difficulty, for the Sunday was her birthday, and she was having a family gathering as far as she could manage it; it was made very clear that Stratheilan and his wife were to be the principal persons there.

He had, however, to Rexie’s relief, made no reference to the subject. It would have to come up, but “please not just now,” Rexie had prayed to the powers that be as she sat by his side gripping her hands under the rug he had tucked round her with his deliberate care.

At the station he had kept well in the background until their greetings were over and after shaking hands with John immediately began to busy himself with the baggage of all kinds that was being piled around him on the platform. John demurred at his large cases going into the car and suggested a hire for them, but before his sentence was finished Stratheilan had hoisted the largest on his shoulders and was striding towards the car.

“Good lord!” said John, “I hope he doesn’t expect me to do that,” but a hefty porter appearing saved the situation, for John did not look at all strong, and he and Stratheilan had soon stowed away the lot, both being perfectly familiar with the stowing-away of anything from a calf to a hen-house in a private car.

“Christopher Columbus,” John was thinking as he looked at the tall Highlander, “he could swallow our small Rexie at one bite! But perhaps I’m being precipitous—let’s hope so. Young Roxana Mary is far too much of a babe to get married. Good heavens! it seems no time since I used to steal

spoonfuls of her condensed milk. Besides I need the absurd little primrose myself and promised Dick Challoner he'd get a look in. I'd much rather have Dicky Challoner than seven feet of brawny Scot for a brother-in-law."

Stratheilan would soon have told him he was a *Highlander*, not a Lowland *Scot*, but he was too busy stowing away luggage and leaving a comfortable space at the back for Rexie, John could sit on the floor as far as he was concerned, though he did manage a seat for him, too.

"You will be wishful to talk together," he said in his slowest, most precise way, and John looked at Rexie with a comical air of calling for help as he assisted her in and took the seat beside her—the one beside the driver being occupied by a large case and a couple of lobsters.

Not a word was said by the intent figure at the wheel as they swung out of Presterby, mounted the bare heights of Todd's Rigg and then dipped steeply down to the warm sheltered valley where Bendibus lay at the edge of the ravine, but Rexie chattered so much it would have been difficult for him to have got a word in edgeways anyhow.

Nor would he stay a moment after dinner, indeed he would not have stayed to a meal or to have a drink had he not seen how shocked was John's hospitable soul at the very idea of his leaving when a meal was ready. There were bottles of one kind and another in John's bag, too, for he knew better than to leave that kind of thing to Rexie.

"Have a drink," he said, "to welcome me home to Bendibus—you're not a teetotaller, are you?" which, to Rexie's surprise, seemed as great a joke to Stratheilan as to John, which is not to say that either ever took more than a hospitable glass or two with friends, or a friend.

Then when Stratheilan rose, John grabbed his arm.

"Man," he said, "I've got a couple of lobsters. You mustn't miss a lobster in its prime season, and Rexie has those ducks she's been boasting about—you can help her to dish up the ducks while I see to the lobsters."

John and Sally were the gourmets of the family when they had all lived more or less together and their meals were shared, Sally doing the cooking and John helping when he was at home, for John liked what he called "fancy cooking."

He could mix a salad, turn out a wonderful omelette, or produce some marvellous French concoction, but the plain cooking and sweets he left to Sally.

Stratheilan assured John that he was better at peeling potatoes and drawing birds than cooking them, but could set a table for two courses if more were not expected of him.

However, Flindy had come up for the evening, so everything was ready but the lobster salad which John insisted on producing to Flindy's dismay, but John had a way with him and the two of them were soon, as Rexie said, "as thick as thieves."

Altogether it was a jolly party. Stratheilan was very much a man's man, as Rexie discovered to her surprise, and as John was of the same kidney, they hit it off and were very quickly at ease.

Indeed Rexie was now and then rather the third wheel to the cart when they were off on their masculine exchanges, but they were both too polite and too fond of her to let that last more than a moment or two and she was soon drawn in again.

Naturally, Stratheilan was intensely interested in all John's adventures and showed a knowledge and grasp of the situation that considerably surprised him, for John had been afraid at their introduction that the Highlander would be a bit heavy in hand.

John, too, was interested in animals, not only as a sportsman, though he had been good at keeping the pot going in Africa, but, like Stratheilan, from many other aspects. Indeed John would have been delighted to have him stay and talk till midnight, but Stratheilan surmised that Rexie was dying to have her brother to herself and went off shortly after the meal.

Before doing so, however, he asked in his most grave and courteous manner, and rather to the embarrassment of the easy-going John, if he could have an interview with him on the following day.

"Right you are," said John. "Come to dinner and we'll make a night of it," which hardly sounded the right answer to that dignified request, but seemed to suit them both all right.

Rexie felt, rather to her chagrin, a bit disappointed when Stratheilan had gone. Everything seemed to have gone a little dull for a few minutes. She had thought that with John there everything would seem perfect, and felt decidedly uneasy that it didn't. She had still no idea of eventually going off to Morne to live with Stratheilan. As a matter of fact, she did not let herself think very much about it. There was plenty of time, Stratheilan would be at Storrs for months still and anything might happen in the meantime. Besides she didn't feel that that registry office affair was a real wedding, so she kept a sort of protective mist all around the future and just thought about John and Sally and the children and all the fun *they* would have together.

Whatever she did she determined that she mustn't fall in love with Stratheilan, because they had just been "sort of married" for convenience and she wasn't going to fall in love with anyone who wasn't in love with

her. Of course, he said nice things to her sometimes, but that was just because he thought he ought to.

His mother had said how chivalrous he was . . . but who was Isobel Rose? Rexie had tried to bury Isobel Rose at once and put a big stone on top of her, when Mrs. Urquhart had made that queer remark to her stepson, "*What about Isobel Rose?*"

Stratheilan had just glanced at his mother and said nothing, and she had immediately gone on to something else as the subject was of no consequence. But Stratheilan was deep. As deep as the sea.

However, Rexie wasn't going to think about anything like that. Back went the stone on the top of Isobel Rose—perhaps with rather a bigger bang than was necessary under such complete indifference!

Rexie soon recovered her spirits. It was so exciting to take John round the house, listen to his enthusiastic outpourings and tell him her ideas for improvements. He was just as keen on them as she was, once they were explained to him, but Bendibus, as it was, quite contented him for the moment. It certainly did look attractive. Both Stratheilan and Tam had been lavish with gifts of flowers, they were in every room and with electricity costing nothing, lights and fires were everywhere for this gala occasion.

All the china, the Chelsea ornaments and other odds and ends she had bought at the sale now shone from scrubblings in soap and water and the furniture had been polished to the last degree. Rexie was really house proud for once.

As for John's study it entranced him so much he said he was starting to get his books in order and his papers sorted immediately after breakfast next morning.

His bedroom was next door, both as far as possible from the living-room where Sally and she and the children would be. They would be rather crowded till the great space under the high-pitched roof had been turned into rooms lighted with dormer windows, but John had at once seen all the possibilities of the attics and was going to see about the improvements at once.

Among Tam's purchases for Bendibus after Rexie left the sale had been a small summerhouse. This was to be a playroom for James and the "Dorky-bird," as John called Dorcas and they now planned an excursion to Presterby to buy a few playthings, a blackboard, paints, and so on for rainy days, so that the grown-ups could "ensure peace and pursue it" indoors.

"And what about you?" John had asked on seeing his study, for he knew all about Rexie's "Chimney Corner." "You'll have to share a corner with

me.”

But Rexie showed him what she called her bed-study with its divan and writing-table, explaining that she felt selfish taking the biggest bedroom, but as they were all just cubby holes, John said she could spare her self-reproaches.

All this time Rexie had talked at her quickest pace—and that was no mean one—because of the questions and explanations that she knew had to come about Stratheilan. She managed to avoid the evil moment a few times but John was hot on the scent of some mystery and was not to be put off; hardly, indeed, a mystery to John, for he had almost at once made up his mind that Rexie was in love with the big, quiet Highlander and very shy about it. Whether it was reciprocal he had not been sure until Stratheilan had asked him for a private interview.

That, John took it, meant he was going to ask for Rexie’s hand in the good old-fashioned way.

At last John saw that Rexie would never pluck up courage to introduce the subject herself, so he took the bull by the horns when they returned to the parlour—as John had at once begun to call the living-room—to make some coffee on the little electric stove left there for such odds and ends of cooking.

“Come on, Rexie,” he said, “I’ve been waiting all evening for you to introduce the subject. Out with it! Who and what is this red-headed chief from the Western Isles? His name is not Stratheilan, I gather.”

“Well, it’s really Urquhart,” said Rexie, relieved on the whole to have it out, but still in a welter of embarrassment at the thought of the surprises in store for the innocent John, “but his place on a little island called Morne is named Stratheilan, and that is how he is called Stratheilan—as farmers in the Cheviots are called by the names of their farms, at least, he says that’s not quite it, but it will do, and he is studying furs and what they call farming them, breeding the fur-bearing animals and making cross-breeds and things and curing and dressing the furs. He is studying all about it at a place called Storrs with people of the same name and has still some months there before he has finished his course, and *then* he wants to start a fur farm on Morne because there is no industry there, just fishing and farming, and they are all very poor, and he has some new ideas of his own about cross-breeds and about dressing furs and . . .” but Rexie had gone at such a rate she had to stop for breath.

“And——” said John, refilling his pipe after a moment’s silence, but Rexie had completely stuck for once in her life.

"There is so much," she said at last, "and it's rather complicated, I hope you won't mind, John."

"Are you engaged to him?" asked John—"pending my consent *in loco parentis* I mean. I suppose that is what he is coming for to-morrow."

"Oh, no! I mean, not exactly. You see . . ."

Rexie had blushed to the roots of her hair and now sat forward on the extreme edge of her chair, staring at John with bright, startled eyes. "It's very complicated," she repeated.

"Suppose," said John, striking a match and settling well back in his own arm-chair, "suppose we have that cup of coffee and you begin at the very beginning, as you used to say, and tell me all about it."

Though John was rather less than ten years older than Rexie he had always stood for all the parental control she had ever had and she looked up to him as something rather more than an older brother. She was even a little afraid of how he would take it when he heard all the story. It seemed to her now that he would not only be amazed but anything but pleased when he heard of all she had done without consulting him, and she was frightened to begin.

"I couldn't tell you, John, or ask you anything about it, because you weren't here and . . . and . . . something had to be done at once."

John had stopped lighting his pipe.

With the lighted match motionless in his hand, he stared at her for a moment, knitting his brows, then he shook it out.

"What's all this, Rexie?"

Rexie had gone very white.

"Are you engaged to this Mr. Urquhart of Stratheilan?"

He glanced at her hand but Rexie had taken off her engagement ring before she went to the station. Her wedding ring was on her middle finger, but he did not notice that.

"Is that it, Rexie?" He broke the silence very gently, seeing her white face.

"Ye-es, I mean, no, John. I mean we are . . . sort of married." She stopped, appalled at his horrified face. "Just *sort of* . . ." she repeated hopefully, as if that decidedly equivocal statement would make things better.

She was mistaken, very much mistaken!

"What—what the devil do you mean? or does he mean?" John had jumped up from his chair, furious with rage. "There's nobody going to 'sort of' marry my sister. Good Lord, Rexie! What are you talking about?"

Rexie had stepped back, her white face twisted with fear and dismay.

“Oh, John, don’t be angry, don’t be angry with me. I’ve only got you. I don’t know what I’ve done! You must help me. Oh, John, it’s all been so terrible. You don’t know—I’ve wanted you so much!”

For at the sight of John’s horror, at his overwhelming anger, at his face working with rage, his hands clenched as if ready to deal some frightful blow, it suddenly became certain to Rexie that she *had* done something appalling. That she had actually gone through the ceremony of marriage with a stranger she hardly knew, whom John did not know and whom he might dislike when he did know him. Indeed, it was plain to be seen at the moment that John would have felled Stratheilan in his wrath if he had been in the vicinity; for John was hot-headed and would never have considered the fact that Stratheilan could have knocked him down like a ninepin.

Rexie had one of those absurdly sympathetic natures which always sees the side of the person talking to them. It is as if their own individuality was paralysed for the moment. It awakens again very quickly, but for Rexie, everything was immediately blotted out by John’s indignation and horror. She was horrified too and frightened as well.

But John was exceedingly fond of Rexie and the sight of her white, terrified face alarmed and distressed him. In any case, most of his indignation was against Stratheilan, though part of it was against himself for leaving her unprotected, knowing, as he put it to himself, what an innocent little donkey she was, in spite of all her quick wits.

Left alone she had, as he might have known, just got into one hopeless mess after another, lost her job—he’d have quickly put a spoke in the wheel of that obvious plot—got knocked down by a car, lost their flat, thank goodness it had just been a furnished place or she would have lost their furniture, too, and then nearly starved to death, instead of going to the proprietor of his paper and asking for help; and now, worst of all that could have happened, she had got herself into some matrimonial mix-up with a stranger of whom she was evidently terrified. He had taken her obvious sensitiveness to Urquhart’s every move for the beginnings of falling in love, but now—he assured himself—he saw quite clearly that she was afraid of the man, not in love with him at all! Well, first of all, he must get to the bottom of the whole thing.

“Sit down, Rexie,” he said, more gently, controlling his rage, “and tell me all about it. Begin at the beginning and tell me exactly what has happened.”

He got out his pipe again, more to give her assurance than because he felt like smoking, and Rexie, glad to do what she was told, sat down and beginning where our story begins, in Mrs. Flint's wretched boarding-house, told him the whole history of those last weeks, answering his sharp questions, as one point or another seemed doubtful to him, and, all the time, as he quite expected, blaming herself for everything.

But as the story developed, his opinion of Stratheilan changed a little. After all, Rexie was no great heiress to be rushed into a marriage for the sake of her possessions. She had nothing and there had been no pressure brought to bear on her. As far as John could see, "the man" had genuinely done his best to straighten things out for Rexie. John could not quite understand about this marriage; it did seem she was "sort of married," as she had said, but what did that amount to? He would go into that with Stratheilan at once. The Highlander was evidently straight, that was one thing. You would know exactly where you were, dealing with an honourable man.

Of course, if all Rexie said was correct, they were both, in John's eyes, outrageous fools; a pair of less worldly-wise creatures you'd go far to find. Hang it all! no man, even if he were half dead with cold, would climb into a girl's window. But, of course, Stratheilan had not known she was there. John had forgotten that for the moment, but remembered in time. Stratheilan had thought the place was empty and everything might have been all right if it hadn't been for that damned busybody at the post office!

Having silently and deeply cursed poor Mrs. Postgate, John sat and considered the story, staring at the pipe held in his hands.

Suddenly he twisted into a knot of laughter as the whole absurd story struck his keen sense of humour. To Rexie's amazement, and not a little to her indignation, he shot out his long legs, leaned back and went into a paroxysm of mirth.

"Gods and little fishes, Rexie!" he exclaimed. "You beat the Dutch!"

Rexie sat up like a jack-in-the-box. "Well! I knew Sally would laugh," she exclaimed, accusingly, "but I did think you wouldn't, John."

"Then you thought wrong, Rexie, my love," said John and unrepentantly wiped his eyes with a large silk handkerchief. "You'd make a codfish laugh."

As anything more intensely solemn than a codfish Rexie could not imagine, she gave a weak sort of smile.

"But I didn't think you'd laugh at me, John."

“No? Well, I suspect that solemn, long-legged Scot of yours lets himself go occasionally, when you’re not there. I caught something uncommonly like a twinkle in that intense blue eye of his once or twice, and that firm mouth has a sardonic twist at the corners, as if he often kept in a laugh. Doesn’t he *ever* laugh at you?”

“Oh, no!——” Rexie began in a shocked voice, then came to a full stop to consider. “At least . . . not like you do.”

“Oh, has his own way, has he? Are you in love with him, Rexie?”

She jumped at the sudden direct attack, then to her dismay, blushed scarlet.

“*No*, of course I’m not!” she denied vigorously.

“All right, all right,” said John soothingly, “much better if you were, all the same, my girl, that’s to say if it were reciprocal—nothing to worry about then. Another wedding if you felt like it, and the poor devil of a bridegroom could be got to go through with it all again—once would be more than enough for me.”

“Of course, I *like* him.” Rexie had been paying not the slightest attention to John’s views on weddings. “I do like him very much.” (It never dawned on Rexie that this was becoming a sort of defensive parrot-cry with her.)

“Ah! that’s better. Well, I expect he likes you very much, too. It wouldn’t exactly surprise me, considering the number of my poor colleagues you’ve knocked over like ninepins. In fact, it would not have astounded me if he’d fallen in love at first sight—especially if you had on that round fuzzy hat affair that that devil, Sally, made you—warranted to kill at a thousand yards.”

John was recovering his equanimity; things weren’t so bad; he’d quite liked the Chief (John was often to call Stratheilan the Chief, or the Chieftain)—not his sort exactly, but a man’s a man for a’ that, as the Scots say.

“But he didn’t.” Rexie had paid no heed to what she called John’s nonsense, only to his statement about love at first sight. “I mean he says he did but the awful thing is, John, that I think he’s really *chivalrous*.”

She paused to let this formidable statement sink in and then went on. “You must remember that when he speaks to you about me.”

“If he talks to me about being chivalrous in marrying you, I’ll knock his big nose through his crass head!”

“Oh, John, do be sensible; of course, he won’t. He doesn’t think he’s being chivalrous, he doesn’t know it, but he’s made like that and brought up

like that, and you must remember that and . . . and . . .”

“Take him with a grain of salt,” John finished for her in his own words.

“Ugh-hum,” Rexie nodded with a half smile.

But John had turned very serious again.

“You should have waited till I came home, Roxana (he only called her Roxana when he was very serious indeed). It seems to me you don’t know your own mind and no one should rush into marriage without being very sure of themselves; sorry for being so obvious, but the obvious never seems to strike you, my child.

“And what if you *are* married, lawfully married, with no ‘sort of’ about it? As far as I can make out it was a registry office you went to—none of these hanky-panky Scotch weddings, jumping over anvils, and so forth.” John wasn’t quite as silly and ignorant as he was making out, he just wanted to lighten his lecture a little. “You would find it a devil of a business getting free again.

“However, that’s enough for to-night. I’ll see what Stratheilan has to say to-morrow, though I’m glad I’ve got the whole story from you first.”

Neither John nor Rexie slept well that night. Rexie tossed and turned, worrying in case John said anything to Stratheilan that would embarrass the situation more than ever, and John lay awake for hours swearing at himself because he hadn’t got home in time to stop the whole thing and wondering what, in heaven’s name, would be the end of it all.

CHAPTER XVI

“Oh, Young Lochinvar!”

THE station at Presterby was even duller and more ugly than the usual station of a small town. Just a dreary sort of halting place without even a really gay bookstall to liven it up, since the dour Scot who looked after it made as little display as he could of colour, showing for the most part the newspapers and farming weeklies his favourite customers liked.

On a spring afternoon that had suddenly grown dark and chilly with showers of sleet and rain, it was looking its very worst and most depressing.

A few people were huddled together on the seats, others shivered in drab waterproofs with their collars turned up and hats pulled over their heads, looking the picture of misery as sleet blew about and clouds darkened the sky so that the gloom deepened and deepened.

Into this dark, wet scene of dull depression John, Stratheilan and Rexie hurried just a few minutes before the express was signalled and they only had time to take in an impression of cold, wet, grey misery when, with a great rush of steam, smoke and black smuts, the train thundered in and came to a halt.

Then, almost immediately, a carriage door was flung open and out into the wetness and greyness tumbled a riot of colour and gaiety.

Looking for all the world like a bunch of tulips or a string of bright and airy balloons, Sally, Dorcas and James, clad in oiled silk mackintoshes of scarlet and blue and lemon yellow, bloomed out into the surrounding drabness.

Tall Sally in shiny lemon yellow, with a hat that wasn't so much a hat as an inspiration, came first, dragging along Dorcas, who hung on to a bright green and purple parrot (luckily a stuffed one) and a marmalade kitten (very much alive). Dorcas was a balloon of bright hypatica blue. Last of the trio came James, who, not to be outdone by his women folk, was also wearing a lady's oil-silk mackintosh—in scarlet! As Sally explained later, nothing would induce James to wear his quiet and manly fawn Burberry after he had seen the splendours of Sally's and Dorcas's cheap mackintoshes, bought in a hurry when a deluge came on after they left the house. He would also go gay. James had chosen a rich tomato red and, indeed, looked exactly like a very ripe tomato, for not only was he round himself but he had two birdcages and a fret-saw machine under cover, none of which treasures must be exposed to a drop of rain.

Not that there were birds in the cages, it was against James's principles to cage birds. One of them held two white mice and the other a tiny black rabbit.

The group immediately focused the attention of all beholders.

Anything as elegant as Sarah—in her cheap waterproof—had never been seen on Presterby platform! Her tall slender figure was the perfection of haughty grace. Her suit—just seen within the open mackintosh—her shoes, her bag, everything was perfect, everything elegant.

Her hair brushed into shining rolls looked as if she had just left a hairdresser's studio. Her rather long, distinguished face was made up a little but with such art that one could only guess at it; one felt that she had a perfect complexion and that the slight touch of artificiality was deliberate and meant to heighten the fragile elegance of her appearance.

Rexie made a dash and enveloped all this elegance in a bear's hug that knocked the marvellous hat completely to one side, while John, though he

did not exactly hug Sally, looked, to Stratheilan's evident astonishment, no more impressed than Rexie at all this ultra-fashionable sophistication as he slapped the vision on her shoulders and hailed her with hearty joy.

Sally, herself, did not seem at all put out at having her hat knocked over one eye and her elegant shoulder slapped, she righted the hat with a masterly touch and held out an ear for John to kiss, which he did rather gingerly.

"I must mind the paint," said he.

"Paint! You ignoramus! Nobody uses *paint* these days. Hi, mind those children or they may smother you in fleas. I caught three in the carriage, it's that rabbit!"

This was addressed to Stratheilan who was relieving James of some of his gear.

"The Country!" Sally was now saying to Rexie. "Home-spun suits from Harris, thick-soled brogues, and felt hats from Henry Heath, the proper wear! Dash my buttons! said I to myself. I'll go dressed up for London, it will give people something to talk about and Rexie will love to see the very latest fashion. John may wonder what has hit him. Bless his heart, he likes them simple! but he'll come up smiling."

"Then," she went on without a pause, "when we were all done up to the nines, the rain came on so we stopped at a stall in Berwick Market and arrayed ourselves like Solomon in all his glory. I did think James would have chosen a sensible garment, but not he, he was all for a bit of colour, like that old dear in some book or other, and I hadn't the heart to refuse him anything, kittens, mice, rabbits or mackintoshes. I thought we'd never get out of that 'Pets' shop near the station. I'm sure I've got twenty fleas, I can feel them walking about. Well, James," she finished up, addressing the tomato, "you will just have to wear your old school mac. when you discover what a ticket you look. Far be it for me to dash anyone's spirits on starting for a holiday—but hush! we are observed!"

But it was not only the mackintoshes that attracted attention, there was a gay spirit of fun and good nature about the party, with its cages, cases, trunks, stuffed parrots and live-stock, that brought smiles to every face. Sally herself had a large generous mouth and when she smiled she was irresistible.

While Stratheilan stood silently waiting with James in tow, Sally and Rexie were exchanging mutual witticisms at each other's expense.

"Holy Columbus!" exclaimed Rexie, who mixed her expletives as well as her metaphors. "You look like the Duchess of Wrexhe or Lady Arabella de Courcy. Do you think you ought to know us? You can pretend I'm the cook

if you like, I'm not smart enough for a lady's maid, and John could be the footman in mufti, or something."

"Yes," declared Sally, serenely, "I thought of that, it would put you both in your places. John's been getting too uppish for words lately. How do you like my new rig-out for the country, John?"

"You look as daft as a broom," said John without turning a hair. "Come on and be introduced to our friend Urquhart of Stratheilan."

For he had seen Sally's quick eye resting on the red head towering above the rest of the crowd.

"Urquhart of Stratheilan! I thought as much! Oh, John, do you really know him?" exclaimed Sally. "What luck! I've fallen in love with him."

There was no shyness or reticence about Sally, but for all her ultra-smart appearance and her quick tongue she was the simplest and kindest of souls. She was a genius at dress, as the exclusive dress shop where she was employed well knew or they would not have kept her on their staff throughout her many breakdowns. Acting often as mannequin to show off their most ultra styles, she had to know exactly how to display them, the twist of a bow, or the cock of a hat could make or mar any outfit—but trust Sally to bring out every lovely line and every piquancy of any model! Nevertheless, she was far happier in an old overall frying kippers for breakfast, as John and Rexie well knew. Her ultra smartness was all fun to her to be put on or taken off with the same zest and careless ease. The children adored her and she returned their love in full measure, as was plain to be seen when her kind laughing eyes rested on them a moment before she went forward to be introduced to Stratheilan.

Dorcas had flung herself first on Rexie and then on "Uncle John," hugging and kissing them as if she would never let them go. But small, solemn James had been too early beaten into shape by strangers for any capers of that kind. He was afflicted with a nervous shyness that kept him from even obtruding himself on anyone, or from even expecting any notice taken of himself; even his toys had always been played with for a little while and then, his time up, passed on to another. He had had nothing of his own, not even a home.

He was standing aside looking nervously fearful and rather like a red balloon just about to be pricked with a pin, when suddenly he felt himself lifted up from behind and swung on to the shoulders of a giant. Involuntarily, his hands grasped the thick red hair and held on.

"I'm your horse," said a strange voice. "My name's Ewen. I'm a good horse at hills and at getting out of crowds. Shall we go?"

This was something that sounded like common sense to James at six and a bit. Much better than your “How do you do’s” and “Quite well, thank you’s.”

“I’ve got a rabbit,” said he.

“Yes, I see he’s a Dutch rabbit. They’re easily reared, and your mice are a good breed, too, I see. You must come and see my skunks and all my wild animals.”

From that moment James was Stratheilan’s man.

John now introduced Stratheilan to Sally, though “what they made of each other,” as he said later to Rexie, was beyond him. “I expect she put the fear of death on him,” he ended up, rather wondering that Rexie seemed to have nothing to say.

Stratheilan, having made his stiff little bow, took refuge, so to speak, with James who rode in state to the old chariot, where he sat by “the lordly one,” holding the gear handle, ready for him to change gears, and bursting with a pride that filled his small heart to overflowing.

“I must tell Sally at once,” Rexie was thinking to herself, as they started over the hills to Bendibus. Sally was behind with John and Dorcas, while Rexie sat beside James in front. They were all chattering merrily together except Stratheilan and James who sat in contented silence, James with a serious and intent a gaze on his gear handle as Stratheilan’s on the road.

Never for a moment before Sally’s arrival had Rexie given a thought to her in connection with Ewen. Now she was calling herself an idiot and various other things for the strange stab that had pierced her heart when she caught Sally’s intent look in his direction.

Of course, she might have known that Sally, who liked big men and talked a lot of nonsense about “Sheiks” and “Lords of the Isles,” and “Hemen,” would be immediately interested in Stratheilan. She should have told Sally before she came that they were engaged, but she had just thought she would tell her the whole story later on when they were at leisure, after the first rush of greetings and getting settled in were over.

And then Sally was so attractive, not pretty exactly, but distinguished looking when her face was in repose, and simply lovely when she smiled.

Not that Stratheilan had seemed even to notice her so far. Except for his stiff polite bow he had seemed quite unaware of her presence and now sat staring intently and silently at the road, his reddish eyebrows drawn over his keen eyes, his lips folded tightly—quite oblivious, seemingly, to anything but his driving, while Sally chattered away behind him giving a humorous shrug now and then as she glanced at his set face.

But Rexie knew that that expression was nothing to judge by, he was a past-master at seeing everything and saying nothing.

“Anyone would say they were made for each other,” thought Rexie, thinking of them as she had seen their tall figures for a moment, striding the platform together, James mounted as if he were but a fly’s weight on the broad shoulders, Sally’s slim height matching, though not reaching Ewen’s own, floating easily along by his side.

“Oh, God,” she prayed, in all sincerity, her mouth twisting a little between laughter and grim earnestness, “keep me from *trotting* when *I* walk with him!”

As all this passed through her head, called up by nothing but a glance of interest in Sally’s eyes, she sat sedately still, seemingly as interested in the road unwinding before them as Ewen himself.

The old car rattled and shook so that conversation between back and front seats was difficult and anyhow John and Sally had plenty to say to each other, exchanging gossip and jokes and ragging each other in complete and friendly ease.

“And that’s another thing,” thought Rexie, her brow wrinkling into an anxious little frown, “Sally belongs to *John*. It’s always been understood that they belonged to each other. Everybody understood that. And when Tommy Slade teased John when he was singing ‘I dearly lo’e the lassies, O,’ John said, ‘Of course, I do, I love my own two, Rexie and Sally,’ and then he added, ‘and my Dorky-bird,’ but that was an afterthought, and of course I’m just his sister and that doesn’t count.”

At this juncture Sally shouted across to ask what she was looking so solemn and anxious about. “Has the fish not come?” A joke that the whole family seemed to understand, for it was greeted with a hail of laughter and Rexie’s thoughts jumped off to John’s old ridiculous tale about being invited to luncheon by a vegetarian friend whose wife, when he arrived, kept apologising and apologising and glancing at the clock, saying she was so sorry that there was nothing but potatoes and cabbage for luncheon as “the fish hadn’t come.”

At last, Robert, the husband arrived and was greeted with anxious cries about the fish.

“It’s all right,” he assured his wife. “I’ve got it,” and produced a tin of sardines from his pocket, whereupon they all lunched on potatoes, cabbage and sardines. So for all her anxiety, Rexie could not but chuckle at Sally’s question.

Ewen turned from the wheel and looked sidelong at her as he heard the chuckle, with that intimate understanding smile that always made her heart beat faster, and feeling her colour rise she plunged into the story, and forgot for the moment her absurd worrying over nothing but a glance. That momentary, tender, ultimate smile on his grave face had brought a return of confidence.

Stratheilan refused to stay to a meal, saying he had a sick cow to visit so that they should not think he was just being tactful because they might wish to be by themselves at this first meeting.

However, he promised to come the next day to give Dorky a ride on his shoulders “if James would lend them his horse” as he punctiliously observed, and later on, James was to go with him “all by himself” to see the animals. “Dorky doesn’t like beasts,” James whispered, and Dorky hearing this at once mysteriously announced, “I like Paprika,” adding magnanimously, “but, of course, I won’t let her eat your mice, James.” Paprika, it was then explained, was the kitten.

There would be no jealousy between them over Stratheilan for Dorky adored her Uncle John and no other man. James had to keep off the ground there, not that there was any need, John returned Dorky’s passionate love with almost equal affection, but hadn’t much use for small boys, though he liked James better than any and treated him with humorous camaraderie, being really upset about James’s humble attitude to life and very anxious to “make a man of him.”

But John tried the wrong way—by too studied a kindness. It was Stratheilan who was to make a man of James by methods that seemed rather rough on the surface, for he was not afraid to give him a good whack on occasion, the same as he gave his puppies. John and Sally and Rexie were all too tender and sensitive with shy, frightened James. Stratheilan, whatever he may have felt, never showed the slightest sign of sentimentalism and James, adoring him, soon began to show more hardihood.

It cannot be said that Stratheilan was missed at the re-union. Wild with joy, the children raced about the house and garden, discovering, one after the other, its fascinations—all the “ups and downs,” all the many rooms they were free to enter. They had always been confined to a school or to Sally’s one bed-sitting room or the tiny flat, and had never had a whole house to call home. Rexie’s first words came as a revelation to them.

“Here you are. Home for good at last!”

Dorcas and James had stared at her. It was Dorcas who spoke.

“Do you really, truly mean this is our *home*, Auntie Rexie, we’re not just on a visit?”

“Bless your heart, child, what do you think it is? Of course, it’s your home. Your very own, really, truly home for ever and ever. Bendibus belongs to you just the same as any other children’s home belongs to them—and don’t you forget it! You must love it and take care of it and help to look after it, you’ll have lots of little duties, for we’re all one family—and Mungo’s your dog because he’s the family dog, and we must have a family cat. My gracious goodness! What a question to ask about Bendibus. Bendibus is *home*.”

Throughout this long outburst the two stood hand in hand gazing at Rexie, then Dorcas turned and seizing James, danced him round and round, chanting:

“We’re home, James. We’re home in our own home. Bendibus is our HOME, for ever and ever, an’ ever, an’ ever.”

Then to let some of their feelings burst free, they rushed off outside, racing and shouting with joy.

“Goodness, John,” said Sally. “We’ll have to chain them up.”

“Let them get it out,” said John, quite unperturbed. “Let them shout and roar and race about. They’ll calm down when they’ve got it all out of their systems.”

It was Dorcas, really, who was making the most noise. She hadn’t been so subdued from babyhood as James and had known the freedom of a home long ago, but James was quite as much, if not more excited, as she dragged him in her wake, for she was both taller and stronger than he as well as older.

Sally, who never minced matters, began at once loudly regretting the departure of Stratheilan.

“Just as I was thinking, ‘Now I’ll get a chance to introduce myself to his lordly notice,’ off he goes to see a *sick cow*!—a sick cow, mind you! And me got up to the nines and prepared to let all my fascinations out of the box, like that Pandora woman—of course, I’d have kept my *hopes* in (Sally always talked in italics) just like the Greek lady. Was she Greek, John?”

“She was,” said John, “and you’d better empty out your hopes at once and be done with them—but of that ‘more anon,’ as the saying goes. Now what about a meal? I’m ‘fair clemmed.’ Where’s your pinafore, Sally? For Heaven’s sake get out of that disguise and put on a frock or petticoat or whatever you call those blue things I used to like. Gosh, Girl, I’m glad to see you! Rexie’s all right, but she hasn’t the same enthusiasm for food as you

and I. Look at her! We'll have to feed her up, she's like a string bean—not that you are much to boast of yourself.”

“Speak for yourself, you bent poker,” countered Sally, carefully taking off the ridiculous hat while Rexie, always ready with a new word, exclaimed cheerfully, “What a blessing we're all ‘skinny-malinks,’ it'll be such fun feeding up. I wish I had a pair of bathroom scales!”

Flindy had not been able to come back that day after her morning's work, so there was plenty to do, though she had prepared the vegetables and Rexie had put “the birds” in the oven, for so she designated every kind of game however carefully Ewen told her the name of each, and despite his being positively shocked when she called a woodcock a snipe, or a grouse a partridge.

The season was getting on, however, and wood pigeons and leverets were his main stand-by when, as usual, he took out his gun to supply her table with something more interesting in the meat line than the everlasting mutton. Beef was less common in that sheep country, though Rexie now occasionally got a piece of the large quarter of beef Mrs. Postgate was in the habit of suspending in the depths of her well, so that instead of winding up a pail of water you occasionally wound up a huge lump of beef, or even a pailful of fish on the rare days the fishman called, for the well was, so to speak, the village refrigerator.

Soon they were all as busy as bees. In a very few minutes, Sally had discarded all her finery and clad in one of the pale blue overalls John called “her petticoats” she was making sauces and savouries, while Rexie cooked potato chips and John employed himself with a salad and superintended the preparation of small plates of *hors d'œuvres* by the children. John believed in doing things properly. He had himself gone in to Presterby to shop at the big old-fashioned grocers, calling themselves “Italian Warehousemen.”

Once indoors Sally had shed her sophistication as an adder sheds its skin. Undoubtedly her overall had an air, for Sally simply could not don a garment without transforming it in some mysterious way, but to see her now, with her sleeves rolled up, vigorously beating the children's mashed potatoes with an enormous wooden beater, one would not have recognised the vision of elegance of the railway station. Indeed, Sally, who looked as if she were as frail as a butterfly and would not know a frying-pan from a scrubbing-brush was, when well, as strong as a hill pony, and loved all or any kind of housework from scrubbing tables till they were as white as ivory to frying kippers to a turn.

Now she was as happy as a lark, making gravy and mashing potatoes, examining the contents of the oven, poking a fork into the children's plainer dish, and concocting some marvellous sauce for their boiled pudding while her tongue wagged the whole time—while, indeed, Rexie's tongue wagged and John's tongue wagged, and everybody's tongues wagged, except perhaps James's, and even he kept assuring them all—in order to assure himself—that “Bendibus was his home—not pretend, real,” and that “he was coming home for every holiday just like the other boys at school.”

After supper, the children were put to bed, tired out with travel and excitement, the last squeaks of joy being over their bedroom on the ground floor where they could look into a finch's nest, tucked into a crook of an old apple tree, and see the eggs when the mother bird flew off for food.

After dinner the dishes were left for Flindy and John took himself off to his study saying with a disarming grin, that he'd done enough domestic work for one day and seen enough of women, but really to leave Rexie and Sally to have their own private talk and to give Rexie an opportunity to tell Sally at once the story of her marriage, which he was sure she would rather do alone.

Sally took the surprising tale much more calmly than John had done, though she was perhaps even more astounded, as Rexie went through incident after incident and then ended up with, “So we motored to Carlisle and went through a form of marriage, but we are not to be properly married in a church until his time at Storrs is up—and not then if Stratheilan (she was still a bit shy about the “Ewen”) or I don't want to.”

“And what will the robin do then, poor thing?” quoted Sally with a sardonic look and then went on, “Well, of all the mad—my Holy Aunt, Rexie, you do need somebody to look after you. You should be tied to John's apron strings or his braces, or whatever he wears—or mine for the matter of that. What on earth do you think you can do if you found it all a mistake? Heavens, girl! You might fall in love! It's plain to be seen you're not in love with him—or are you?”

“Oh, *no*,” said Rexie, at once in a very alarmed voice. “Of course I'm not, nor he isn't, it's *purely a marriage of convenience*.”

“Not that I don't like him,” Sally went on. “In fact he's just the sort of man I could fall in love with myself, if——”

She stopped there.

“You mean if he were free,” said Rexie, blushing at this confirmation of her uneasiness.

"Maybe," said Sally, briefly, and then gave a little laugh and said, "Goose!"

"A marriage of convenience," she repeated, after a moment's silence between them. "Oh, Rexie, I do wish I had been here. Whatever made you do a thing like that? Why didn't you write to me and tell me to come? I would have if I'd known you were as desperate as all that—marrying a man you don't care for just because of a few village gossips. Really, Rexie!"

"But I *do* like him," came Rexie's parrot cry. "I *do* like him, Sally. I like him very much."

"Humph!" said Sally.

"And we *might* fall in love with each other."

"I see . . . and if you don't fall in love with each other or if he does—I take it he isn't exactly madly in love at the minute—and you don't or you do and he doesn't—what then?"

"It's to be annulled."

Sally sniffed. "Annulled my hat!" Then with some asperity, "So you have it all cut and dried!"

Sally wasn't being very helpful, or even very kind, thought Rexie, two tears stinging at the back of her eyelids. Was it because she was disappointed about Stratheilan?

"We had to do something, Sally, or leave Bendibus. I mean John and I couldn't have stayed with things as they were."

"Marriages are not so easily annulled." Sally seemed to be thinking deeply for that was all the reply she made to Rexie's plea about not being able to stay at Bendibus.

"But it can be done." Rexie paused and then went on, "Stratheilan found out all about it. His mother says he is very chivalrous, and I think so, too," she ended up ingenuously, not very sure herself of what she meant.

"Let's go and do those dishes," said Sally, jumping up. "I feel I must do something. Anyhow, I hate to think of dirty dishes in the kitchen, and your Flindy mightn't turn up in the morning."

But Rexie knew it was just that Sally was embarrassed and wanted time to think of all she had been told. Certainly she was taking it all much more seriously than Rexie had thought. Sally usually saw the funny side of anything so quickly, and she had been afraid Sally would laugh both at her predicament and her way of getting out of it.

Now she wished she would laugh, the air seemed so heavy with Sally being so serious and unlike herself.

They went into the kitchen and began to wash up, silently, except for a few remarks about where to put things, and so on.

At last Sally sat suddenly down with the dish towel in her hands and the last plate in the other.

“I’m sorry, Rexie, darling. You’ve completely taken the wind out of my sails this time—there’s so much to sort out in my mind, it’s sort of overcrowded and won’t work. Where’s your kettle? Let’s have a cup of coffee. I wish I liked what they call ‘strong drink,’ I feel I need it!”

“I’m terribly sorry, too,” said Rexie, “spoiling your first evening like this.”

“Fiddlesticks. I’ll make the coffee—thank goodness you have a grinder. Where are the beans?”

The coffee made, Rexie took a small pot full in to John and told him to stay where he was.

“Still riddling it out?”

“Yes. . . .” She said nothing more but went out. As she passed into the corridor to go along to the living-room there came a light tap at the inner door from the verandah.

Surprised, for it was too late for any ordinary caller, she hurried back and opened it. To her amazement Stratheilan was standing there.

Swiftly she stepped out beside him into the dark verandah. She did not want to ask him in at the moment, in fact nothing could have been much more embarrassing.

“Don’t be frightened, Roxy,” he said at once, for he had caught a glimpse of her white strained face and thought he had startled her into thinking of burglars and such like, for John might have gone down to the inn for all he knew. John often went down for a game of chess or darts in the evening.

“It’s nothing serious,” he went on, “only that little devil Mungo has chewed his way out to freedom and will be making for home, so I rode over here to see if he had arrived before starting to seek for him.”

“No . . .” said Rexie. “No . . .” Then suddenly to her own frantic surprise she began to cry, the sobs breaking out of her throat, making her lift her hands to her mouth in an appealing gesture.

Instantly his arms went round her as he lifted her from her feet and held her clasped against him.

“Oh, Ewen! Oh, Ewen!” she gasped. “I wish we hadn’t.”

Then he saw that it was not Mungo she was crying about as he had thought for an instant, that indeed she had hardly taken in his words about her beloved puppy.

“Hadn’t what, my darling?”

“Got married! Oh, Ewen, could you stop it. I don’t want to be married now.” She knew she was being silly and childish but could not stop herself. “I don’t *want* to . . . you *can* annul it, can’t you? Everything . . . everything is all wrong. I don’t want to be married to you.”

“Don’t you, my Sweet? Then I’ll put it right. Only don’t cry, don’t cry like that. What has happened—of course, you shan’t be married to me if you don’t want to.”

He felt her thin small body shaking in his arms and putting his foot on the low shelf that ran round the windows for flower pots, he lifted her on his knee and held her there, whispering words of comfort in English and Gaelic, laying his cheek on her hair and drawing her closer and closer till, at last, she ceased sobbing and only gave little hiccoughs and brief tremors.

He did not ask any questions but pulled out his own handkerchief from his breast pocket to mop her face when he saw her trying to wipe her eyes with her hands, then loosened his hold a little as she began to struggle away.

“What is it, my darling?” he asked then.

He felt her shake her head in the darkness.

“You can’t tell me now.”

“No. . . . No . . . never. Oh, Ewen, what about Mungo?” It was very evident she wanted to change the subject, and luckily, even as she spoke, there came a scratching at the door.

“I will see to him,” he said, and then as she whispered, “Oh, Ewen . . . if you don’t mind, would you——” and paused, he went on, “You are wishful for me to go without coming in?”

“If you wouldn’t mind.”

He set her down gently, but instantly, kissing her hair as he did so.

“Let Mungo stay . . . just to-night—please—after coming that long way,” she pleaded.

She felt rather than saw his smile. He opened the door, lifted up a miserable and abject-looking puppy and put him in her arms, then with a softly whispered good night, he let himself out and was gone.

The return of Mungo was a good excuse for Rexie’s long disappearance. She did not mention Stratheilan’s call but merely said that Mungo had

scratched at the door. She knew Ewen would not mention it, he wasn't given to talking at any time and most certainly would never speak of their meeting.

"It *is* comforting," she thought to herself, "to be able to trust anyone so much, just to feel certain he'll know at once just what to do—just what I'd want. I don't even mind so much that silly exhibition I made of myself when it's only Ewen that knows about it, he'll bury it deep down inside himself—there's plenty of room—and never allude to it—*never!* Perhaps he won't even think about it."

With this comforting reflection she returned to Sally; if her face was rather tear-stained Sally would think either John or Mungo had upset her. She would never guess that Stratheilan had been in the house.

Sally had evidently been thinking things over while she was away, and no sooner had Mungo been introduced, fed and tucked into his basket than she returned to the subject.

"Why didn't you just get married properly in church at once?" she asked, "seeing you intend to later on and you say you like him?"

"Oh, yes!" Rexie returned immediately. "*I* like him very much, but you see, Sally, it was just *chivalry* with him. I couldn't take advantage of that—at least, of course, I did, but not so much as that would have been. And then, that wouldn't have put me right with the village, because they would have thought he'd just married me to make a respectable woman of me—and *they* wouldn't have."

"They wouldn't have what?"

"Let that make a respectable woman of me, they are very severe about morals."

"Well, so are we all, aren't we? We are all decent, nice people. And if they do find out that you were married after Stratheilan, to all appearances, spent a night at Bendibus, what then?"

"He doesn't think there's much risk of that. After all, we're just 'strangers' to them, not real village people. They are not so interested in us as all that—as to worry about exactly when we married, I mean. Anyhow, I think they are all quite pleased they can be friendly and just aren't bothering about us now."

"Yes, I can see through that all right—it's not as if you belonged. Well, Roxana Mary, it's as well you told me that your Mr. Stratheilan——"

"Not Mr. Stratheilan. Urquhart is his surname. Stratheilan is just his house on an island called Morne—but Morne is really all his—it's just a little dot of an island on the map. But what do you mean, Sally?"

“I mean, you’d better look out. Any woman in her senses would fall for him the minute she saw him. You keep your eye on all the women folk—including me!”

“Sally!”

“All right, darling. But if you hadn’t been first, my romantic heart might have run away with me”—her lips gave a humorous twist—“if it hasn’t run off already.”

She laughed at Rexie’s dismayed face, then gave her a sudden hearty hug.

“Oh, Rexie, you’re the most priceless goose. But take your Grandmother Sally’s advice and keep that engagement ring well to the fore. Wear it always.”

“Yes, I do. It was only to keep you from asking questions at once that I took it off.”

“And where is this Morne?” Sally asked later as they sat companionably drinking the last of the re-heated coffee.

“Further north and right away to the west.”

“Um—I thought so.”

“Thought what?”

“Oh, Young Lochinvar is come out of the west!” said Sally.

CHAPTER XVII

“Better a dinner of herbs where love is”

EVERYONE was happy at Bendibus. After Sally and the children came things settled down very satisfactorily. Sally, once she knew of Rexie’s engagement, had been very careful to show no particular interest in Stratheilan. They were very busy at the fur farm and he did not get over very often for any length of time, though he always called two or three times a week to see Rexie and nearly always stayed to a meal on Sunday.

Neither of them had mentioned the night he had come looking for Mungo.

Mungo should have gone back at once to finish his training, but as the children were wild about him, he was allowed to stay at Bendibus till another bull-terrier puppy in the Storrs kennel was old enough to leave its mother. This hero was at once named Parky on his arrival and soon became

as much adored by the children as Mungo, even more perhaps since Parky was their very own puppy, while Mungo was Rexie's dog and left no one in any doubt about that.

Stratheilan went very carefully about his wooing of Rexie, for she had got so highly strung about the whole affair that she could not take things naturally. She was as sensitive to a touch as a Barberry flower, and as ready to roll up at an alarm as a hedgehog putting out all its prickles. John had tried a joke or two about "the Chief" but Rexie, who was really so quick to laugh at any joke, had completely lost her sense of humour when it came to that subject. At least so John complained to Sally.

"She's in love and doesn't know it," said Sally. But that was some time later.

One effect of the arrival of John and Sally was that Stratheilan scarcely ever saw Rexie alone. She was more shy than ever of him since that meeting in the verandah or she might have done much to counteract this, for there was not much he could do when she herself avoided being alone with him.

However, he went on in his quiet way and in the meantime John and he became very good friends indeed. Sometimes John even half apologised to Rexie for taking up so much of his time when he did come, they always seemed to have so much to talk about and so many interests. But Rexie merely looked surprised at John's anxiety, and there was no doubt about her delight that they got on so well together. Sally was more impatient.

"What do you two talk about shut up in that study of yours with your pipes?" she asked John.

"Everything," said he, "except women. He never mentions either you or Rexie if that's what you are wanting to know."

"Of course it is," said Sally at once. "I'd love to know what he thinks of us, I mean women in general, and me in particular. I don't suppose Heaven itself knows what he thinks about Rexie."

"I think Heaven could make a good guess," said John slowly, after a rather long, thoughtful pause, and then he changed the subject before Sally could ask any more questions.

John was very happy. He had fallen completely in love with Bendibus and liked Lammerside and its folk. The Scots drop of blood in his veins made him understand their ways more quickly than pure English blood would have done. He knew, without being told, that he had to go slow and never be "forwardsome." He stood back and let them do the "coming on," but once the ice was broken, he was soon arguing and laying down the law or sending them into roars of laughter over his frank opinions about the

Scots. He had a way of making his reactions to many Scottish ways, that they, of course, took for granted, so funny that they did not know whether they were laughing at themselves or at him.

He was always hailed with delight at The Shepherd's Bush, and had sense enough not to call the old inn Clarty Meg's, though the village and its old retainers never referred to it in any other way. They could do it without any stigma being attached but a "foreigner" couldn't. Foreigners, especially the English, didn't say it the right way.

At last John had what he longed for, complete peace and freedom to get on with his book. No one entered his study without an invitation. The children spent their days out-of-doors, retiring to their garden room when it rained. His half-finished novel was soon off his hands and moderately successful and he was then able to give all his time to his second, which was appearing in the newspaper he worked for and bringing him almost as many letters as Rexie's "Chimney Corner," which was rapidly picking up again. Rexie worked in her small bed-sitting room, but a study was planned for her, too, when they had turned the space under the high roof into light and airy rooms, put in hot water and finished the other alterations and additions now under way. Betty, still at Mrs. Flint's, was to come as soon as ever they had a room for her.

In the meantime Sally had taken over the housekeeping and with the help of Flindy, who came to them most days except Sunday which she kept entirely for her children.

Not only did Sally run the house and do most of the cooking—with the aid of John, but she renewed all their wardrobes, re-covered chairs and sofas, made new curtains and generally smartened up the whole place as well as its inhabitants.

She could do anything with a needle and thread. John even said in an unguarded moment that if he didn't look out she'd be making him a pair of trousers on her sewing machine.

Sally's reply might have been foreseen, for she forthwith made him a pair of grey flannel slacks that he mistook for a bought pair till he saw the twinkle in her eye (for which he chased her and kissed her), but he wore them till they were threadbare about the place, though nothing would ever induce him to wear them outside the garden.

Tam was very suspicious of John at first, and said mulishly that he couldn't understand a word "the guvnor" said, but he gradually came round and even claimed him as an ally "agin' thae womenfolk" on such occasions as when he and Rexie fell out about the garden, a not infrequent occurrence

for Rexie loved to read gardening papers and spring their marvellous ideas on Tam, who regarded all writers (including John, of course) with deep suspicion and alluded to those who wrote on gardening, fishing, shooting, or any of his own pursuits, as “daft lunatics.” John assured Tam that he himself was a very sensible lunatic, but got no change out of Tam.

“Aye, so ye think,” said Tam and had the last word.

However, he “wrought” away in the garden and outhouses, though he would never accept a regular wage, explaining to John that he couldn’t be “tied” and that “forbye” John mightn’t have the money handy every week, which as things were bothered neither of them, he’d take it when John had it and “dae away withoot” when John hadn’t.

This arrangement seemed to suit them both admirably, though Sally often laughed at it, and Tam came and went as it suited him.

As soon as Mr. James Orr heard that John was at Bendibus he wrote asking him to call. So John wrote and suggested the following Saturday, but before that something else happened.

By this time the Easter holidays, which had really been delayed until after Easter that year for some scholastic reasons, were over and James and Dorcas should have been back at school. So terribly were they cast down, however, at the merest hint of leaving Bendibus that John and Rexie had twice managed, by means that were not perhaps above reproach, to get the dreaded date put back.

Now, however, Sally felt the evil day could no longer be put off, the children had to be educated and though they all disliked the school and its cold-hearted head mistress, it provided board and a good education within Sally’s means.

So a date was fixed and as little said about it as possible until the evil hour should be upon them.

Then, one day, when John had gone over to Storrs to do a little fishing with Stratheilan and bring him over to dinner, the children disappeared. This did not cause any trepidation for some time as Dorcas was a dependable little soul, and always looked well after her beloved James.

When they did not turn up to lunch, however, Sally and Rexie began to worry a little and Rexie decided to go and look for them. Sally was very busy getting their clothes all ready for school so she went off alone.

It was a lovely day of early summer and Rexie felt very happy as she dipped down off the moorland, and took her way first to Tam’s cottage, for the children often went to visit Tam, who, to all appearances, never spoke to them but of whose company they were inordinately fond. They would trot

about after him quite contented to be near him without even a grunt thrown at them now and then. He never talked to them, he never told them a story or paid the least attention to them, so what the fascination was, was a complete mystery to the grown-ups.

They went to his cottage uninvited and there, too, he went about what he was doing taking no notice of them. If it happened to be his own tea-time he would cut each of them a huge slice of bread, butter it and empty half the blue basin of brown sugar on to each piece, slamming it well down with the knife he used for cutting tobacco and disembowelling rabbits. This they considered the food of the gods, but they never asked for it at home and never got it. Both Rexie and Sally knew perfectly well that, at home, it wouldn't have tasted the same as in Tam's wood-smoky kitchen, or sitting on his sunny bench beside the bees. He made tea and occasionally fried kippers or cut large slices of cold ham or cheese for himself, but never offered them any. They did not expect it. If they wanted a drink he drew a bucketful of fresh water from his well, gave them a mug and returned to whatever he was doing. Nor did they ever get more than the one huge slice of bread. They ate every crumb of it.

Rexie's way ran along a burnside through sheets of blue ground ivy, yellow buttercups and pink campions, forget-me-nots, "torn thumbs" (birds' foot trefoil) and daisies. Waterhens swam swiftly into reeds at her approach, followed by little fleets of sooty balls. She knew now that if she parted the reeds where they disappeared she would see their little open beaks above the water, their absolutely still bodies submerged, while their mother's anxious cluck would be heard near at hand. "Keep still, keep still," Rexie imagined her saying.

But she had no time now to watch them, or the dipping water-ousels or the piping sandpipers on the dry sandy stretches between the sun-warmed boulders.

Soon she had passed the wooden "brig," made of one thick mossy log, the little fall where the kingfisher nested and the whitewashed cottage of the woodman with its stack of logs by the wooden "cuddy," its pea-sticks and green water barrel, with a flat "yeasty cake" standing on the lid to cool, and taken the turn into the wood where Tam's tiny cot stood, knee-deep in lupins and marigolds, hen-and-chicken daisies, bee-balm and southernwood, with the honey bees clustered round their woven skeps and the wild bumblebees, tortoiseshell butterflies, hover-flies and cabbage-whites hovering over the flowers.

It was still and very warm; not a sound, save the hum of bees, came from garden or cottage. The door was shut and the tabby cat lay full-length

sunning herself on the sill, while a hen or two scratched beneath the gooseberry bushes or fluffed their feathers in the dust-holes they had made.

No, the children were not there. There was some water in the pail hanging over the well, and she took the blue mug standing on the wall among the wild mint and had a drink before setting off for the village. But the village children would all be in school, she did not think they would be there, more likely they had wandered down the burn hunting for birds' nests or trying to "guddle" trouts—an art Tam had tried to teach them—or looking for hemlocks to make pea-shooters or hazels for whistles. They were quickly picking up the village children's lore though still ignorant of the times and seasons that were best for this, that or the other occupation.

She had to go down the lane where she had met Wullie Wright, but she would not have been afraid of him if she had met him to-day. It was only on very special occasions he got drunk and at other times he was as quiet as a lamb and shyly touched his old hat with his whip when he met Rexie and rather humbly replied to her merry greeting. Rexie was terribly sorry for him now she knew all his story, and would gladly have chatted to him and tried to make him think his face looked quite ordinary to her, if he had not always hurried on.

There was a flock of sheep in the turnpike and she lingered well behind, away from the smell of their wool, the dry rattle of their tails and the hard patter of their little hooves on the road when the old collie stopped them from nibbling at the verge, which was very tempting to them with its bites of sweet grass among the hoary plantains, the white starwort and the polished yellow coins and dusty fronds of the silverweed.

All along her walk Rexie's brain had been hard at work beneath all her enjoyment of the lovely morning.

There were many things to "give her pause," if not "to fly to others that she knew not of."

There were John and Sally, for instance. She had never quite understood John and Sally; they were such good friends and such perfect companions, she had always thought they were made for each other, and that, eventually, they would marry. John had said once that he wouldn't marry till he felt he could himself keep his wife in some comfort; he had nothing to say against men who let their wives help to keep the pot boiling, it was their affair, but he wasn't made like that himself, he'd simply hate it. He would provide for his wife and family, if he had one, by his own efforts and do without either till he could.

John might now feel pretty safe about that, but, so far, he and Sally seemed to be no further forward—they weren't even engaged, unless, of course, it was secretly, but Rexie could see no sign of any secret understanding, and anyhow, why secret? They knew Rexie would like nothing better.

So sure had she been of Sally and John that she had never for a moment thought of Sally and Stratheilan till Sally's keenly interested glance had stirred something far below the surface in Rexie's heart. She had then awakened to the fact that they were both most attractive persons—and to all outward appearances made for each other. He was so tall and handsome (in spite of that red hair!) and she so distinguished looking.

He had arrived in a shabby old kilt one day, so absolutely unconscious that there was anything unusual in a kilt, that even John, who was inclined to be amused at kilts, took it for granted and hardly noticed it. But Sally had never seen a kilt before, except perhaps in some military parade, certainly never a stained and shabby old garment that had evidently seen years of hard wear and in which its wearer looked perfectly at ease and at home, and Sally had stared, her eyes opening wide as he came swinging down the hill.

"Jerusalem!" she had exclaimed, wide-eyed, and then, after a moment's pause, "But doesn't he look just right and as if the hills belonged to him by birthright."

"Well, so they do, and the mountains, too," Rexie had proclaimed proudly, then blushed and drawn down her brows.

Sally had turned and looked at her angrily. "Glad to see you begin to appreciate your luck," she said. Then she had completely changed, rushed at Rexie and given her a hug. "Don't mind your bad-tempered old Sally—only, Rexie, you are such a little owl!"

"Oh, Sally, why? Why do you always think I'm such an owl?"

"Because you are. Because you have no sense, because you don't know your luck. Because you can't see how every woman will envy you, and grapple him to your soul with hooks of steel—as that old Shakespeare of John's says. Why if I . . ."

"If you what?"

"Never mind, you ought to know if you don't, you little blind bat. Come on, and let's meet him and his dogs and his gun—how many dogs has the man got?"

"Well, you see, they have kennels at Storrs as well as the fur-bearing animals, but Fan and those two Scotties, 'Bran' and 'Mhor,' and that gun-dog are all his."

Rexie had been glad to change the conversation, but there were many other occasions that had worried her a little, and other insidious remarks of Sally's—latterly she hadn't been quite so sure about Sally and John, perhaps she had been mistaken all the time and they were just friends. Many of her remarks might refer equally to John or to Stratheilan.

Sally sometimes looked at her, too, with a very strange expression and she said things that were meant to be taken as jokes, and were taken as jokes, but which left a funny little after-taste behind them. For instance, that time Stratheilan—Ewen (she must really always say Ewen, Sally laughed at her for saying "Stratheilan." "I expect you'll call him Mr. Urquhart when you are married, like the early Victorians you both are," she had said). Ewen had left after his usual stiff little bow, John had remarked aside to Sally, but within Rexie's hearing, "Doesn't seem to know much about making love, does he?"

Sally had looked very queerly at John who was smiling to himself.

"If that's what you think you never made a bigger mistake," she said. "Your 'Highland Chief' knows every last thing about making love—*yes, every last thing!*"

"And what, Miss Sarah Lothair, do *you* know about *that?*" John had asked. And Sally had blushed, actually blushed and there had been a distinct pause before she quoted lightly.

"I have been there before!"—a very queer answer, Rexie thought, but John had just smiled, a little secret sort of smile.

Not that Rexie ever for one moment doubted Sally. Sally's loyalty was something she did not even think about. "Steel true and blade straight" was Sally.

No, but might Sally be really attracted by Stratheilan? Might she be falling in love with him? Rexie wasn't going to have Sally hurt.

She paused to stare very intently at a blackbird, splashing in the little thread of water that trickled under the hedge with eyes that did not seem to see him. . . .

No, she wasn't going to have Sally hurt . . . but perhaps—perhaps Ewen — She vainly sought her memory for any sign that Ewen might be particularly interested in Sally. But no, he never seemed to be interested. But Ewen was such an adept at not showing his feelings or giving away an inkling of what he thought, that there was no knowing what the truth might be.

Well, she wasn't going to have Ewen hurt either. After all, though neither John nor Sally knew it, she was much stronger than either of them,

though she looked so pale and silly—and Ewen knew that.

Ewen might not be in love with her—he might not even care very much for her, but he knew all about her.

Suddenly her heart warmed and a happy thrill sent her blood sparkling through her veins. She had seen his face just above her, looking down with that secret, intimate smile. Was it not a smile like that that had launched the thousand ships—not Helen’s smile but her lover’s?

A backward rush of some sheep with the collie after them, brought her thoughts to the present moment, the blackbird flew away and the dust rose in a cloud from the road as the stragglers joined the herd that now turned off through a gate near the village. Rexie continued on her walk, before her the village street lay quiet and empty; no children played about the bridge and most of the doors were closed for a few minutes’ peace before they came rushing home to tea.

She made her way to the post office. Mrs. Postgate, like the famous woman at the French newspaper kiosk, “knew everything,” and if the children had been about the village, she would be aware of the fact.

“The bairns!” said she. “Oh, they’ll be at the skule.”

“The school!” Rexie repeated, surprised but remembering vaguely some chatter at home about the “skule” as the two faithfully rendered it. “But the children will be at their lessons!”

“Ou, aye, but Dorky and James are there maist days. They hang aboot till playtime, then wriggle theirsels in wi’ the ithers if they can. Miss Howey lets them bide whiles, they’re good, quiet bairns. That’s where ye’ll find them, sure as deith.”

As Rexie approached the school, the door opened for the afternoon break, and sure enough, out tumbled Dorky and James with the others.

They flew to Rexie when they saw her, too intent on their own news to apologise for their misdemeanours. Dorcas as usual was spokeswoman:

“Oh, Auntie Roxana! Oh, Auntie Rexie! Can we go to school every day? Miss Howey says we may and we can take a piece and eat it at dinner-time and a tin bottle with tea in it—a tin bottle only costs fourpence halfpenny, do you think Sally could afford one? One would do for both, though, of course (rather longingly) two *would* be better. You warm them at the school fire and I-reen (she pronounced it in correct village style) says her mother would make us some puffs and——”

“Me too, me too,” James got in here. “Me too, *perhaps*,” James never forgot his “perhaps.”

From Dorky's excited babble Rexie gathered much the same story as Mrs. Postgate's, but they had more to add to it.

To-day they had gone to the school gates about twelve, many of the children went home to dinner, but the ones from outlying districts brought their lunch with them. I-reen (Irene) had shared hers with Dorky and James, a kind of meat pasty called a "puff," and a tin bottle of milky tea, heated at the schoolroom fire.

They had fully intended to come home at one for their own lunch, but one o'clock is an elastic term for children. At one o'clock they were still playing in the playground and "I-reen" and "Polly Porter" had then smuggled them into school between them—not for the first time.

Good-natured Miss Howey had not only allowed them to stay but—here excitement rose to concert pitch—had said, "If you are staying with your aunt all summer, why not come regularly to school?"

This had opened undreamed-of vistas of delight to the two little peris who had stared longingly through the gates of the playground, and Miss Howey had then said they could mention it to their sister if they liked.

Liked! Dorky could hardly get home fast enough to see Sally.

Now that it appeared possible to go to school at Bendibus, they were neither to hold nor to bind.

At least that was Dorky's state; all James's pleading was in his eyes, as he repeated his "tomorwo—perhaps" in his small, doubtful voice. James had no trust in happiness like Dorky. It made Rexie want to give him everything—everything his heart desired to make up for those long years of repression that had made him so unchildishly doubtful of joy.

Immediately, she was determined that he should go to the village school. Dorky, too, perhaps, but Dorky was older, and Rexie wasn't so sure it would be suitable for Dorky; Sally would be better able to judge.

By the time they reached home she had all her arguments ready. When the children were so well and so gloriously happy at Bendibus, why send them out of their heaven to a dull school in a dull town, a school where they were miserable and unhappy and scarcely saw each other from week's end to week's end? Dorky hated it, but James was really miserable, and she could not bear James to be miserable, she knew, too, that it tore at Sally's heart to send them away.

Tea was ready when they reached home and after tea Sally and Rexie talked and talked. If it had only been James, Sally said she would never have hesitated, James was so young, but there was Dorky's education to think of

and it would simply break Dorky's heart to be sent away alone. Sally could not do that.

"Well, we'll ask John," said Rexie, at last.

That was how it was that two tall anglers, returning from a fishing expedition, were suddenly set upon by a pair of wild children, who flung themselves on them with as many legs and arms as spiders—according to John—begging, pleading and demanding to be sent to school.

"I wonder, myself, you do not send them to the village school for a while," said Stratheilan, when at last he and John had grasped what it was all about. "They would get quite a good grounding and their health would improve; they looked such delicate children when they came, and still they do not look very strong."

He repeated this to Sally when they got home and that probably won the day, though they discussed it all evening till at last the children were sent to bed, still a little doubtful as to their fate.

Sally's chief hesitations were over Dorky, but when Stratheilan told her that Miss Howey was not at all the village schoolmistress she imagined—the day was won. Miss Howey was a very clever and intellectual woman, an M.A. of Edinburgh, who had also been at Cambridge for some special subjects, but she was an only daughter with a very delicate mother, and had taken the village school partly because of the lovely little house and garden attached, and partly because of its setting among the hills, the hill air being perfect, as it happened, for her mother's asthma.

Stratheilan was sure she would love to have Dorky's education in her hands and so it was settled that she should be consulted.

"But I'll have to be thinking soon of going myself," said Sally, with a sigh when the discussion ended. At that there was a general outcry, and to Rexie's surprise it was the usually silent Ewen who seemed even more distressed than John at the idea of Sally's departure, in fact one could hardly call John distressed, though he joined in the general expressions of dismay.

Rexie caught too—her eyes had grown very sharp these days—Sally's guarded look towards him and a brief flash of some secret understanding between them. But Sally's blue eyes were instantly returned to the piece of cretonne she was stitching by hand as she said rather weakly:

"But there's my job. They won't keep it open much longer, and it's not one I can do at home, like Rexie."

"Well, I couldn't do my job if you weren't here," said Rexie, "and that comes to the same thing, so don't you say another word about leaving us."

So it was decided that Sally and Rexie would go and see Miss Howey the next day and that John would write to “St. Mary’s,” their boarding-school, to say that the children were benefiting so much by the country air, it had been decided to keep them at Bendibus for the present—a nice elastic term.

Rexie, who knew the children would be lying sleepless with anxiety, slipped in to give them a hug, and tell them the good news. She found them both in Dorky’s bed, James crying softly, so as not to make a noise and Dorky comforting him.

“It’s all right,” Rexie whispered. “You are staying. Your Uncle John is writing to Miss MacNab (the hated schoolmistress) and you are to take the letter to the post as soon as you are up in the morning, and Sally and I are going to see Miss Howey. Now into your own bed, James, and you are both to be asleep in twenty minutes, or you’ll be late for school in the morning!”

No threat could have had quicker effect. James was into his own bed in two ticks.

“Can we just speak for five minutes,” asked Dorky, “through the open door?”

“You can speak till the grandfather clock in the hall chimes the half hour, that will be ten minutes, and then not another squeak from either of you.”

Then she left the happy pair “squeaking” like two madly enraptured mice.

John took them with him to Presterby on the Saturday when he went to see Mr. James Orr and left them to hunt for tin bottles and school bags in the large emporium in the High Street while he went to his interview with the lawyer.

It was very short. A large sum was offered for Bendibus by the company who wished to build a large hotel on the site, and Mr. Orr told him he would be a fool to turn it down as he’d never get another such offer, for the company would build their hotel somewhere else and there would be no need for two hotels.

But John was adamant. No grand hotel was going to push Bendibus off the hillside. He wasn’t going to sell, and that was final. Then Mr. James, a great golfer himself, shook hands and said, for his part, he hated the very idea of the grand hotel, but had to do his duty by his clients. Now he had another idea to put before the company—a site in Presterby—which eventually was adopted but, whether for that reason or another, the Presterby Golf Club remained a rather small and select affair known to comparatively few enthusiasts—John becoming one of them!

So summer crept in on them; the ling bloomed on the hillside, the alterations went on in the house and James and Dorky, after considerably shocking Sally and Rexie by the rapidity with which they acquired the village mode of speech—"those terrible accents!" as Sally sighed when Dorky shouted, "It's ma shot!" if she wanted her turn to ride in the trolley the village joiner had made them, "What are we to do about them?"

But Stratheilan comforted her by saying with a confident smile, "It iss all right, you will see," and so she did, for the pair soon settled into talking broad Scots among their compeers at school and changing into English the moment they got inside the garden gate.

One day Stratheilan asked Rexie to bring James over to see the animals. Dorky was going to have tea with Polly Porter, one of the blacksmith's large brood, who, with Irene Rose, a farmer's only chick, had become her "great friends." Irene was going, too, and the "Three Musketeers" (as John called them) had no use whatever for James when together. Indeed, Dorky was rather ashamed of having a younger brother, a useless appendage possessed by neither of the others, though Polly had a baby sister to whom they intended to marry off James later on—to get rid of them both, James being still a little too inclined to hang on to Dorky at school. He had no use for tea parties, however, it was only at playtime and in school that he was something of a burr as he was still shy of the other boys and nothing could have pleased him better than a visit to Storrs. He had been there once or twice before, but some of the cat tribe were kept in a place of their own in a wilder part of the hills and he had not been up to those wilder regions.

Sally had no use for skunks, having heard one thing, and one thing alone about them—Sally's long patrician nose was exceedingly sensitive—after which anything favourable Stratheilan had to say about skunks went in at one ear and out at the other.

It was a gay pair that set off, leaving John at his book and Sally making cherry jam from a recipe she had acquired in France. Sally had spent two or three years in Paris on behalf of her firm and had there learned a great deal about French cooking as well as to speak with a Parisian accent. James and Dorky, who had spent their holidays with her in the capital, could also chatter in French as to the manner born and as Stratheilan had spent a good deal of his boyhood in France with his French relatives, they often all chattered away together leaving Rexie feeling a little out of it.

Stratheilan, hearing her speak a little, for she and John had also spent holidays with Sally, had concluded that she understood it as well as the rest and never guessed at that slight feeling of hers of being cut off from the fun. She did not like to say she hadn't understood some joke or other or ask them

to repeat things, knowing that would spoil all the spontaneity of their incursions into the French language.

The visit took place on one of those days, after a period of dry sultry heat, that dawn too brightly, then darken to brief thunderstorms, after which the earth awakens up like a giant refreshed and the very air seems full of joy.

As Rexie and James took their way over the moorland, every burn and beck came tumbling down filled to overflowing with peaty brown water, frothing creamily over the stones and leaping down little rocky waterfalls in their course. Every blade of grass and sprig of heather had caught its own particular raindrop which sparkled and gleamed in the sunlight; the sparse silver birch trees were like glistening candelabra, rising here and there among the rosy ling; hill-lark after hill-lark rose and sang and dropped, rose and sang and dropped again in an ecstasy of joy.

Wet bees crept out of the foxglove bells to dry their furry backs and their wings in the warmth, adders sunned themselves here and there on the drying pebbles, the ferns overhanging the gurgling streams had freshened to a brighter green and every golden cup of tormentil was filled to the brim with water. Near at hand the sun was brilliant, but further off the hills lay in a golden haze, which reappeared in patches on the hillsides wherever the wool of a stray sheep, catching the sun, was turned into a golden fleece.

James took off his shoes and stockings, slung them by the laces round his neck and went skipping and running over the spongy turf which every here and there was smoking as the hot sun rapidly dried it.

“Mind the adders,” Rexie called, but James knew all about the adders by this time and, in any case, was absolutely fearless where animals were concerned.

They had gone little more than half way when the sky suddenly turned a greenish battleship grey, except at one point where a dazzling golden gleam opened above a black peak and sent a few rays of glistening lemon across the valley.

“Another shower,” said Rexie and looked about for shelter.

Across the stream a single plank led to a path. They hurried across and came to an old building with a loft where bales of hay and bracken were stored, possibly for feeding and bedding the ewes in spring, though Rexie was not familiar enough with sheep-farming to do more than make a guess at this.

It had an old door that opened in two halves, the upper of which hung loose on its hinges, the lower had been nailed fast and Rexie had to make a most undignified scramble over the top and had scarcely tumbled to the

earthen floor when a hail from the hillside beyond was answered by a shriek from James, who forthwith began to climb out again, as he saw Stratheilan, who had evidently come to meet them, making down through the heather towards the swollen burn.

Rexie saw that he was wearing the battered old kilt that had taken Sally's eye, and understood for the first time just what a suitable garment it was for the heather-clad hills and moors of Scotland. Trousers would have been soaked to the knees in a very few minutes, but to a kilt, thick woollen stockings and rain-washed knees, wet heather, and soaked grasses and rushes were of no account.

Stratheilan made straight for the burn, took it at one leap with flying kilts and came running on to the barn. He swung James back into shelter, and stepped over the half door himself just as the heavens opened for a final burst of heavy rain.

He lifted Rexie off her feet and kissed her wet cheek before she could catch her breath, then pulled out a bale of hay and set her on it while he leaned by her side with his long legs outstretched and taking a corner of his plaid scrubbed at his rain-soaked hair.

"Are your feet wet?" he asked, glancing down at her strong little shoes, then, jumping up, he brought up a bundle of dry bracken, knelt on one knee and took off her shoes; then he rubbed her feet with the ever-useful plaid, rolled them in it, and settled them on the bracken while he stuffed her shoes with hay.

"I was sending word over for you not to come, as I knew you would be caught in these hill showers," he said. "Then I came myself in case you had started—this is good, isn't it?"

He put an arm tentatively round her and glanced down into her face but Rexie was looking shyly away.

"James," she said, for James was starting to climb by a sort of manger, through a hole to the loft.

"James is all right, if he tumbles down it will teach him to be more careful next time," he said callously, but got up to be near at hand in case of accidents.

As James's roughened little legs and feet disappeared into the dark depths of the loft he came back and half-sitting, half-leaning on the bale beside her, lifted one of Rexie's hands and spreading out her cold, damp fingers on his own, put his other warm hand over them.

"Cold as paddocks though they be," he said, smiling.

“Lord, I lift them up to Thee,” Rexie finished the funny old grace. “But we’ve nothing to eat,” she laughed, more to avoid a silence than to mention food for, as always in his presence, she was too filled with a shaky sort of excitement to be hungry.

“No, but we have shelter—and I have much to say grace for.”

He pressed her hand between his own, then raised and kissed it very slowly and gently, then, as he lifted his head and looked at her, he said, “You know, don’t you, Roxy?”

She was silent for a moment, then shook her head.

“Not about you,” she said shyly.

“What is it you do not know about me?”

He bent close over her and she would like to have laid her head against his old coat and say, “I want to know if you married me and pretended to like me just to help me and to save my good name because it was through you I lost it. If it was to make me accepted again in the village and make everything right for John and Sally and the children that you did it. There was so much you could do by marrying me, so much and so much. You were sort of bound to do it because of your training and because you are made that way—but oh! oh! if I could only know that you liked me a little bit, too, that you weren’t always just being kind and trying to make things all right for us all.”

And then she would have liked to have asked, “What about Sally? Would you have wanted Sally if it hadn’t been for me? Could you and Sally . . . ?”

He moved a little and the flow of her thoughts was stopped. He had seen one of James’s thin legs waving about under the opening and called to him.

“Hold on, James, your foot’s a mile from the bar, you crump! Why didn’t you look before turning your back?”

His voice was so ordinary and his attention seemed so entirely fixed on James, as he rose to help him, that Rexie’s heart went down. She could not help thinking that James was quite as much, or more important, than she was and as she stooped to get her shoes she thought to herself, “If Sally had been here instead of me——?”

She hurried to lace her shoes, not wanting him to help her now, and ashamed of herself for that slight resentment at James’s having called his attention away from her, persuading herself that she would have plucked up courage to say something about Sally if she had had a few moments longer.

Stratheilan swung James over the half door, watched him for a moment as he made pell-mell for the burn, and then returning picked up his plaid and began refolding it to fit over his shoulder, humming to himself as he did so, “Oh, wert thou in the cauld blast, on yonder lea—on yonder lea,” the tune of which was familiar to Rexie but not the words.

When the plaid was fitted to his satisfaction, he hesitated a moment as though he were going to speak, then glanced at Rexie’s cold, little averted face, and walked to the door.

“Come here and I will lift you over,” he said, “as if he were speaking to James,” thought Rexie, cross with herself but unable to control her pettishness. Indeed Rexie did not know what was the matter with her. She wished he would go away and leave her to sit on the hay and cry and cry, though what she wanted to cry about she could not have said.

“I can get over by myself,” she said shortly. “If you would go away I could manage much better.”

He gazed at her with an expression that was not so much puzzled, as expressive of patience at the whims of the creature. Then, quite simply he said, his Highland accent very marked:

“If I am standing with my back to you—so,” he sprang over the door and stood with his back to the opening, “I will not see your petticoats. You put your hands round my neck and I will be standing up and will raise you to the top—then you can jump down.”

Rexie was too used to John talking about “petticoats”—a word that to his masculine mind described any garment from an overall to a skirt—to blush at that word, but she turned as red as a lobster at his daring to think it was because she was shy of him that she wanted to climb over by herself.

To refuse, however, meant making a silly of herself in that maidenly way she and Sally detested because of its hint of mock modesty, so biting her lips she put her hands over his shoulders, he drew them close round his neck with his own, and slowly rising from his stooping posture, raised her to the top where he did not wait for her to jump but moved so that she could lift her feet over, then lowering her gently to the ground he walked slowly on without a glance behind.

But as she made up to him he stopped and looked down at her in a way that made her want to cry again. Why again, she did not know, and to cover the sob in her throat she made a quick remark.

“I think I’ve got a cold,” she said, rather wildly. “Perhaps I should go back and you can take James on to see the sk-skats!”

She was shivering and instantly he was alarmed. He did not laugh at the “skats,” knowing he often talked about his cats, but got out the flask he always carried and made her take a sip of brandy. Then he took her hand. “Now you must run,” he said, and giving a tally-ho to James, he started running with her along the hillside till they came to the track that led to the group of sheds and runs where the animals were kept.

“I’ve a surprise for you here,” he said, and there in a warm hut that evidently served as an office, was Mungo, stretched in great comfort by the fire. He then showed her a cupboard where tea things were kept.

“You stay and make tea while I take James round,” he said.

But by this time Rexie had quite recovered her spirits, and was exhilarated by her run in the high mountain air, the sun was out again and she wanted to see the animals, too.

So he took them both all round the lower sheds and runs and then up to the higher mountain fastness so that by the time they returned they were famished.

But Stratheilan had also provided against that contingency, and brought out a large tin of tongue, bread and butter, and a huge bag of tea-cakes which James was set down to toast and soak with butter while Stratheilan and Rexie set the table and made the tea.

They were all in high spirits by now and after huge helpings of tongue and bread and butter and toasted tea-cakes, and large thick cups of hot tea sweetened with condensed milk, it became a hilarious party.

Rexie was gloriously happy, her spirits, always volatile, had risen as quickly as they had gone down, and she felt that if only all that silly fuss about their breakfast at Bendibus hadn’t happened and if she and Stratheilan had simply fallen in love and got married, she would have been happier than any queen; just to be together in this little wooden hut among the heather and the hills, with the grouse clacking at their back door and bilberries growing round their door-stone at the front was all the paradise she wanted.

CHAPTER XVIII

“The wind blows cold”

“I’M GOING round to the garden room for my slate,” announced Rexie one day later. “Those little besoms went off with it yesterday to play at schools and never brought it back.”

The “besoms” were Dorky and her bosom friends, Polly Porter and Irene, or I-reen, as Dorky called her, much preferring the village pronunciation. The Three Musketeers had for the moment deserted the pleasures of “guddling trouts” and climbing trees to play at schools indoors.

“And you might look for my spectacles when you’re there,” said Sally. “Those children seem to think I bought my spectacles solely for them to play schoolmistress with.”

As Sally never wore the spectacles this was not to be wondered at, but Rexie promised to hunt for them as she knew Sally liked to pop them on her nose occasionally “to keep her end up,” as she said.

John and Stratheilan had just come in from a walk and as they had mysteriously disappeared near the garden gate, Rexie had insisted on going to see what they were doing and had been followed by a very reluctant Sally, who protested that she wanted to get on with making things for the yearly Soirée and Sale of Work to be held in the village hall, and that Rexie ought to be doing the same. Rexie took this for one of Sally’s funny ways about Stratheilan; at one time she had seemed always eager to see him and now seemed just as bent on avoiding him, so she took no notice.

They discovered the two men at the dam and all walked up to the house together where Sally went off to prepare the tea, while Rexie hunted for the missing kitchen slate and the spectacles in the little play-house at the end of the garden.

As soon as she reached it she remembered that Parky, the new puppy, was tied up there for some naughtiness or other, and that she had meant to take him in a bowl of water.

Parky was a nice little puppy but Rexie sorely missed Mungo who had followed her wherever she went and repaid her love with unswervable devotion. She knew Mungo missed her, too, and made many attempts to escape, but his training was just about complete and Stratheilan had said he would bring him over in a week or so. He wanted to test him again about some duty he was learning, otherwise, he was now a well-trained and well-behaved animal, she could take anywhere with her.

Rexie had always thought Mungo perfect as he was, but gave in to Stratheilan’s superior knowledge of what a dog ought to be and what he ought to be able to do.

She was now nearer the back of the house and went in by the scullery door on the ground floor, but his water bowl was in the parlour, as John called the living-room above, and Rexie ran straight up the rather rickety steps from the kitchen.

She had reached the top and put out her hand to turn the handle when she was astounded by hearing Sally's voice exclaim beyond the closed door.

"No! No! Ewen, don't! Don't! Rexie might come in!"

Rexie stood petrified. To hear one's own name when one is not supposed to be within earshot is always a little startling, but added to that there had been the words, and an urgency in Sally's voice that completely undid her.

Her face flamed as she heard a scuffle and then Stratheilan's voice saying something she did not catch, for she had immediately swung round to descend the steps. Then she paused, realising her horrible predicament, and heard Sally say, "No, Rexie hasn't guessed."

The old stair was so rickety and ill-made that it creaked loudly at every step, especially in descending. How they had not heard her mount she did not know but it was abundantly evident they had not.

But she simply could not risk going down again, it was quite quiet in the parlour now and she felt that every creak of those loose steps would resound through the house.

Then Sally spoke again as if in answer to a question from Stratheilan.

"No, she hasn't the least idea."

Desperate now, for she knew that if Sally opened the door she must see her and guess that she had overheard what was said, Rexie really felt that death would be preferable to discovery.

She looked wildly round for some escape, but there was none. Again Stratheilan spoke, but Rexie was no eavesdropper, she would now have had to pay attention to hear and her only desperate idea was to get away, to get away without being seen or heard.

She was white to the lips and her knees were trembling so much that she was now terrified they would give way beneath her, and that she would fall, but at that moment, desperation showed her a way of escape. She was very thin and could, she thought, just squeeze through between the uprights that supported the shaky bannister. It was not a very high drop from the top to the floor, but the floor was of stone and she must not make a sound.

Quickly she undid her tweed skirt, dropped it to the floor and then silently squeezed herself through the rails, scratching her arms and tearing her cotton blouse a little on the rough wood, then she clung for a moment by her fingers to the floor of the landing, before dropping lightly down. Her skirt was on in a moment, she stole across the scullery, gently opened the door, let herself out, then closed it and sped by the path through the gooseberry bushes to the garden house.

Arrived there she sank into a chair, unable for a while to control the trembling that shook her, though she knew that Sally would be hunting her up for tea and that she must try and pull herself together before she came.

Luckily Dorky, running home from school, burst in to see Parky before going to the house and Rexie, pretending to be very intent on something, told her to tell Sally not to wait tea as she was busy, but would come in a few minutes.

A few minutes may mean anything and Rexie managed to stretch it out till she saw Stratheilan, who had only come in to drink a cup on his way to some meeting, cross the garden with John.

Sally was going out, too, to help with arranging things for the Soirée and was in too great a hurry to take much notice of Rexie when she did go in, beyond telling her that she had made fresh tea for her and saved two cream sponges, Rexie's favourite cakes, which were hidden under the blue bowl on the dresser.

Sally was always so kind, Rexie felt horribly guilty as she rescued the two little cakes—not to eat them, she could eat nothing at the moment, but to give to Dorky and James.

Indeed, she felt so self-reproachful at having overheard those words that she tried to put them out of her mind and persuade herself she had not heard them.

It was useless, as she drank her tea alone—for Dorky and James were off as soon as they had swallowed the cakes to help in the church hall—she went over and over them, and then over all that had happened since that happy tea-party in the hut on the hillside.

She did not think that she had ever been really happy since then.

Sally had been rather short-tempered that night when they got home. It seemed that Tam had seen Stratheilan crossing the hills and he had told him he was coming to Bendibus and would turn James and Rexie back as the weather was too threatening to visit the enclosures far up the hills.

Naturally Sally had then expected them all back to tea and had been worried when they did not come. Perhaps it was just that that had upset her, but Rexie had felt that she had changed a little since that afternoon.

For one thing, she was again much freer in her expressions of admiration for Stratheilan, she didn't seem to care if Rexie knew how much she liked him.

She had spoken to Rexie a good deal about her marriage, too, even saying that that sort of half-and-half arrangement wasn't fair to other people. Did Rexie eventually intend to marry Stratheilan and go to Morne with him?

Because, if not, she should remember there were other girls who might like him and whom he might like, if this pretence of a marriage was just to throw dust in people's eyes and there was no intention of consummating it. Yes, that was what Sally had said. She had waited for an answer, too, and Rexie had not known what to answer. She simply could not tell Sally straight out what she wanted to know. It wasn't all cut and dried, like that—it was all too fragile and delicate to talk about.

If only, Rexie reflected, Mrs. Postgate hadn't come in that morning and forced Stratheilan to offer to marry her! If only he had been free just to ask her if he wanted to, if he really and truly loved her, and had had no cause whatever to think he was letting her down if he didn't offer to marry her! But that hadn't been the way at all. He had practically been *forced* to ask her.

Even John had said it was "the only decent thing to do." In fact, everyone accepted that, that Stratheilan hadn't had any choice, that he just had to ask her.

Then Sally had said it was easy enough to know if a man was in love with you. But was it? Well, it might be with some men who would not mind showing a girl, even if she were hurt, that he didn't care for her. But Stratheilan was so kind and so reserved. . . . Of course, there had been times when she had had no doubts, but they never lasted when he wasn't there. She always began to think again of how he had been forced to pretend to like her, and of how his mother had said he was so chivalrous—had she meant to hint that Rexie was taking advantage of his chivalry?

She hadn't seemed to be hinting that in the least, but Rexie simply could not help reminding herself of it and thinking all sorts of queer thoughts.

Another thing Sally had said—and Sally didn't say these things unkindly, it was only once, or twice that she had spoken sharply. No, she had been genuinely worried when she had said to her, "Don't you love him at all, Rexie? If you do you should let him see it, just a hint would do. You see, it is not only awkward for you—his being forced to ask you to marry him as you put it. No doubt *he* thinks you entered into this arrangement because you couldn't very well do anything else, especially with John and me and the children coming, and *he* may be biding his time, the same as you are doing, trying to find out what you really feel. Another thing, you're such a timid creature about love and men and all that sort of thing, that I expect he's afraid of you."

"I'm not," Rexie had roundly declared, roused at this. "I'm not timid about love, I'm only frightened of him marrying me when he really doesn't

want to.”

All this had not, of course, been said at once, or all on one occasion. For the most part they went on their usual way without a word about the situation between Stratheilan and Rexie, it was only now and then that a few words were said. But for all that, Rexie had the feeling that there was a lot going on she did not know about.

She had sometimes suspected an understanding between Ewen and Sally and tortured herself thinking they were in love but had decided to “sacrifice themselves,” as she rather grandiloquently put it, and not let her know. The very thought of a secret understanding between them was like a knife in her heart.

For Rexie could not deceive herself now; she knew Stratheilan could break her heart though she still kept up a sort of façade, pretending to herself that she was one of those prehistoric or mythical maidens who did not really fall in love until they knew they were wanted.

“Not that I mean,” she assured herself, “that I wouldn’t still love him if he didn’t want me. I only mean I wouldn’t want him to love me if he didn’t want to”—a dark saying that she may have understood herself—one never knew just what Rexie could persuade herself to believe or the things she would see perfectly clear but only muddled up if she tried to explain them.

Sally on her return from the hall that night did not seem in the least perturbed or troubled by a guilty conscience, but, as Rexie said to herself, there was really no reason why she should, since *she* had kept saying, “Don’t.” No, it was Stratheilan whom her heart accused, not Sally.

“Did you see John?” Sally asked. “He was in here asking for you just before tea.”

“No,” said Rexie. “What did he want?”

“Don’t know,” said Sally, carelessly. “Hadn’t you better go and see; he’s along in his room, I suppose. Those children will be the death of me. When Dorky saw me eating an apple she said, ‘Gie’s a bit, Solly, Hen’—just like that!”

Rexie, for all her broken heart, could not control a laugh at Sally’s indignation and her perfect mimicry of the village accent.

“Dorky’s determined to be more Scotch than the Scots themselves at the moment,” she said, going off to see John. “James, on the other hand, though he does his best, is a poor hand at the Scottish language, his heart isn’t in it.”

When she entered John’s room she found to her surprise that Stratheilan was there.

"I met Sally and brought her along," he said, seemingly surprised that Rexie did not know he was with John.

"Oh, I see," said Rexie in such a cold voice that he looked at her in a startled, puzzled way.

"He won't stay to supper," said John, glancing at them, in his turn, with a very uncertain expression, "he says he has to be back by ten—will you see him out?"

Stratheilan was standing as if just on the point of departure. He wasn't going to see me, thought Rexie, turning the blade in her heart, he just brought Sally home.

They went silently to the door and Stratheilan opened it, then hesitated, looking at Rexie.

"What is it, Roxy?" he said, so gently that it was all she could do to keep the tears back, and her face shut hard and tight.

She looked up at him and he saw that her eyes were full of reproach but before he could speak, she laughed quite lightly.

"If you want a welcome next time bring Mungo," she said. "I must go now, the milk will be boiling over," and she shut the door.

It was the excuse she, Sally and John often used in fun together, but he did not know that.

She stood and listened to his footsteps till she could hear them no longer. . . . But he did not know that either.

She went back to the study where John was still standing by the fire, gazing into the embers.

"Sally said you wanted to see me."

"Oh," he looked up, "did she?" Then after a moment's pause, "Well, as a matter of fact I did want to talk to you, Rexie. Stratheilan gone?"

Rexie said he had and then John began to speak of ordinary affairs, as if, Rexie thought, putting off the moment when he must talk to her.

The following day was her birthday and Stratheilan had been asked to dinner. Having worked round to this, John said:

"Stratheilan seems to be hesitating about it now."

"Is he not coming?" asked Rexie, coldly.

"Yes, he is, but——" John stood staring at her for a moment, his eyebrows drawn above his quick but kind grey eyes, his shoulders stooped, his hands in the pockets of his loose coat, and then said urgently, "Rexie, tell me the truth. Do you care for Urquhart? Or are you regretting the whole thing?"

“Yes, I think I am,” said Rexie slowly, her heart sinking into unfathomable depths of blackness.

John stood looking at her in silence for a moment, then turned and taking his pipe from the mantelpiece began to fill it.

“Well,” he spoke uncertainly, “I don’t know what can be done . . . but . . . Well, shall I tell him so and see what he has to say?”

Rexie stood hesitating so long that John had filled his pipe, put it unlighted in his mouth and given it a few tentative draws before the silence was broken. And then it was he who broke it.

“Well, shall we leave it at present? It’s early days yet. When is it he goes back to Morne? Not till the late autumn, or early winter, is it?”

“Perhaps . . . perhaps you’d better tell him now,” Rexie got out at last.

John struck a match. “Well, it may get things cleared up, but what he can do is more than I can tell, you are married, aren’t you?”

“Yes . . . I think so.”

“You *think* so! My goodness, Rexie——” John suddenly pulled himself up at the sight of her blanched face. “Oh, well, I should never have left you,” he said. Then as she moved to go, “Cheer up, Hen-len, the sky hasn’t fallen yet. How old are you to-morrow?”

“Twenty-three.”

“Gosh! Nearly grown-up! And there’s Dorky coming to say the coffee’s ready.”

He came and put an arm round her and gave her a hug as they went along to the parlour. But it had not comforted Rexie.

But next day, her birthday, she cheered up a little; everyone was so kind and they had teased and laughed at her, kissed and hugged her and been so determined to give her a happy birthday, that the sun had struggled through the grey cloud that enveloped her and lightened her heart a little.

Stratheilan rode over to breakfast bringing her a pair of pearl ear-rings, having noticed that her ears had been pierced—as indeed they had, by her grandmother with a darning needle and a cork in the good old-fashioned style, then the two silver rings the old lady herself had worn had been inserted and Rexie had had to keep turning them till the holes healed up. She still had the silver rings but had never worn ear-rings, being indeed rather ashamed of her grandmother’s “barbarous notions” (to quote John) and always tried to hide the tell-tale little holes in her ears with her hair.

She could not understand how Stratheilan had noticed them but he had done so all right for the little pearls were for pierced ears.

“You must put them in,” Sally had said, laughing, and Rexie had shrunk back a little from where he stood with them in his hand.

Then he had looked at her with that intimate smile that always thrilled her, that smile that shut all the world away for a moment, leaving only themselves. . . .

“Yes,” he had said very gently, but made no move to do so just then, but replacing them in the little case, with the smile still lingering on his mouth, “as if,” thought Rexie, “he knew everything and everything and everything and it was all right,” and her heart felt warmer in her breast all the day.

“Do you know how to put ear-rings in ears?” Dorky asked him.

“I am knowing very well how to put them in Rexie’s ears,” he had said with grave assurance.

Whereupon James, who had been silently but deeply interested in the ear-rings, announced in a satisfied tone, “I expect he often puts rings in pig’s noses to keep them from rooting up the crops.”

This sent everyone into gales of laughter which puzzled James but relieved Rexie who was now presented with her other gifts.

Sally’s was of a very different complexion, as she said herself, it was a very feathery and furious clocker, who snapped and pecked at them all, with angry indignation when her basket was opened. In another basket were thirteen “Rhode Island Red” eggs for her to sit on, if ever she could be calmed down enough to sit on anything. Rexie, it appeared, had frequently said how lovely it would be to have a hen and little yellow chickens running about the garden.

“And nicer still to have our own eggs,” Sally had suggested. “Not to speak of a cockerel, or a good fat capon for the pot,” said John unguardedly, only to be met at once with the question, “What’s a capon?” to which he truthfully replied that he hadn’t the remotest idea except that monks ate them and they knew what was what.

“I expect,” said James, who could always be trusted to give a considered, if at times rather surprising, opinion, “it’s a cock-hen in its first-year plumage.”

This remarkable bird hit the nail on the head, as John remarked, and Rexie’s next gifts happily shifted the centre of interest, John presenting her with *The Children’s Encyclopædia*, which she had said she wanted—not for the children, but herself, “though it would do for both.” Dorky and James produced a kettle holder (knitted by James), a handkerchief with “Roxana” in one corner (embroidered by Dorky) and a very fancy box containing two cakes of poisonous-looking pink soap and a bottle of perfume, purchased

from the village shop after much anxious saving and counting up of pennies, from both.

At the birthday tea-party the children had four guests of their own, who were regaled on sausage rolls and twopenny bags of potato chips (by special request) followed by huge slices of birthday cake and pudding-plates full of pink jelly and whipped cream, a total before which that strong man, John, quailed, but which was polished off by the spindly James without blinking an eyelid.

James was coming on.

Stratheilan came to dinner in Highland dress, as John had told him they were going to dress in honour of Rexie, and they toasted her in champagne, but there seemed to be something missing, though everyone did his best to pretend there wasn't and all were very merry and bright.

Stratheilan had waited till the last to say good-bye to Rexie and then had lingered a little as if hoping she would come to the door with him, as she usually did, but they were all joking about the clocker, and Rexie seemed to be able to think of nothing but clockers till Sally gave her a nudge, when she said very cheerfully indeed:

"You see him off Sally, while I count the spoons," a very feeble joke indeed at which only the courteous Stratheilan smiled.

"Yes," said Sally, rather defiantly, "I'll see him off, but it's your *chickens* you can count, Rexie, before they are hatched."

A deep saying over which Rexie wrinkled her eyebrows as, no doubt, she was meant to do, for had she not been for weeks trying not to count on any chickens at all and indeed was now more like breaking all the eggs in her basket than hatching out any birds.

She had half hoped and half feared that John would take the opportunity to say something to Stratheilan, but when she asked him if he had, John had seemed a bit put out.

"Yes," he said, "and a bright lot of good it did! He only said—though very politely, of course, and in other words—that he was very much obliged to me for my interest but that he was quite capable of looking after his own affairs and, if I understood him aright, quite capable of looking after you too, my girl. You take my word for it, Rexie, if ever this daft marriage does——" John hesitated for a word, "*culminate*, you'll be made to toe the mark all right."

And that was all Rexie got from John except a rather gentle good-night kiss, and a hint not to mind him, he was in a bad temper, birthday cake always did sour his naturally angelic disposition.

As a matter of fact, Stratheilan had not been at all so superior and untroubled as John's remarks seemed to indicate.

He had looked very grave and worried when John had said he thought his sister was rather upset now about that hurried marriage of theirs, "in fact," said John nervously, "she has sounded me about what I thought could be done to . . . to . . . well, go back to 'as you were,' so to speak."

John hated his task so much he was a bit incoherent.

Then he had managed to stammer, for he liked Stratheilan now and had much sympathy with him. "What about yourself, Urquhart? (John could never quite get out of his English habit of using a friendly surname). You were rather rushed into it yourself. If you both feel——" He had stopped there, for an angry frown had quickly knitted the brows over the blue eyes.

"I was not being rushed into it! Indeed, no. You are mistaken, Mr. Drew, please withdraw those words."

"Oh, all right, sorry, I withdraw them with great pleasure," said John. "I'd hate it said that anyone was rushed into marriage with Rexie, in fact, I'd take great pleasure in blacking both their damned eyes—but—well—— Hang it all, man, I want to be fair to you, too——"

"That is all right." Stratheilan's brows had straightened a little. "I understand. It is a brother's right. But I think Roxana and I . . ."

"Oh, certainly," said John hurriedly, sensing that Stratheilan (as he said later to Sally) wanted to give him "a kick in the pants," and tell him he didn't want anyone to interfere between Rexie and himself, or try to explain her to him.

"And, dash it all!" John exclaimed. "I believe he's right and that he knows more about Rexie than any of us. I'm not so sure myself that Rexie really wants it broken off."

For John could never really bring himself to look on Rexie's marriage as anything but the engagement most people supposed it was. He was, therefore, a little startled when Stratheilan ended the conversation with:

"Rexie is my wife. What I have, I hold," and then changed the conversation with a polite but unmistakeable hauteur that John envied him.

"I suppose it must come from the blood of kings," he had confided again to Sally.

"Yes, those chieftains were kings in their own right," Sally concurred. "But don't you try being kingly, John. That manner is like the kilt, you have to be born to it, otherwise you only look a fool if you don't," she sighed.

“But if you are born to it, you can’t beat it, and you can no more stamp it out than you can stamp out the mists round the head of Ben Avie.”

After which poetic flight she went off, looking rather ashamed of herself.

CHAPTER XIX

“What I had, I lost”

EVERY year the village of Lammerside had a *soirée*. If you wish to pronounce this word in the classic tradition, you will say “Sworee,” with the accent well on the “ee”—that is how Dorky told Sally to pronounce it, and so Sally did. Otherwise you can be as French as you like.

Like all other villages, Lammerside liked to consider itself in the forefront of fashion, whether as to the cut of its coat or the pronouncement of such French words as sandwiches (*sangwidges* is the proper French, in case you don’t know) and envelopes (*ongvelopes*, if you are a scholar, as I take you to be). But most of all did Lammerside enjoy proving its up-to-date outlook by introducing some new feature into the *Soirée*.

This year it had been advertised with great *éclat* that there was to be “A Grand Display of Waxworks in the small hall. Entrance 6d.”

Rexie and Sally had, of course, been much too raw and new to take any active part in either the *Soirée* or the accompanying sale of work, each stall belonging by ancient right to certain local families, or to High Lights in the Church, but they had both been asked to “contribute.”

Sally at once suggested their getting up some feature themselves, such as a Punch and Judy show, or the latest in bran-tub ideas. Luckily, Rexie recognised this at once as being “forwardsome” and hushed Sally down before she put her foot in where angels feared to tread.

So they contented themselves with giving something to each of the stalls and remaining modestly in the background.

James, indeed, was to recite, but this greatness had been thrust upon him by his deluded teacher.

Bendibus was going *en masse* to the *Soirée*, even John, who had never been to a *Soirée* and liked new experiences, was putting on what he called his “Sunday suit” and going.

Sally had invited Stratheilan—it was always Sally now who invited Stratheilan to join them—but he had said he was too busy as he had so much to get in before his time was up at Storrs, which would not be very long

now, but he would come and escort them home and help to carry their purchases.

The first part of the entertainment was tea.

John enjoyed this part of the affair prodigiously.

They all sat in rows on the narrow seats in the kirk and were presented with paper bags containing sandwiches, scones, a slice of seed and a slice of plum cake, with various small buns and cakes to fill up the corners, all home-made by Scotswomen who cannot be beaten in this world when it comes to scones and cakes. Indeed, at the last meeting of the W.R.I. the colonial wife of an old inhabitant who had returned to spend his last years at home, had loudly complained that all the cooking competitions were for cakes and scones which every Scotswoman could make perfectly, so what was the use of competitions? Why not soups? said she. They could only make one soup—Scotch Broth!

This had been forwardsomeness beyond all bounds. The W.R.I. had been speechless with indignation until after the meeting, and the next competition was for *Cakes and Scones, Girdle and Oven!* very much underlined.

After the bags, teacups were distributed and then grace was said by the minister, tea was then poured out from large teapots and conversation and jokes started among the grown-ups and a race among the boys and girls to empty their bags and then look hungrily round for any superfluous food from grown-up bags.

When the bags were empty—John was just saved from throwing his away—everyone, young and old, at a given signal, blew up his own and then burst it with a loud resounding whack.

This was absolutely *de rigueur* and was the sign that that part of the entertainment had reached its climax and was over. John's crack was magnificent as he blew up and demolished his bag, quite putting to shame the feeble whiffs which were all their giggles allowed Sally and Rexie to produce. James and Dorky were "also rans" but no more.

Sally said proudly, with a sidelong look at Rexie, that if Ewen had been there, John's thunderous crack wouldn't even have been heard. But Rexie wouldn't rise. No, Rexie was not herself these days.

The sale was then declared open by a lady in white gloves who seemed as thankful as her audience when this part of the performance was over, and rushed with the same gusto to the stalls.

Sally and Rexie had brought large bags and Dorky and James the biggest egg-and-butter baskets they could find. These were soon filled as they all

loved buying things and when James found he had even spent his sixpence for the waxworks he started for home.

He was met by Stratheilan, who, guessing something was wrong, though James only said that he thought he ought to feed the hens, took him back and seeing him carefully avoiding a glance at the door of the waxworks, guessed at the state of his finances, gave him half-a-crown to buy two threepenny lottery tickets for a bottle of whisky and a pig, and keep the change, which once more turned James into a man of means.

James did well, for he won the pig and forthwith gave it to Flindy who, he knew, had bought four tickets in the vain hope of being lucky.

Flindy didn't want to take it, but Rexie and John were so obviously horrified at the very thought of having a pig thrust upon them through James's recklessness that she gave in and allowed James to help her own brood drive the pig home—a grand finale worth twenty half-crowns.

Then came the waxworks and another surprise for James when he discovered that, as one of the entertainers, he could get in for nothing. He was much chagrined at this come-down. At six and a bit it's much more lordly to pay for yourself than to be let in for nothing.

It might as well be said at once that Rexie and Sally completely disgraced themselves at the waxworks and bowed John's neck with shame. They laughed at all the wrong places.

John held his own by folding his arms, putting on a stern expression and never departing from it through comedy, tragedy, farce and bathos. Like Sidney Carton, he said it was the only way.

The "Waxworks" were various village worthies dressed up to represent such characters as the Village Blacksmith, Little Boy Blue, George Washington, The Lady and the Mouse, Jenny Lind, the Swedish Nightingale, and so on.

Each was mounted on a box, wheeled on to the platform, wound up with a huge and loudly creaking handle amid excited cheers, and then jerkily performed their parts as like automatic figures as they could.

The blacksmith hit a horseshoe on the anvil to a verse of "Under a spreading chestnut tree," sung by the choir; Little Boy Blue blew his horn and a rather oversized lamb immediately bolted across the stage, charged down the hall, knocking children to right and left, and finally had to be caught and bundled out by the butcher, ably assisted by the choir.

Naturally, this unrehearsed effect brought down the house, and it was still rocking with laughter when the next "scene" was staged. A small mouse was dragged across the stage by a black thread and the "lady" in a large

crinoline (the pot boy at the inn) who was supposed to give a polite squeak and faint gently up against the next figure—the Village Blacksmith now resting from his toil—rather overdid his part and gave such a resounding roar and leaped so high in the air, that he missed his box on his descent, sent it flying into the front seats and sat down himself on the mouse.

Never had any acrobatic display been such a success in Lammerside, squawks and screams and cries of “A moose! a moose!” rose through the laughter and the encores, while children grew hysterical with joy.

Unfortunately these high jinks were considered a bit too successful by the minister and other sedate folk, and the youth, flushed with his triumph, was well dressed down behind the scenes and “The Mouse” deleted from the programme, to many an “I told you so” from the members of the W.R.I. who had foreseen over-enthusiasm when it came to mice and women.

By this time, both Rexie and Sally were helpless, but that did not matter—they were meant to laugh there and John was the only one who did not seem to think it riotously funny.

The speech of Mr. Gladstone should have restored order, but the Liberals and the Tories in the audience took the opportunity for a little private backchat, exchanged with great good humour and many local witticisms, but not conducive to restoring the gravity with which the next item in the programme should have been received, especially when a Tory bun hit Mr. Gladstone on his very liberal nose.

The next item was “Jenny Lind, the Swedish Nightingale,” represented by a coquettish spinster, very far from her first youth, a silly creature who saw herself as a coy young girl with an entrancing voice, her old parents being partly to blame, as they still called her “Girly,” treated her as one and listened to her warblings with awed attention.

Her leaning being, of course, towards pathos and tragedy, she had chosen a lugubrious lament, in the second line of which the word “breast” occurred. She was quite honestly shy of this word, and unfortunately had neither brains nor a sense of the ridiculous, so she changed it to chest, a slight change, no doubt, but it was to complete the undoing of Rexie.

“The Nightingale” was wheeled in arrayed in white muslin, with a girlish cross-over and a blue sash. On her frizzy hair was set a large leghorn hat, with a wreath of forget-me-nots round the crown—the whole evidently copied from some chocolate box. This vision was enough to upset Sally at once, and having more sense than Rexie she whispered that she must go and cheer up James who, with Dorky and the other entertainers among the school children, was being looked after by Miss Howey, the schoolmistress.

Hardly had she gone when the large handle was turned and a sudden high wail, like the hoot of a hunting owl in a silent wood, startled the audience almost out of their seats.

“Lay me in my lonely grave——”

A pause, then in a tragic and heart-rending shriek on her top notes the request was repeated:

“Lay-ay me in my lone-ly grave.”

By the time the second onslaught reached her ears, Rexie was nearly hysterical with suppressed mirth. Still her kind heart might have saved her had the next line been left alone.

“Strew no violets on my chest——”

Here, alas, Girlie drew a deep breath and in the momentary silence a woman behind Rexie innocently asked her neighbour in a loud, solemn, puzzled voice, “Is’t her kist she’s meanin’?” (her chest-of-drawers).

Nothing could disguise Rexie’s choking crow of laughter, her desperate attempt at a fit of coughing only made matters worse, though John manfully rose to the occasion and ostentatiously slapped her on the back.

A lady in front turned and looked at her through her lorgnettes and Girlie, herself, gave her a glance of withering scorn before she continued her wail.

If Sally had not already escaped, Rexie would have fled, but John had taken a firm hold of her arm and, besides, she saw that it would only make matters worse for both Sally and herself to desert the ship, so she hung on, doing her best to control her hysterical desire to break into shrieks and crows of laughter as the large, bony creature in the childish muslins and ribbons bewailed her lot at the top of her thin soprano voice, with what, she evidently supposed to be, a bewitching lisp.

Fortunately, the next item was officially funny, and Rexie got her eyes dried and her nose powdered, while John whispered to her:

“No apologies, mind—face it out. Go and congratulate her as if nothing had happened.”

So Rexie, at the end, did not run away but supported by John mixed with the audience offering congratulations and being, by this time, really sorry for poor Girlie, whose last verse had been greeted with impatient hoots and cat-calls from the rude fellows at the back, she was quite charming in her funny way and she and John looked so innocent of all offence that people, including Girlie—only too eager to believe it—began to think they must have been mistaken and that Rexie, far from hooting with laughter, had been

affected to tears by the wails of the songstress. Of course, there were many who were not taken in, but they were mostly those who had had to conceal their own mirth, and been glad of a scapegoat to divert attention.

Nevertheless, Rexie was thankful for a short interval that allowed her to escape. After a word with James, who was not in the least nervous and had evidently been in no need of Sally's cheering-up, for she was not there and, according to James, had only been in a moment to "put his collar straight."

You could always depend on James, whose shyness was that of a mouse or a bird—entirely free from any self-consciousness—to perform his part.

Rexie left him and going out for a breath of fresh air was surprised to come upon Stratheilan's car drawn up on the verge of the road with himself and Sally seated in it in earnest talk. She was going up to speak to them, when she saw him stand up to go and then draw Sally towards him and kiss her before he stepped out. Sally followed him and they went towards the hall, not seeing Rexie who stood in the shadows.

Stratheilan's action had caused no great shock to Rexie. When the light has gone out of one's life, the falling of another shadow makes little difference.

She accepted it and turned to go, only feeling that she wished she could go home now, and not have to smile and smile.

"I've laughed myself out," she said in return to a remark of John's on her serious face when the rest of the hall was convulsed over a recitation of "Tam o' Shanter."

Even James's performance brought no more than a faint smile.

James, not because he could recite, poor lamb, for he couldn't, had been chosen to, so to speak, entertain the troops with "Scots Wha Ha'e wi' Wallace bled," for the sole reason that he was the only one in his class who could be trusted not to lose the few wits the Lord had bestowed upon him, and bolt like a hare at the sight of the crowded hall.

He was indeed an object to provoke the laughter of the gods as he stood there, small and spindle shanked, with large knuckly knees, held very straight, and two front teeth missing, lisping in a high, sparrow-like pipe, the martial words of the battle-song of the brawny Scots, as he himself conceived them:

"Scoth *wham* Bruth hath often led
Scoth *wham* Bruth . . ."

through it he went. Not in Scots, indeed, since neither he nor Miss Howey could pronounce one word of that ancient language correctly, but that didn't matter since nobody understood a word anyhow, and it was so much more

diverting as it was that even the ranks of Tuscany could scarce forbear to cheer.

Arrived at what everyone took, on faith, to be the end, he swung his thin stick of an arm across his chest—bowed stiffly from the middle, and had taken a few steps to depart, when Dorky, anxiously watching from behind the curtain, hissed in a loud whisper:

“You forgot ‘Now’s the Day——’ ”

Back came James. Up went his freckled chin and out he piped the forgotten verse. Again came the low bow and again an unperturbed James departed, while the shouts of laughter and loud cheers that greeted this return to his guns, seemed indeed as overwhelmingly overdone as if a thunderstorm had been called up to appreciate the efforts of a grasshopper on a blade of grass. The grasshopper didn’t mind.

Rexie smiled with a little ache in her heart both for James, so unconsciously pathetic, and for herself, because she too was insignificant-looking and wasn’t so tall and distinguished and clever and charming as Sally, who had so easily taken from her what she had. Yes, she had lost what she had, perhaps because she was poor-spirited, like the man with the one talent. “From him shall be taken away even that which he hath.”

“What I had, I lost.” I expect that will be a suitable epitaph for me, she said to herself, trying very hard to speak cheerfully to her own lost heart.

For, indeed, her heart felt very small and lost as she made her way out of the hall, glad that it was all over.

At the door stood Stratheilan with some wraps.

“I brought the car,” he said. “All the baskets and parcels are in there. You drive, John. Rexie and I will walk home.”

“Oh,” exclaimed Rexie, “I think Sally should walk. I mean, she—she likes walking—sometimes.”

This was such an obvious lie that no one took any notice whatever. Sally never walked anywhere if she could be transported by any other means. John had even offered to roll her down a hill to “save her legs.”

“Sally will go in the car,” said Stratheilan so definitely that Rexie was slightly startled. Sally looked at him and smiled and he smiled back. Then he took Rexie’s arm to guide her, for she seemed slightly dazzled, coming out of the bright hall.

As they left, Sally looked round and called something about “Isobel Rose.”

They reached the hillside in silence, and then Rexie, remembering that Mrs. Urquhart had wondered “what Isobel Rose would say,” asked tonelessly, “Who is Isobel Rose?”

“It is the girl my mother is wishing me to marry: she was at the concert with a party from the Hall and took Sally for you and spoke to her,” he replied.

“You mean—now?” Rexie was startled, though by this time she was used to his occasional misuse of the tenses, the only sign he ever gave of being disturbed. “Wishing you to marry her now?”

“Isobel is now married,” he said calmly. “We never wanted to marry each other,” he smiled, “it was our mothers. I knew you heard my mother say, ‘What about Isobel Rose?’ It has distressed me sometimes, but I had no opportunity——”

“Oh, but now——” Rexie interrupted, then stopped. She had been going to say, “It’s Sally now. Does Sally know?” But, of course, he and Sally had been talking about that in the car—and then he had kissed her, so it was all right.

“*Now*,” he replied quietly, “I am going to marry you.”

This was Rexie’s opportunity. He had said, “I am going to marry you,” so he must not consider that that other ceremony had been binding. He had once made a remark about something they might have to sign before a magistrate or someone, Rexie, as usual, was not very clear about such intricacies, but she was quite sure they had never done that. Certainly she had thought that it was in connection with another form of Scots marriage but . . .

“For the second time,” continued Stratheilan, interrupting her thoughts.

Rexie looked questioningly up into his face. There was a light strip of greenish lemon sky just behind the hill beyond the birch trees of Bendibus, and against it his profile with the bold nose and strong mouth looked carved in bronze. The sternness frightened her a little and her voice faltered as she said:

“Ewen . . . I’ve been thinking . . .”

“Yes,” he said, suddenly stopping between her and the light, which made his face so dark she could not see it.

“You’ve been thinking——?”

“Yes . . . I mean about us—I mean if you would like to—oh, no I don’t mean it like that,” she was nervously gripping her fingers together and, as always when upset, kept repeating “I mean,” and knowing it, tried

unavailingly to stop, "I mean—I think it would be better" (another "I mean") she hesitated and, in her confusion, her voice suddenly sounded hard and dictatorial, but she could do nothing about it. "You must see about us being free," she ended up. "And then you could marry——" she just could not say "Sally," so ended up, "anyone you like."

"In that case, I shall marry you all over again and this time——"

He stopped, put his arm under hers and raised her off her feet, pressing her against his heart, "this time it is a real marriage and you go home with me to Morne."

"But—no, listen, Ewen——" for his face was close to hers.

"You are my wife," he said. "Do you think I shall let you go?"

"But—but *if there is someone else?*"

Immediately his arms slackened. He peered down into her face, but the evening shadows were too thick now for him to see it clearly and in any case she had turned quickly away.

"You—you mean . . ." he said, and paused, then added quickly, "But you are my wife, Rexie."

"But you said . . . you said I could be free . . . Stratheilan . . . Ewen, please let this be the end—*please* . . . *please*. I do want it. It was a mistake. . . . It was very kind of you, but——"

"You want to be free!"

His voice was harsh and abrupt, the first time it had ever been anything but gentle to her and she shrank back.

He stood quite still. He had let her go and was looking down at her with fiercely knitted brows. Suddenly, he took her arm and walked her across the few yards to the garden and took her to the door.

He paused a moment as though he was going to speak, then opened it without a word.

She hesitated before going in and looked up at him again, but his face was in the shadows.

"Good night—Ewen—and—and good-bye."

He turned quickly on his heel and went away.

She watched him cross the garden and then mount the hillside but he never looked back.

The last she saw of him was his tall figure black against the lemon streak of sky before it dipped over the hill.

CHAPTER XX

“Che Sara Sara”

REXIE stood playing with the curtain cord and looking at the dawn on the hills.

She had not slept. Like a hunted hare her mind had rushed from one thing to another, throughout the dark hours.

She could not understand Stratheilan, he ought to have been grateful to her for telling him to cut the Gordian knot, but he had been so abrupt. As if he blamed her. Of course, he had taken those words of hers to mean that the someone else was on her side, but how could he believe that? He must know there wasn't anyone, and it seemed mean to put the blame on her as he had seemed to do, and she couldn't have believed he could be mean.

“He naught ignoble did, or mean——”

Her lips twisted as the words formed in her mind; of course, it wasn't any memorable scene—except to her. . . .

“What was she to do?” She had asked that of herself a thousand times and now with the dawn the answer came.

Of course, she must go away until it was all over. That would make it easier for everybody. For him and for Sally, and for John, too.

Poor John! But perhaps he didn't love Sally, perhaps she had imagined all that, just as she had imagined sometimes that Ewen loved her—even after Sally came.

Yes, she would go away. This was Saturday, the day she always went to Presterby. She would slip out with a suitcase after breakfast and leave it at the post office where the bus always stopped and where she always joined it. John would be busy with his book, and Sally had promised to go down to the hall and help with the clearing up there, and Dorky and James wouldn't miss a treat like that, there were sure to be odds and ends of rubbish to collect as treasures. They would all be out of the way this forenoon, the bus went at eleven and she could go down to catch it as usual, collect her case at the last minute and at Presterby catch the 12.15 train to the south.

Her mind made up, she returned to bed for a while and then got up and packed her case and wrote a note to John, telling him as much as she could and asking him not to look for her—she was giving no address, indeed had none to give—she would write to him and come home when everything was cleared up and settled. She would go to Mr. Matthew Orr in London and he

would act for her if there was anything the law wanted to know or wanted her to do.

It was, of course, rather a confused epistle, but she got the main point clear enough, that she was convinced Stratheilan and Sally cared for each other but were too loyal and kind to tell her so.

This note she sealed up then addressed and stamped it. She would post it at the post office at Presterby and it would be delivered to John that evening, as she knew from having tested it. John and she always liked to know everything about collections and deliveries because of their work.

In that way, she would be sure of being well on her road to London before he got it and yet not be missing long enough to alarm them.

She also wrote a friendly little note to Sally, saying that she and Stratheilan had agreed to annul their marriage and she thought it better to go away until it was all over, when she would come back to Bendibus and John.

This, she thought, was enough to let Sally know she knew, and wasn't hurt about her and Stratheilan.

For all her apparent frailty and her elusiveness, there was a strength about Rexie which would carry her through things that would have daunted weaker natures.

But her pain was so terrible she could just go on from one thing to the next. It wasn't only her heart, it was her whole existence that was broken. She loved Bendibus and adored John and Sally and the children and all their happy life there together. There did not seem any life for her anywhere else. Leaving them all just seemed a thing she could not bear if she thought of it, so she did not think. She moved through a dreariness that had no light anywhere. Even if she came back her life was all over and done with, all spoiled.

She was too young to have any trust in time's healing. She didn't even want time to heal her and bind up her wounds, let them bleed her white, she did not care.

She carried out everything as she had planned. There wasn't a single hitch, indeed everything went so well that that, too, would have added to her pain if she had not been past noticing such pin-pricks.

"You would think it made no difference," she thought, when at last she was seated in the train. "No difference at all that I won't be there any more, as if everything would just go on the same. . . ."

Dry-eyed, she sat in the train and watched the hills and the moorlands pass. She had brought nothing to eat, she had just felt that that she could not do, though she knew that her changes of trains meant missing the set meals.

Not that she noticed missing them; she just sat in her corner seat, gazing out of the window, but seeing very little.

In her sad, tired mind, she went over everything again. All the misery of those snubs from the village people in the bitter, early spring, her relief when Stratheilan had made a way out. Of course, she knew now, she had been too glad to find a way out, she had not thought about it enough. It was a mad thing to do, perfectly mad. But she had trusted so to Stratheilan and he hadn't seemed to think it mad; of course, that had influenced her—and then it had all been so hurried. They simply had to do something at once before her name was completely trampled in the mud and before John and Sally came.

Of course, they hadn't either of them been in love, but they had liked each other. . . . Yes, they had liked each other very much . . . and if it hadn't been for Sally coming . . .

Had he fallen in love with Sally at once, as Sally had with him? Or, at least, as Sally seemed to. Sally made such fun of everything you never could tell, in fact she talked so much of falling in love with him that Rexie had thought it meant safety; girls didn't, as a rule, keep saying so when they really fell in love. But then Sally was so subtle, perhaps even that had been a blind.

And Stratheilan—her whole being seemed to quiver like an aspen tree at the thought of Stratheilan, but she was determined to think it all out.

She had thought, deep in her secret heart, that he loved her in spite of all her arguments to herself that he had to pretend to, that there was nothing else for him to do but pretend, since a man manifestly could not say to a girl, "I don't care for you but will you marry me to save your good name?" If he was going to ask her at all he had to pretend. Well, he had pretended too well, and then Sally had come, and no doubt they had both tried not to care for each other—she was sure they would do that—and she still loved them both. Perhaps Ewen would have gone through with it and married her if she had not found out, so it was a good thing she had found out. . . . But, she thought, he should have confessed when she did find out, and not leave it all to her. That hurt her. And to have pretended to love her when he had shortly before been putting his arms round Sally at the other side of the door—the words "stealing a kiss" rose to her mind and her whole being shuddered away from them, they were so common, so vulgar, so far away from anything she could ever have thought of him.

And to think he could still go on pretending to her after he had just kissed Sally in the car. How could he? How could he belittle her so? How

could he, who was so proud, stoop to deception like that? She could not understand. Did love alter people so completely? She almost wished she could be deceived by her own eyes and ears. But no, not that. She wanted the truth, always the truth, however hard. Good, clear hard truth might wound but it did not poison.

But, everything was poisoned, yes, poisoned. Even if Sally and Stratheilan married, which, of course, they would do eventually when he had got that ceremony annulled, nothing would ever be right and clean and sweet between them all again, as it might have come to be, if he had told her straight out that he loved Sally. . . . Why had he not?

She could only suppose he and Sally had decided that she mustn't be hurt, that they could bear things but she couldn't—Sally would be like that. Yes, Sally would think of all the kindness between them and decide that Rexie mustn't be hurt. She and John had always protected her, treated her as something fragile—and rather silly, which she wasn't. Rexie sat up with a sudden quick movement which made the two women in the compartment look at her. No! she wasn't fragile and silly; she was tough and strong, tough enough to bear this, if she just had a little time, a little time to get used to it, when the broken ends of her heart wouldn't grate against each other and hurt—like splintered bones, only hearts weren't made of bone, but of something more like india-rubber—she tried to smile.

Anyhow she wasn't going to be pathetic, her thin pale face hardened showing the underlying structure still more clearly and looking, not old, exactly, but set. Her long eyes looked somehow out of place there, too softly blue, and the fine, fair hair looked too young, too palely soft and golden for that hard, small face. One could imagine the white face of a starving child having feathery hair like that lying on the bony forehead.

No, she would not be pathetic. Things were like that—*Che sara sara*—What's to be, will be. Sally had done her best and Stratheilan had done his best—but God knew best of all. He knew about that bit of steel he had given Rexie when he made her look like a silly owl. No, not an owl, an owl looked as if it had loads of character, she looked as if she hadn't any, just a silly colourless moth. . . .

At last in the early hours of the morning her train drew into the gloomy station of King's Cross. It looked worse than ever in the dim light, dirtier, greyer, more dreary. It smelt more strongly of yellow smoke and fog and slightly stale fish.

She had made no very definite plans, she had turned away with a sort of sick distaste from any plan and loathed the idea of seeing anyone. She had

said to John she would go to Mr. Matthew Orr, but there was no hurry for that, she had said it to comfort John. He would think Mr. Orr would look after her. They were all always wanting to look after her—Stratheilan, too. It was the way she looked (feeble, she called it!). She didn't want anybody to look after her, she was quite capable of looking after herself!

No, the only person she could bear to go to was Betty. Betty wouldn't be sorry for her, at least not in that way. She would be sorry if she were cold or hungry, but severely practical about it, getting her something to eat and lighting a fire, and she wouldn't ask questions or even look questions.

She sat in the cold waiting room with her feet on a damp newspaper while a woman washed the floor around her. It must be raining, for newspapers were spread to preserve the newly washed floor till the woman left, and they were already being dotted with muddy footprints.

She knew Betty rose early and took her way to the boarding-house about seven o'clock.

Betty was shaking mats in the basement and ran up the steps to let her in by the gate when Rexie called to her.

"My! What a start you did-of give me, Miss Drew! Come in, the kettle's 'on the boil,' you was always one for a cup o' tea."

She hurried about getting tea and toast, talking all the time, and giving the news of the house, who had left and who had come and how she herself would have gone if it wasn't for the chance of coming to Bendibus, because Mrs. Flint was turning "that mean."

"She didn't need to turn," said Rexie, "she was born like that. Does her nose still get pink when she's fussed?"

They chatted comfortably for a while as the hot tea and toast revived Rexie and then she asked Betty if she knew of a quiet place where she could stay, "not costing too much, you know, Betty. A bed-sitting room with a gas ring, round about this district. I want to be near Fleet Street. I've come up to see about my newspaper work."

This was enough explanation for Betty, who was used to the vagaries of writers. She told Rexie of a house in Brunswick Square, within a bus-ride of Fleet Street, and there Rexie got a vacant room at the top of a tall house, and, as the landlady ran some cheap eating-houses for students in the vicinity, she found the meal problem practically solved for her. The meals would have sent John or Sally into fits, but Rexie wasn't so particular at any time, and just now she took no interest whatever in what she ate. The over-salted soup from the stock pot, called by a different name, but the same soup every day, the "stuffed" this, that and the other, made of chopped scraps

enclosed in a cabbage leaf, or a leathery pancake, the uninteresting jellies and “custards” made out of cheap packets, all slightly disgusted her, but she was too miserable to care. She went to her newspaper office to collect letters from her correspondents and asked the secretary not to send them to Bendibus in the meantime. Another day she went to Mr. Orr’s office, but was pleased to find he was not in and left her address in a note to Mr. Orr saying he could send on letters, but wasn’t to give anybody her address unless she said so.

After that there was nothing to do, or so she felt. She was so lonely and down that she couldn’t even read. She wandered about, looked into windows and sat on seats on the embankment or in the Temple watching the sparrows flying in and out of the spray at the fountain.

She was sitting indoors one evening, so lonely and dejected that she felt numb. It wasn’t cold and she did not feel justified in lighting the meagre little gas fire, so she got up and stood at the window and watched the few dry leaves left over from the long past winter blowing about the dull garden in the wind.

Suddenly she saw a dog run out to dash after a ball thrown for it and immediately her thoughts turned to Mungo.

Mungo! Mungo would love her through thick and thin. Mungo would be missing her as much as she missed him! Stratheilan had said that since she had been at the hut he just lay on the floor, when shut in with his nose stretched along his paws, watching the door for her to come back.

If she had been at home, Mungo would have been there, too, now. He had learned all his lessons—to come in to heel when called and stay there when told to, to stand still, wherever he was, at the sign of a lifted stick, or hand, to keep any suspicious-looking customers who came about the place at bay with threats and growls, until he had summoned help, and so on. He was now a perfect watchdog, protector and companion. He had needed no teaching, indeed, to protect either Rexie’s person or her property, even as a puppy if she dropped a glove he’d carry it to her, if she laid down a coat no one dared try to lift it when she wasn’t there. Things like that were either born in him or he’d picked them up from Fan.

He was her dog. Why not have him with her? Stratheilan had said, once he was trained, he could always be with her. She could take him anywhere, just like Fan who would sit on a bicycle basket or find room to smuggle herself in where there wasn’t an inch to spare, she’d follow her master through fire and water and efface herself so effectively to be near him when making calls or visits as to puzzle people when she did appear.

Yes, Mungo would be dying to be with his mistress and she was dying to have him, so why not?

Why not, indeed? But how was she to get him without telling anyone where she was?

She certainly was not going to tell anyone where she was. She had written to John again, a very private letter saying she would come back when he really needed her, but she would rather stay away and not see anyone until her marriage was annulled, and please, please would John not try to see her or alter her decision, because he would only make her desperately unhappy.

Doubtless John would write to Mr. Orr and send letters through him, but there had been no time for that since she called at his office.

No, she saw no way of getting Mungo.

But, once the idea had entered her mind she could not get rid of it. She thought of it all through her meagre repast of salty soup, stuffed tomatoes and sponge jelly, and could not have told you five minutes afterwards what she had eaten. There was indeed no necessity for her to have meals at this little cheap and nasty eating-place, but it was near her room, quiet and clean and used by people she felt at home with. Hard-up students and writers, an occasional artist and literary free lances, most of whom made a little extra money when down and out by tramping about with a suitcase to demonstrate some household gadget or other, or to sell cheap underwear. They displayed their goods and gave advice to each other with the utmost good will and were quite willing to welcome Rexie into their freemasonry, give her tips of all kinds, from the best days for different dishes at the restaurant to the most efficient method to display a silk stocking so as to hide the fault that accounted for its cheapness—or even to pretend a fault was there so as to insinuate that the stockings were exceptionally good except for some tiny knot or mark that had made them less than half the price.

To Rexie's hesitating suggestion that it wasn't quite honest they had dozens of replies, most of which made her laugh—a surface laugh that had nothing whatever to do with fun, but hid the hopeless aching of her heart beneath it.

It was in the early hours of the next morning that she hit on a plan. It was, like all Rexie's plans, quite simple—if it came off!

She would simply go to Presterby the next day, if she rose early she would arrive there the same night, make her way in the darkness to the lonely hut, whistle to Mungo to keep him quiet and then let him out and return to catch the early morning train back to London.

She had seen where Stratheilan put the key, so that the students could enter without each carrying one. It was on a little hidden ledge beneath the overhanging eaves, but not near the door, where it might too easily be discovered.

She would take a torch, but unless the night was very cloudy, she ought to be able to see, for the moon was past the first quarter.

She got up and hunted out her time-table; she found she could arrive at Presterby about ten at night and start on her return journey by an early fish-train leaving at 4.30 a.m. That would give her ample time to walk up to the hut, abstract Mungo and return to London without having to spend a night anywhere except walking on the hills. The walk to the hut might be very lonely and even frightening, but coming back she would feel absolutely safe with Mungo.

She would say nothing about him to her landlady until he was noticed, which might well be some time if he were as clever as his mother at becoming invisible when he chose, and of that she had not the slightest doubt.

CHAPTER XXI

"Rats!"

REXIE got out at the station at Presterby with beating heart. She was terrified of being seen by anyone she knew. If she had been a criminal, escaping from justice, she could not have looked about her with more frightened eyes.

Yet she was more determined than ever to have Mungo, and once she had had all the details arranged it had seemed quite easy. All she had to do now was to hang about in the waiting room till about eleven when she was sure all the Storrs students would be in bed and none of them hanging about the outlying enclosures in the hills.

The enclosure where Mungo was being kept was some distance from Storrs, but she knew the way fairly well, having been there twice, once from Storrs and once from Bendibus.

People in the district were afraid of the animals and gave the enclosures a wide berth, especially at night, so she had little fear of meeting anyone once she had left the town behind.

It was an unsettled sort of evening with occasional drizzle but for the most part lit up by a fitful moon floating through the clouds.

She had put on the strongest pair of shoes she had taken to London with her, but wished now she had the long-legged boots Stratheilan had got for her to tramp about the hills in when her ankle was still weak.

As a matter of fact her ankle still gave her trouble, not that she was always conscious of it, for days, she would never think of it, then she would put her foot down carelessly on a stone, or catch it in a hollow of the ground and it would “turn,” giving her excruciating pain and often leaving it weak for quite a long time.

The boots which Stratheilan had had specially made were a great help, but he did not encourage her to wear them on the flat ground, thinking sandals better, or bare feet better still, so she had not taken them to London.

It was not long before she began to long for her boots.

At first it was all right. She had only a small suitcase to carry in which she had a book, a newspaper, a bone for Mungo begged from the cook at The Green Parrot, and a thin silk nightdress rolled round her toothbrush just in case she might have to spend a night in a hotel.

She had brought nothing to eat hoping to manage a snack at some of the stations where she changed, now that she knew the ropes better. But, partly through bad luck, partly because her mind was elsewhere, all she had managed to get was a cup of tea and some biscuits from a station barrow.

She was not in the least hungry or she could have got something in Presterby. Indeed, she was too filled with fear and excitement to eat and, besides, she did not want to be seen and sat hidden behind her newspaper in a corner of the ladies' waiting room until it was time to set off. When she did so she found the streets were nearly empty as she had decided to start about half an hour before the latest picture houses closed for the night.

Part of her way was along the main road to Bendibus, but after a mile or two she took a side road which led to Storrs. After passing the farm, she came to the track that climbed up into the hills towards the outlying enclosures where the wilder animals were kept.

It was then she began to long for her boots. The track soon became very stony and steep and her ankle kept turning on the sharp rocks or in the deep ruts of the hillside path. Her light town shoes were no protection, indeed she sometimes felt as if she would like to take them off and go barefoot, for she kept coggling over on the high heels, not that they were really very high, but just high enough to be a nuisance.

However, there was nothing for it but to keep on and on.

The way now seemed much longer than she had pictured it. There were certain landmarks she remembered but the first seemed at least thrice as far

as she had supposed and the last, the old disused barn for storing winter fodder for the sheep, was so long in appearing that she stopped several times afraid that she had gone off the path.

She knew she could not pass it unnoticed as it was a high building of two storeys, where hay could be safely stored in the upper lofts to be easily reached when snow was deep on the ground. It was falling into ruin now, as the shepherd's holding had been deserted and had the reputation of being haunted by the ghost of a shepherd's wife who, long ago, had been drowned in the burn below when it was in spate.

Doubtless, Rexie thought, as at last she saw the building outlined against the cloudy sky, the ghost was a white barn owl. It was just the place for one to nest. Nevertheless, she gave a start of terror when a horrifying shriek suddenly broke the stillness just as she approached it. She actually stopped with her hair stiffening on her brow and it took her a few moments to summon up her courage to go on, then a few moments after she made a terrified jump into the heather as a pale form glided past her—the ghost out hunting on silent wings!

She watched the great owl float, as if swung on a long silken thread, down to the “fat lowlands” where mice and rats would be more plentiful and then continued to stumble upwards, her heels blistered, her feet aching and her weak ankle so painful that now she limped as badly as ever she had done in its worst days.

She knew she was damaging it but she could do nothing but go on. It would be easier going down and she would have Mungo with her then.

But now she began to worry about the train, five and a half hours had seemed more than ample time to find Mungo and return, allowing for any small setbacks *en route*, but now it was one o'clock and she still had not reached the hut where Mungo had been taken after his escapes from Storrs—where too many people were always going about, unheeding the sharp eyes glued on every avenue of escape.

She began to feel, too, the effects of a day on tea and biscuits, not that she was hungry, she was past that stage, she had felt very empty when near Storrs and would feign have stopped for a meal when she fancied she smelt there the aroma of roast beef. No doubt, they had had beef, Yorkshire pudding and mashed potatoes and turnips for dinner. She had realised then that she had not had a good plain meal since she left Bendibus and her stomach suddenly rebelled against the hateful, unwholesome messes she had been subsisting on since she left.

“My goodness!” she thought, “I never realised before how *good* plain English food is. Of course, Sally and John always say it is not to be beaten anywhere in the world, though they both like making French dishes for a change, but I never paid much heed to them, they are such gourmets in their own fastidious way—though neither of them eats much—but now I know they are right. How I would love a good plateful of roast beef!”

But that stage had soon passed and now she had not the least desire for food, though feeling faint for want of it.

At last she came to a stretch of wire fencing and knew she had reached her destination.

There was a heavy drizzle falling, now she was up and among the clouds on the hills, and she hurried for it would soon soak through the warm coat she had put on, in preference to a mackintosh for travelling; it had been so fine and dry when she left London she had thought little of the weather.

However, it would only be on the hill-tops that the rain was heavy, she would hurry downwards once she had got Mungo.

She gave a low whistle and waited, hoping Mungo might give some sign of having heard, but she was not disturbed when he did not bark. He was never a noisy dog unless he thought it necessary to make a noise and then he could awaken the echoes.

She unlatched the gate and partly felt her way to the hut, for it was pretty dark, and half found it by stray gleams from the moon through the clouds.

She reached the door and called, “Mungo! Mungo!” but there was no reply. She thought, however, she heard a scrabbling inside, and called again, to be answered by the same scrabbling, scratching noise.

She could now see in her mind’s eye exactly what was going on. Mungo must have been shut up in the inner room, knowing her whistle he had not sounded any alarm. Why should he, when there was nothing to raise an alarm about? Now she could almost imagine she heard his little anxious whines as, wildly excited, he rushed back and forward with his nose to the crack under the door, sniffing in louder and louder sniffs and breaking out into little whines and cries, deadened by the double doors.

He would be expecting the inner door to open at any moment and working himself up into a fine fury of excitement.

She had not yet got the key but now slipped round to where it lay concealed, took it from the ledge, and hastening back, pushed it into the keyhole. The hut was small and consisted only of the two rooms, one opening out of the other, the outer was used for work in connection with the farm, the walls were hung with skins and there was a work bench and other

pieces of rough furniture. The inner room was furnished as a small office and sitting-room and had a large couch which could be used to sleep on if any of the men had to stay there throughout the night.

She could still hear shuffling noises when she returned, but they now seemed to her to come from the outer room as if Mungo had managed to get through to it.

“Mungo! Mungo!” she called as she turned the key, and then she pushed the door open.

As she did so, there was a pause and she saw two round green, luminous globes in the darkness within and heard an animal breathing. Then at the same moment that she realised that it was not Mungo, the creature sprang!

Indeed the realisation came in one second’s flash before the spring, and that possibly saved her life.

She swerved and the creature missed her, landing well outside the door.

If she had had her wits about her she would have then rushed inside, shut and bolted the door and waited till help came from Storrs.

But she was dead beat and acted only on impulse. Her impulse was to run, to fly at once from the place, where, for all she knew, other dangerous beasts might be prowling about. She knew they were all kept secure in cages, of course, but her wits were gone for the moment.

The creature had landed in some bushes and she was past them before it could gather itself together. She fled down the short path and through the gate in the fencing; there, she had the sense to pause, draw the gate shut and latch it before she took to her heels down the mountainside, now flying in leaps and bounds, now blindly stumbling forward, her ankle forgotten, her tiredness and exhaustion completely vanished from her mind.

She knew that the fence was not considered a safeguard. It was principally there to mark the boundaries of the Storrs’ property on those wild hills, though it was an unclimbable fence, too high to leap, and secure enough in an ordinary way to keep dogs and other animals on the further side. It was even useful as a second barrier should any animal get out of its own building or escape when they were being moved about, and so forth.

But the fence with its latched gate was really of little comfort, for she had not the faintest idea what the animal was. It had looked enormous, as big as a tiger indeed, coming at her in an amorphous mass through the darkness, but she had still sense enough left to know there were no tigers or, indeed, any very large animals kept at the fur farm; skunks, she remembered, were there and wild cats of one sort and another; they might be able to climb anything, or gnaw or burrow their way out, for even the fences

in the rabbit section had to go well below the surface to keep innocent creatures in.

All these thoughts flew through her mind as she sped onwards, stumbling down rocky slides, rushing through burns that crossed her path, sometimes wading down them with a vague notion of throwing off her scent.

All the time she wondered about Mungo. Could he have been in the inner room after all? But no, Mungo would have had sense enough to scent danger, he would have known Rexie was there and hearing the sounds of the snarl and the spring, not to speak of Rexie's cry of terror, he would have rung the echoes with his barking and pulled the place down in his efforts to get to her, whereas there had been complete silence—so far.

But suddenly she heard a sound behind her. Then another! Was the beast stalking her?

Her heart stopped and she might have fallen through sheer terror had not a sight met her eyes at that moment that gave her hope.

She had rounded a bend and there, across the water but close to her, was the old barn!

She rushed towards it, twisting and turning as she ran past trees and rocks, for danger had cleared her brain, and she was all alert now to every possibility of being sprung on from behind.

She scrambled over the plank bridge before the barn, keeping as low down as she could, ran swiftly to the door—still open at the top and closed below—slipped over it, again keeping her body as low as she could, and fell to the floor inside.

Immediately she sprang up, closed the upper door and bolted it.

Then she drew a breath of relief, discovering as she did so, that every breath drew a sharp pain from her overworked lungs.

She stood panting, trying to regain an easier breathing, her brain working at full speed. Was she safe? It was dark inside and she tried to remember what loopholes or windows there were in the walls, or where they were broken down.

Then she remembered James and his visit to the loft in this same barn. In one corner there had once been a sort of manger, partly down, leaving a long low hole in the wall with a pile of stones beneath it. James had climbed up there.

She stood listening, her eyes growing accustomed to the darkness, peering round her prison. It was nearing dawn now, for the nights were very short so far north at this time of the year. They were well into summer but it

could still be bitterly cold high up in the hills. She was not cold but she shivered involuntarily all the time.

Again she heard the sound of an animal moving. She looked towards the corner and to her horror saw the two luminous green globes just above the heap of stones in the corner.

But danger steadied her. She stood absolutely quiet, reckoning her chances; the beast, she was sure, was furious and bent on attacking her—but there was the loft!

The woodwork that had been pulled out had been the wooden trough below the manger, into which hay could be pushed through a hole in the floor of the loft; the trough was gone, but the bars of the manger were still there. She might be able to pull her thin form through the hole, but . . . it meant climbing that heap of stones and going close to the beast. She had no idea what the animal was. Not a skunk, she thought, though it was difficult to see, she was sure its white stripes would have caught her eye, besides, Stratheilan was very fond of skunks and had often told her how gentle and harmless they were unless cornered or suddenly startled.

She felt sure a skunk would not have followed and stalked her; that was more like one of the cat tribe. More like one of the American wild cats Stratheilan had mentioned. She tried hard to remember anything more she had heard of the beasts. None of them was really large, but some of them were very fierce and might kill an unarmed person if roused to fury.

This beast was now watching her. No doubt, it could see her, for there was a faint light coming in through cracks and holes, but so far it seemed just content to watch.

Rexie was not without courage. There was that bit of steel inside her that she could absolutely depend on, once she got down to it. It was there for either a physical or a spiritual need and never failed her, but it was not on the surface; a lot of layers of kindness, politeness, fear and many other things lay over that final vein of pure hard strength—but it was there.

She paused a moment, drawing all her faculties together, then she made a dart for the stones, scrambled up them as a snarl met her ears, grabbed the rungs of the manger and pulled up her feet just as a fierce claw glanced off her ankle, tearing the stocking and causing a trickle of blood to run down into her shoe.

But she had a firm grip of the manger and drawing herself up, she got her shoulders over the top bar, drew up her feet, pushed her head through the hole and found she could just manage to squeeze through, another brief struggle and she found herself lying on the floor of the loft.

So far she was safe, nevertheless if she could get through that hole, the beast might follow.

It was now scratching and scrabbling at the stones, enlarging the hole no doubt, so that it could get in.

At last it made its way into the barn, she could hear it padding about. Perhaps it was hungry. She thought of Mungo's bone—that might keep it occupied for some time; it was a large bone with a good deal of almost raw meat on it. Mungo, like John, liked his beef "rare."

She had hung on to her suitcase more by good luck than good guidance and now opened it and dropped the bone through the hole in the floor. She heard the beast spring towards it and then she suddenly collapsed in a faint, the last little effort having completed her undoing.

She lay there while the beast gnawed at its bone, quite unconscious for a while of the passing of time, and of the light that was now streaming down the hillsides with the rising sun.

* * * * *

Meantime everything and everyone was thoroughly upset at Bendibus.

When Rexie had disappeared so mysteriously none of them could make the slightest guess at what had happened. Luckily, the post came in just as they had realised that she had not returned by the last bus from Presterby.

Immediately John sought out Sally and was for going off to London at once, but Sally's saner councils prevailed, for what, she asked, could he do in London when he had no idea where Rexie was. They must send a telegram next day to Mr. Orr and see if she had called. In the meantime, Rexie knew her way about and she had plenty of money, she had assured John of that in her letter.

In any case, Sally was sure that Rexie wanted desperately to be alone for a bit, she knew herself what that was, that craving to be alone to lick one's wounds, so she prevailed on John to give Rexie a day or two before he did anything drastic.

She agreed, however, that John should go at once to see Stratheilan. The two men had then for the first time had a real talk about the whole affair, which John had not liked to speak about while he thought that Rexie and Stratheilan quite understood each other and that Rexie did not want him to discuss it.

Now all those barriers were down and John spoke his mind, not in any way to give offence, for he liked Stratheilan, but very clearly and definitely,

and there was no mistaking the relief it was to him to come out into the open.

“Man, I feel as if I’d been moving among cobwebs,” he said, taking out his pipe and sitting down on a stone wall, for he’d met Stratheilan in one of the fields on the Storrs Estate.

Stratheilan, squatting in much the same manner, for they both had inconveniently long legs for sitting on low seats, got out his own pipe. Then he told John the whole story from his point of view.

Though Stratheilan was reticent about Rexie, John gathered that he had adored her from the moment he saw her and that, when he married her—they were quite properly married, indeed, he seemed a little indignant that John should be at all doubtful on that score—when he married Rexie he had been quite certain it would turn out all right, she just needed a little time and a little of what he called in his old-fashioned way—wooing. He soon convinced John that he knew Rexie better than any of them and realised very clearly that he had to go slow with her under the circumstances, as, unfortunately, she could not be sure that his offer was not more or less forced on him.

But all had gone well till Sally came. Since then, for some reason he could not fathom, Rexie had become more and more difficult and elusive, and now, he told John, she said there was someone else, and that she wanted him to free her. Did John know who it was, for “You know, Drew,” he looked at John and it was a very grim look indeed, “Rexie is my wife—and no man is going to take her from me.”

“But there’s no one,” said John puzzled. “Do you mean to say Rexie—who is the soul of truth—said that?”

Stratheilan nodded, he did not seem to wish to repeat it and John saw that, in any case, he hated discussing Rexie, even with him.

“Perhaps Sally can riddle it out,” said John, completely at a loss at this revelation, “but I’m sure there is some mistake. Well, I must be going. I intend to ring up Orr and will set off for London the moment she has called there. All the same one must go carefully with Rexie.”

But Stratheilan had immediately gone up to the house, changed and set off for London with the first train south. He entered Mr. Matthew Orr’s office just about five minutes after Rexie had gone.

The clerk who had seen Rexie knew nothing about her affairs, as, naturally, Matthew Orr kept his own counsel about his clients.

Stratheilan had to come back to Storrs without having found her, but returned at once after having arranged things to inconvenience Mr. Storrs as

little as possible. After a fruitless search he had arrived back again just before Rexie's own journey and was met with the news that one of the animals had been hurt in a trap set for rats. Its wound had been dressed and it had been removed to the hut away from the others, and Mungo had been brought down as the dogs and animals were sworn enemies and a distance was best kept between them.

Stratheilan said he would go up first thing in the morning. As the unofficial vet. of the farm, he attended the animals in all illnesses and accidents. He set off early on horseback, but unfortunately, did not take either Fan or Mungo, partly because of the dislike of the animals and partly because the horse he was riding was a nervous animal who also objected to dogs.

He passed the barn in the early dawn, just as Rexie was recovering from her faint and beginning to listen for signs from the creature beneath. He arrived at the hut to find the door open and the wounded animal gone, and went galloping back to Storrs to raise the alarm that one of the wild cats was at large, with a wounded leg certainly, but nothing to make it really harmless, not only to the lambs and other creatures in the lowlands at the foot of the hills, but even to human beings if interfered with or made ill-natured from pain.

Armed with guns or other weapons and accompanied by dogs, the students set out, while the alarm was raised in the neighbourhood and most of the farmers and indeed anyone who enjoyed a day's sport, joined in the hunt.

Unfortunately, word came in at once that a lamb had been killed near Storrs. At any other time foxes would have been blamed, but now, of course, everyone at once decided it was "the lynx" who was responsible; and this word having accidentally been mentioned, spread like wild fire, though as a matter of course there was no such beast at Storrs.

This was why the hunt went on all day on the lower ground where food in the shape of fat lambs and plump geese would tempt the marauder, and where every farmer and smallholder was intent on having his own ground thoroughly searched at once.

Stratheilan had securely locked up before he left the hut after going the rounds to see that everything was now safe in the upland reservation.

The unlocked door remained a complete mystery, though many suggestions, each more far-fetched than the other, were put forward.

James was the only one who might have solved the mystery, but unfortunately, John, who was cleaning his rifle to join in the hunt, paid no

attention to James when he said:

“It would be Aunt Rexie going to get Mungo.”

“Oh, would it?” said John, carelessly.

“Yes, Aunt Rexie said she had a good mind to steal Mungo that day we had tea in the hut, but, of course, he hadn’t finished being trained then. Is he finished now, Uncle John? And might we have him to keep till Aunt Rexie comes back, if he is?”

“I don’t know, son. Perhaps, Mr. Urquhart would like to keep him to give him a few finishing touches, as it were, until his mistress comes back.”

“When is Aunt Rexie coming back?”

But at this now rather monotonous question John had escaped, forgetting all about the opening of the conversation.

While the hunt went on, Rexie lay and listened in her loft. Realising that she had fainted and that the animal might have gone without her knowledge, she watched and listened for a long time and then made a tentative pretence of descending. No sooner, however, had she got one foot through the hole than a low growl warned her to desist.

She then lay down on the floor and put her head through the hole to try and see it. There was very little light in the shadowy place, but she thought she could make out its form in the corner just under the manger, and from slight sounds it made she thought it was licking the bone she had thrown down, though, in fact, it was licking its wounds.

So she stayed there imprisoned for there was no way that she could think of to get out of the loft but by the hole in the floor.

Across the far wall some old bales of hay were still piled and hearing sounds of movement there, she became convinced it was infested with rats. There was scarcely any light in the loft either, but her eyes had become used to the darkness and once she was sure she had seen a pair of gimlet eyes fixed upon her.

At that she started up; she had remained lying on the floor above the hole, utterly exhausted and a little feverish from her ankle now very swollen and painful, but she loathed rats, and was terrified of them, and now realised that if she did not escape soon, she would have to spend the night in the loft, where emboldened by the darkness they would leave their lairs beneath the hay and attack her—a whole legion of rats! Horror roused her from the state of lethargy she had been sinking into, for she was now, as Flindy would have said, “Sair forfochen”—utterly spent.

But—Rats! She must do something!

Again she put a foot through the hole, and again a snarl warned her to draw it quickly back. Worse than that she seemed to have excited the animal and it began moving about below her.

Again terror and danger cleared her brain; she was looking at the bales of hay when suddenly, her eyes falling on the small hole in the floor, she wondered how the hay had been got in.

In another moment her quick mind had solved the problem. Of course there was always a door into the upper storey of these barns. There would be a door into this one—hidden behind the hay!

No sooner had she realised this than she began feverishly to move the hay. It was slow work for she had nothing but her hands to move it with. But fear gave her strength; she simply dared not stay up there through the night with rats; she knew that hungry rats in a mass would attack a human being and these rats were doubtless half-starved, for there would be little for them to eat in the barn or on the bare hillside, especially now that the birds' laying season was past and no nests left for robbing. Already as she worked she saw one or two of the bolder ones peeping out.

She was terrified of them springing out as she moved the hay, but at least there was still some light and she could see.

She wished now she had not thrown away the bone, it might have drawn off their attention while she worked, or it might have served as a weapon—the only one she now had was the shoe she had taken off her injured foot.

All through the afternoon and early evening, she worked, pulling out pieces of hay from the tightly packed bales, never giving in except for a moment or two now and then when a stitch in her side caused her to stop.

At last she reached the wall and saw a tiny gleam of light from the crack where the two doors closed together. She prayed that they swung outward, for then her struggle with the hay would be over, if not, she would have to work till one door was cleared and she could pull it inward sufficiently to get through the opening and leap to the ground.

After a while, she found the big wooden latch, but alas! the door opened inwards.

She did not give in, but tears ran down her face at this bitter disappointment.

She had no idea of the time, for in her stress and terror there had been no room for such an everyday thought as winding up her watch, but it was now almost too dark to see and rapidly growing darker.

Soon she would not be able to distinguish the ground when she took her leap and she could not remember whether it was flat or on a steep slope at

that side of the building.

At this thought she plunged her hand more desperately into the hay. As she did so, a shrill scream of horror sent the rats on the floor scuttling in every direction. A rat had bitten her hand!

CHAPTER XXII

“And there was an end to that hunting”

ALL day Stratheilan had been in doubt if they were on the right tack hunting for the escaped animal down in the lowlands. Mr. Storrs had been deceived, he thought, about the lamb; it had probably been killed by a fox, but once the farmers and smallholders had heard of one of the “wild beasts at Storrs” having escaped, nothing would do for them but to centre all the hunt round their farms. It was the “lynx” that had killed the lamb, and also visited most of the steadings in the district, for soon all sorts of stories were afloat about depredations here, there and everywhere.

“Why a lynx?” Stratheilan had asked, but nobody knew. Some lively imagination had fixed on the word and being easy to say and to remember, it had flown from mouth to mouth. Now, for all time it would be a lynx that had escaped and Mr. Storrs and Stratheilan shrugged their shoulders at the inevitable.

But they were both anxious to get away to the higher ground and Stratheilan, in any case, felt certain the beast would go into hiding and remain there till it felt better; hunger would then drive it out to hunt, and hunt it would, even if gangrene set in and the wounded paw dropped off, when it would eventually heal, and leave the beast lame but as hardy as ever.

So it was much more likely to be in hiding near the enclosure at the moment, than anywhere about the lowlands. However, much depended on the good will of the farmers and they must not get it into their heads that there was any slackness at Storrs about protecting their flocks and herds from the importations in the enclosures.

The accident had happened when Stratheilan was away, the animal getting its foot into an iron trap set for the rats which had started to come up from the old barn as the season advanced. The trap had been set in what seemed a safe enough place to the man who set it, but Stratheilan blamed himself bitterly as this enclosure was his special charge and he had gone away and left it to seek for Rexie.

Though, therefore, he took over the ground that Mr. Storrs had ordered him to search, his mind kept working on the problem of what the beast would most likely be doing, and when the unsuccessful hunters gathered together to discuss what they had done and seen and make further plans, he quietly called Fan and set off up the hill to the enclosure.

He was not surprised when he saw Mungo sneaking after Fan with a guilty air, knowing perfectly well he had not been invited to join the party, but hoping he might, by making himself as small as possible, be passed over as too humble an object to bother about.

Stratheilan smiled at his antics and let him be. He was a strong dog now and well trained and would not be a hindrance, in fact he might be a help.

He was surprised, however, when about half way to the hut Mungo stopped dead and began smelling at a patch of grass and then, instead of giving it the go-by, started running in circles till he came further on to another patch which made him pause. This he kept up while Fan, less interested in whatever was attracting her offspring, trotted contentedly at heel or made a little excursion on her own affairs. Since they had not been expressly told to keep in to heel neither of them did so continually, though never going far afield or out of call.

Mungo, it must be confessed, however, showed some signs of impatience, as he waited, time after time, for them to come up, giving little half barks as if he wanted to attract his master's attention and occasionally quivering all over with excitement.

"So, ghille. What is it?" Stratheilan asked in the Gaelic once or twice, stooping to clap the puppy and rub his ears. "What is it, old chap? Have you scented the rascal?"

Both Fan and Mungo knew quite a lot of Gaelic; Stratheilan had only to say some phrase, such as "Leig a mach na coin" (let out the dogs) for the two to spring up in excitement while the others wondered what had taken them.

They did not pass the barn, as Stratheilan took a shorter cut, so Mungo's only unusual proceeding was to stand still every now and then and look back. But once they reached the hut, he became wild with excitement and Stratheilan began to really take notice of him, he behaved so differently from Fan who, like Pet Marjorie's turkey, "was quite unusual calm and did not give a single dam."

The general idea at Storrs about the open door of the hut had been that some hiker, caught in the rain, had tried to take shelter there, but had been frightened off when the wild cat leaped out and fled, leaving the door open.

But Stratheilan was doubtful about all that. The key was not so easy to find, yet he could think of no one who knew its hiding-place who would not also know about the wounded beast being shut up there, since, naturally, all the students and workers about the place would be warned about it.

He, therefore, took time to examine everything about the place for clues to the mystery until the gathering darkness drove him away.

He started to descend by the short cut again, but now Mungo behaved really badly. He refused to follow and went running off down the other path, stopping now and then to sniff excitedly, and give short little yelping sounds, or occasionally “freezing” an accomplishment of Fan’s, which had rather surprised Stratheilan when she started it as a young dog, though he knew that bull-terriers could be trained to almost anything, Fan had never been trained as a gun-dog and must just have picked it up, and now Mungo seemed to have picked it up from his mother.

Stratheilan called him in to heel but rather tentatively, as he was sure now that the pup was on the track of something.

The youngster could have no knowledge of the missing animal and he had not even been out with the hunt to get the idea of a search going forward, but Stratheilan was too used to Fan’s queer and often extraordinary perceptions to dismiss her puppy’s ongoings lightly, so when Mungo only came creeping a few yards towards him, belly on the ground, and then stuck there, he made up his mind to let him go where he wanted to and follow him up.

Possibly it was only a mountain hare whose scent interested him, he was still very young, but there was always the chance that it was the scent of the wild cat. Only, in that case, why was Fan looking so bored at her son’s excitement? Fan was much more likely to have picked out the scent and been interested in it than her puppy. However, Fan had been out all day and Mungo had not . . . he shrugged his shoulders and took the longer route.

Mungo knew perfectly well he had been disobedient and that retribution would surely follow unless he showed some very good reason indeed for his lapse into the wicked ways of the untutored savage.

Stratheilan was convinced that dogs had brains and always encouraged them to use them, to *think* indeed, and that was perhaps why he was such a good trainer of animals, and why so many of his dogs were reputed to be so clever. He always talked to Fan as if she could understand him, and though you would never find him boasting that his dogs “knew every word he said,” he knew that dogs did understand a great deal, partly from words and gestures, and partly no doubt from some kind of intuition and that the more

you talked to them as if they were responsible beings the more you would help them on, since, even if they did not understand every word, they would catch the meaning in some way of their own if you took them seriously and were at the trouble to explain things to them. So now, he repeated, rubbing Mungo's ears, "What is it, Ghille? Do you want me to come with you? Have you found something to show me? All right, I will come. On you go!"

At which, Mungo, too intent to roll on his back and wag his paws as he might otherwise have done, for he still occasionally indulged in puppy ways in spite of his new-found dignity, started at once to run forward again till he came to another place at which to pause and sniff.

At last the barn came into sight and then suddenly Mungo, forgetting himself altogether, started off at full pelt barking ferociously as he went. Stratheilan began to hasten too and then all at once to rush forward in great leaps and strides for, as he neared the barn, he suddenly saw something move high up against the wall.

Then everything started to happen at lightning speed. He saw a small figure appear as if it had come out of the solid wall and with hardly a pause bend as if to leap to the ground. With a wild shout, he hurtled over the burn and across the wall, spread out his arms and was just in time to catch Rexie as she sprang and came full tilt up against him. The sudden impact sent him staggering backward a step or two, and caused him to lose his balance on the sloping ground and down they went—Rexie's fall broken against his body as he went backward underneath her, catching her to him as he fell and before they both went rolling over and over to the bottom of the slope.

They had hardly slowed down when, with a leap the beast was on them, snarling and tearing with its claws. But Fan was there as swiftly as the cat! Like a small thunderbolt Mungo followed and Mungo was of his mother's tribe, the tribe that dies but never gives in!

Fan, herself, was a match for any animal near her own size, and would have gone for a lion at once without any show of fear. Fan did not seem to know what fear was—but wait! Ah, no! Alas, and alas. Truth compels one to retract those words. Of one animal, and one alone, did Fan show any signs of fear. One blushes to mention it, as no doubt Fan would have blushed herself had she been capable of it. Fan was afraid of a pig! Not a wild boar, mind you, one might have excused her for that, thinking of those horrid fangs and fierce small eyes, but not a bit of it, Fan would have gone for the most terrific boar you could produce without a moment's pause, but in any big, fat lumbering old sow, Fan met her Waterloo. At the very sight of a fat pig she turned and fled with her tail between her legs, knowing perfectly well that Stratheilan was roaring with laughter behind her.

Perhaps it was because she shrank from sinking her teeth anywhere in that soft luscious fat, perhaps because, in modern language, she was allergic to pig (she certainly didn't like bacon) and then again perhaps fear was the wrong word—in any case, the redoubtable Fan fled before a pig as a rabbit will fly before a stoat!

But this was no fat pig, this was a compound of muscle, fang, sinew and lightning force such as Fan was herself—in other words, a foeman worthy of her steel. In a trice Fan had the beast by the throat, Mungo having, so to speak, to be content with his mother's leavings, hung on to the tenpenny, or tailpiece, and for a few minutes a royal battle raged on the darkening hillside.

The cat was a fighter, too, and in spite of his wounded paw gave Fan no easy task.

For a few minutes snarls and curses, tufts of fur, hair, pebbles, scraps of turf and bits of heather flew in all directions round the central whirlpool on the hillside which swirled itself from side to side across the ground, while grunts and gasps and queer whistling shrieks arose on the still evening air, and under the slender crescent of the moon that now floated out high above the shadowy hills.

CHAPTER XXIII

"The Evening brings all home"

"AND now," said Stratheilan, "you will tell me why you ran away."

A large and cheerful fire was burning in the hut, Rexie's hand had been ruthlessly cauterised with such rough and ready methods as could be managed with the aid of the medicine chest, kept for accidents, including bites and scratches, at the hut; her ankle had been attended to and bound up, brandy had been (also ruthlessly) administered and now Stratheilan was making tea while Rexie, reclining on the large old-fashioned sofa, was toasting a piece of bread on a toasting-fork with a handle as long as a broomstick—an invention of Stratheilan's own.

Before the fire lay Fan and her redoubtable son, resting from their labours, indeed, Mungo was still panting now and then for, although the scene was so completely changed, it had all been over for a very short time indeed.

Stratheilan had wasted no time in asking questions when he sprang to his feet after their roll down the slope, he had picked Rexie up and sped with her to the hut the instant he saw her torn hand, which he thought the wild cat had bitten till her screams about the rat had enlightened him, but made him more anxious than ever since rats were such poisonous creatures.

The dogs had followed on his heels, having quickly settled their enemy, dragging the carcass to the door where it now lay. This was really the first moment Stratheilan had had time to speak.

“Oh!” said Rexie at his question, and stopped dead. He turned the bit of toast for her, poured out two large cups of tea, sweetened and added milk by the simple method of stirring in a huge spoonful of condensed milk and passed one to her while he liberally buttered a slice of toast.

“Hungry?”

“No, but I’m thirsty.” She drank up nearly half of her cup. “I haven’t had anything to eat since last night—or was it the night before? No, it was the next morning. I’m sorry but I do feel rather mixed, but I smelled your dinner last night and that made me awfully hungry.”

“Eat up your toast then. We have plenty of time for explanations, it will be morning before they get up here to take you down—unless I carry you.”

“Oh, no!” said Rexie, quickly.

“I think so, too, though for other reasons. Now, I’ve got you here to myself, I am going to keep you until everything is explained.”

And having delivered this threat he poured out more tea, buttered a thinnish slice of toast for her, and then, prepared half a dozen larger ones for himself and the dogs. Both Fan and Mungo adored tea and toast, indeed they adored any share of what the gods were eating, Mungo having even been known to pretend he enjoyed grapes because Rexie ate them. Fan was not quite so blinded by adoration as all that, but she loved her saucerful of sweet tea and would swallow as much buttered toast as she could get.

“They like to feel they are sharing with us,” Stratheilan had replied to Rexie’s exclamation of surprise when she first saw him give Fan a saucerful of tea, “but of course they are well aware it’s just a treat.”

The present feed was partly a treat in return for all they had done, and partly in place of their ordinary meal which they had missed, as their work, or at least Fan’s, was not done yet.

“Perhaps I had better send Fan off now,” he said, and taking a note-book from his pocket he scribbled a note and fastened it to her collar, paused, and then fixed another to Mungo’s.

“That will be helping him to learn to carry messages,” he said, “he has not carried a message any distance yet, now he will do it with Fan and he is quick enough to remember the lesson.”

Rexie thought her beloved pup might well be tired and would have liked to keep him stretched out in enjoyment by the warm fire, but she never interfered with his training. She wanted him to be as clever as Fan.

The note was a message to Storrs saying the lost animal had been found and destroyed and asking for a pony to be sent up for Rexie, all explanations to follow later on.

He took the dogs to the door and sent them off, then came in, shut the door and coming across the hut stood looking down at Rexie.

“Why did you run away from me, Rexie?” he said.

She did not speak for a moment.

“Are you too tired to tell me now?”

But Rexie was not too tired. She was as hardy as a robin and the hot tea and toast had completely revived her, though it would be some time before she recovered the use of her hand, luckily the left one, or her injured foot. For a moment she said nothing, she was tired of pretence.

At last, “I thought you loved Sally,” she said, simply, glad to tell the truth. She had been looking up at him but now her lids dropped over her eyes and she did not see the look of complete bewilderment that crossed his face or she might have understood his silence.

She waited a moment, then repeated what she had said.

“I thought you loved Sally. Do you, Ewen? I won’t—I won’t mind very much if you do. I mean, I——”

He bent and lifted her hand gently by the wrist.

“Would you not, Rexie? Is that what you really mean? Tell me, my Sweet. My Darling.”

Whether it was because they were the first endearments he had ever deliberately used, or because there was no mistaking the tenderness that deepened and saddened his voice, Rexie never knew, but suddenly all her defences were down. She turned her head against the plaid he had folded into a pillow for her head and began to sob the low despairing sobs of the utterly spent and comfortless.

“Cha’ r fhurling mi sin!” (This I cannot bear). Suddenly he dropped beside her and lifted her so that her head fell against his shoulder. “Aren’t you knowing, my Sweet, how I am loving you and the way it is you are breaking my heart?”

“But Ewen, but Ewen—— Oh, Ewen, I didn’t want to hurt you, I wanted to do my best for you!”

For a moment the corners of his grave mouth lifted a little at this characteristic speech, then out poured a flood of Gaelic! Bending over her, his careful English fled and words, unknown to her but soft as water flowing over the mossy stones of Dye and sweet as ungathered honey in the clover blooms of the Merse, fell on her ears and comforted her aching heart.

He had said he could only woo her properly in the Gaelic and now she knew that it was true, that only the mother tongue is eloquent enough for love and for the needs of that other soul side a man shows only to a woman when he loves her.

* * * * *

At last the sudden bark of a fox near the door, where it had probably come on the carcass of its dead enemy lying under the lonely moon, made them both start.

“You are cold,” Stratheilan said, feeling her hands, and he jumped up to renew the fire. “They should not be long now.”

Rexie watched him as he broke and piled on wood, his black shadow shooting up the wall as the red flames blazed on the hearth.

“Now I must get you ready,” he went on, spreading out her coat to warm and coming for the thick woollen plaid he had made into a cushion.

As he bent over her to lift it, Rexie jumped up all at once like a Jack-in-the-box, and caught hold of the lapels of his coat.

“But, Ewen! Ewen! What about Sally?” He had never mentioned Sally in his song of songs, which is the Song of Love.

He closed his fingers over hers, smiling a little, but with his brows knit above his eyes.

“Yes, my Darling, what about Sally?”

She was silent a moment, remembering all that had happened about Sally, her heart sinking a little.

“What about Sally?” he repeated, his reddish eyebrows knitting closer together.

“Oh, Ewen, I do believe you, but . . . if . . . if you did—like—*love* Sally, you would tell me, wouldn’t you? I wouldn’t, I wouldn’t——”

Quickly he put his cheek across her lips.

“You are not going to say you wouldn’t mind—I will not have it! And you will not say there is someone else because if you do I will shoot him!”

“Oh, no. Oh, Ewen, I would mind. I would mind very much—but I mean . . . I mean . . . *Why did you kiss Sally?*”

This question came out like a pistol shot. It seemed the only way Rexie could get it out, but once out it opened the flood gates.

“Why did you kiss Sally? And why did she say, ‘Be careful, Rexie might come in!’ Oh, Ewen, why did she say that?” Then, after a pause, “But, Ewen, I would have been kind—I would be kind now if—if it was Sally you really loved.”

He had raised his head, but he did not speak, he just continued to look at her with his tender, half-amused smile as she rushed on.

“Yes, I would, but it did—it did hurt me when Sally said, ‘Be careful, Rexie might come in.’ ”

He sat down beside her.

“What are you talking about, Roxana, my Sweet? Do tell me,” he said patiently.

“But you know—at least, no, you didn’t know I was there—the night before my birthday. You and Sally thought I was in the garden room, but I came back for Parky’s dish for water. I came by the back door and up the kitchen stair and then I heard your voices through the door. I wasn’t listening, I couldn’t help it and I heard Sally say, ‘Be careful, Rexie might come in,’ and then you said something, and Sally said, ‘No, Rexie hasn’t guessed anything.’ ”

“But, Ewen, I had. I had guessed everything.”

He was looking at her completely puzzled. Then, suddenly light dawned, he shot out his feet, leaned back and shook with intense laughter, which increased if anything at the sight of Rexie’s face ranging from indignation into fury as he burst out:

“Oh, you mean that old hen!”

She stopped in full career, absolutely dumbfounded.

“Old hen! Ewen! How dare you call Sally an old hen? Or do you mean Flindy? Flindy isn’t an old hen, I love her.”

“No, no. Bless your soul, my Darling, I mean the old clocker!”

“Clocker! Clocker! How could it be a clocker? What do you mean?”

He put an arm round the indignant Rexie, who would have pulled away had he not held her fast.

"I am sorry, Rexie, I'm sorry, my Sweet. I wish it could have been a bird of Paradise or even an eagle—but, of course, you *would* choose an old clocker for your birthday present and John and I ranged the whole countryside looking for a clocker because Sally said you *must* have a clocker. And then at last we got one and hid it in the building by the dam, but Sally wanted to see it when you were safely in the garden room, but I knew what clockers were! That outraged old fury was just biding her time and if Sally had opened the basket lid an inch she would have been out and through the window and there would have been such a letting off of fireworks, such a detonation of squawks and cackles and curses as were not fit for your small ears, my innocent, and besides—the cat would have been out of the bag!"

"Cat! What cat?" Then Rexie caught at her scattered wits. "Oh, yes! Of course, the *cat* . . . the clocker. . . ." She looked as solemnly intent as if she had been working out a problem in Euclid and he gazed as solemnly back.

"Yes," he repeated gravely. "The cat! The clocker!" And then they caught each other's eyes. Rexie bit her lip with her two little square teeth, but it was no use, out came a crow of laughter! At that sound up jumped Stratheilan, and seizing her, he swung round the room with her, his kilt flying, his red hair sprung aloft.

"Oh, Rexie! Rexie! Rexie! You darling goose!"

They laughed and laughed. Never had she seen him look so young and gay and full of fun, as he did now, waltzing round with her in his arms while their mirthful giggles echoed in the rafters above them.

At last he stopped, but not till she had buried her hands in his red hair, gripping two handfuls and trying to shake him into sobriety.

"Ewen! Ewen! Put me down!"

He put her back on the broad sofa and sitting down beside her picked up her arm and kissed the inside of her elbow.

"That's for your funny bone. I've always wanted to kiss it and to kiss you when you made me laugh but I never dared."

At that she opened her grave blue eyes wider than ever.

"Oh, Ewen, have you wanted to laugh at me before?"

"No, only to kiss you for being so funny."

She considered this a moment.

"Well, yes, I was funny. It was just like me, Ewen, wasn't it, to mistake an old clocker for a vulture tearing out my insides with its claws and its beak?"

He had his own way of answering that, but they were both grave enough again when he said, "Now, tell me all the rest and what you were meaning when you were saying there was someone else—as if anyone else had dared!"

"Oh, no! I meant you, of course—someone else for you—I meant Sally. And, oh, Ewen, you *did* kiss Sally in the car, I saw you." Her voice was solemnly accusing.

"Yes, so I did indeed," he answered to this grave charge. "Sally had just told me she and John were tired of waiting for us to be happy—you see, Sally didn't like to be happy when you seemed so sad—but at last they were engaged properly and going to be married, so, of course, I kissed her very nicely on her pretty cheek, but Sally knew all about that, she knows much more about kisses than you do—as yet. It was what she would be calling a 'peck,' though I do not like to be accused of a 'peck'—like—like a bird." He carefully refrained from using the dangerous word *hen*—or *clocker*! "Was that all, my Sweet? Let us have it all out now, for I do not know when I shall have you to myself again."

Was it all? Rexie wondered. It certainly didn't seem very much put into words.

"Yes—no, it wasn't all. There was everything else besides, I mean everything made me think, as soon as Sally came, that you must fall in love with her. It was what everybody thought, that you and she were just made for each other—and there was *nothing* I could do about it. Both so tall and distinguished—I'm not being humble, I have my points, but they are all the wrong ones—and then you see, I knew it was just because of Mrs. Postgate you had asked me to marry you——" a pause, then—"Ewen!"

"Yes."

"Was it really and truly not because of Mrs. Postgate, and all those insults, that you asked me to marry you?"

He sat up. "Of course it was because of those——" he paused as if the term on his lips were too opprobrious for her ears—"those *scandalmongers*, I asked you then! Didn't I know I was spoiling everything rushing you like that. You, who should have been wooed like a princess? *Ah, Thuit e mach!* (So it happened!)." He paused, his face black as thunder, his blue eyes hard and fierce under their thick, reddish brows.

Then he relaxed and drew her to him.

"But listen, Tha—Small, dear One." He often quickly translated the Gaelic endearments that rose to his lips. "I shall make up to you for it all—if only—if only you will begin to love me a little, Roxana, just a little, my

Sweet, just enough to let you walk gently over my heart with your small feet.”

His deep voice was so moving, so like a wave rolling in from depths she could not fathom, that she could not speak, she could only put up her hand and touch his cheek.

“Am I loving you too much, my Darling?” His voice changed quickly to a gentle humouring note and she knew in one flash of insight that he feared his love might be a burden to her and that, rather than let it weigh upon her, he would make it seem lighter, not to encumber her with his pain.

Indeed his next words proved all that and more. “I will not love you overmuch, my Sweet, I promise, I must not crush you with love so that you will be saying, ‘Comfort me with apples, for I am sick of love.’ ”

Again he smiled and her heart ached because she was afraid she did not know how to answer, he was still so much a stranger to her, a stranger from a strange land.

But love finds out the way. She stole a shy hand round his arm.

“I love you too much, too, Ewen. I mean, I was afraid of loving you too much because I thought perhaps you wouldn’t want so much love as all that”—she sighed—“that you would want just a little, enough, you know, to make do for people who were married.”

His spontaneous laugh over this careful attempt at sedate reasonableness dispelled all the tenseness that held them.

“It’s quite true,” she assured him, “though, of course, I ought to love you more than you love me, because I’ve nothing else to give you. I’m sure Jane Austen would think you were a very grand match for me, and——”

But before she could dilate any more on Jane Austen a small thunderbolt struck the door, followed by an anxious scratching.

“Mungo?” they both exclaimed, and Ewen jumped up to let the rascal in. As he did so, the sounds of an approaching cavalcade came up the hill and he turned to fold her for a good-night kiss.

“Oh, Ewen, if you don’t love me for ever and ever, I shall die.”

“And I shall die one day, but I shall still love you for ever and ever.” He stood looking down into her upturned face, holding her upraised hands against his shoulders. “And there to I plight thee my troth.”

* * * * *

But when John came in all he saw was a rather punctilious gentleman politely helping his sister on with her coat—not that John paid much

attention to that, for he also, as Sally had said on a similar occasion, “had been there before.”

“I’ve got that pony,” said he, “and the better half of Storrs, man and dog, out there.”

“What about that off shoe?” inquired Stratheilan earnestly, as if nothing whatever interested him at the moment but the pony’s off shoe.

“Good enough,” said John and then the hut was all at once full of men and dogs, shouting questions, giving Rexie little spontaneous hugs, re-wrapping her up in the assortment of furs and rugs they had brought up to keep her warm, making her drink the strong, milky coffee Mrs. Storrs had sent with them, and seeing her feet were well encased in layers of woollen stockings inside Mr. Storrs’ sheepskin boots, for her ride down the hill.

“But,” said John later on to Sally, “nobody but the Chief himself was allowed to lead that pony one inch. You’d think it was the Queen of Sheba herself he had mounted there instead of our small Rexie. I’m afraid I’ll never come up to him as a wooer, Sally Darling. You’ll just have to make the best of your plain John.”

Then they looked at each other and the secret smile between them left nothing to be desired.

And so the evening brought all home.

CHAPTER XXIV

“Take joy home with you”

“THEY’D better kill us two birds with one stone,” said Sally, a week or two later, “and have a double wedding.”

And so they did, though John made a feeble attempt at getting out of having any wedding at all. Not, of being married, he didn’t mind that, he assured them, it was having to wear a stove-pipe—“they make me look as if I were never going to stop,” he said. “Do you not think——”

“Of course, you’ll wear a tall hat!” exclaimed Sally and Rexie in one breath.

“Do you think you can get married in a deer-stalker?” demanded Sally.

“Or a velvet smoking cap with a tassel?” chimed in Rexie.

“Look at Ewen,” she continued, “he’s going to wear everything he’s got, kilt and sporran and skean dhu and everything in full dress. It’s in honour of

me, he says.”

“So what about me?” demanded Sally. “Is thy servant a scullion that she should marry anybody in less than a frock coat and tall hat and lavender gloves—do they wear lavender gloves?” she demanded of Rexie, while John groaned.

“And a gardenia in his button-hole,” she finished up, as Rexie showed an even greater ignorance than her own on the niceties of gloves—and thus polished off John with a final blow.

“I’ll look like a calf going to the slaughter with a wreath of roses round its neck,” he complained, “but there’s one comfort, Stratheilan will look even worse.”

“He will not!” Both girls turned on John who stood with his hands in his pockets laughing at them.

“Stratheilan will look quite at home all dressed up in Highland full dress,” went on Sally severely, “he’s made that way, whereas you, my poor lamb, will look a perfect monster got up in the English equivalent.” Then she relented a little. “But never mind, Darling, you do look sweet in a pair of old bags and a tweed coat and that’s how I’m going to see you most of the time, and I’ll say this for you, you look, just as you are, nicer than anybody in the whole world—doesn’t he, Rexie?”

“Well, I adore him whatever he has on,” said Rexie, “and I’ll adore him just as much looking a perfect fright in a tall hat and a tail coat, if that’s what they call it, as I do when he lends dignity to a pair of shabby flannels and a patched jacket.”

“Gosh!” said Sally. “Who would have thought our Rexie could pay a compliment like that!”

“It’s my innate superiority coming out,” said Rexie, who was glancing in the mirror. “I always knew I had it in me.” Then she came flopping down from these dignified heights to gasp tragically. “Oh, Sally, I feel in my bones that I have a spot coming on my nose! What shall I do if I have a spot on my nose on my wedding day?”

“Paint it with iodine,” said John and was forthwith banished.

By this time all the excitement over the hunt had long passed off, and all the mysterious actions of each and all of them been explained over and over again.

Sally had confessed to an outraged Rexie that on coming to Bendibus she had seen very quickly that her friend was in love with Stratheilan and didn’t know it and had thought a little jealousy of herself might awaken Rexie up and had forthwith done her best to arouse it, even threatening John

with having bits of himself nipped out with red-hot pincers if he gave her away by assuming a too confident and lover-like an attitude.

“Of course I said he could pine away in despair if he really wanted to help,” Sally explained, “but John said he liked his dinner better, so that was no good, and I didn’t dare ask Stratheilan to pretend anything, so I had to do everything myself even to holding out my cheek for him to kiss. He didn’t seem to enjoy it very much, but was quite the gentleman, as Flindy says _____”

Sally sighed lugubriously, and then they both laughed, happy that they could chatter flagrant nonsense together again.

The double wedding was to be a real wedding, for none of them, in spite of John’s horror of dressing up, was for one moment deceived by the silly idea that marriage could or should be a rather shameful secret of only sexual importance and concerning no one but the pair in question.

As John said to them when they discussed it seriously, even the marriage of the humblest citizen was an affair of family and national importance that might, in the long run, far outweigh the most royal of nuptials in its effect on lives present and to be. It was an institution, an affair of the State, and should be gone about in the open and with due ceremonial, where possible.

Not that John, the most retiring of mortals, was all out for a grand wedding, not he! But he did believe it proper and right to make an *occasion* of a wedding, in however simple a way. To dignify it with one’s best, sanctify it with religious observance, and guard and revere it with old customs. To make it no secret joy but to spread its happiness among neighbours and kin, to share the sunshine of it and not keep it, like a little candle in a dark lantern, to lighten a narrow space for the pair of lovers alone.

In fact, John gave quite an eloquent talk on the subject one evening while the girls diligently stitched and he and Stratheilan smoked and watched their sweet faces, both so dear to both, and each so infinitely precious to one of them, bent over their work.

John, indeed, was no chatterbox, but when he did talk he talked well and could be both instructive and entertaining, as he proved by finishing his homily with some lighter observations of his own on weddings that had them all convulsed with mirth in a very few minutes.

Stratheilan said little except for a few remarks that strengthened John’s arguments and gave a fresh depth and seriousness to his conclusions, but Rexie and Sally, of course, aired their opinions with great freedom, and on Rexie’s part, not a little originality.

The upshot of all this was that the wedding was to be in the village church—to be decorated for the occasion with flowers of every sort but especially roses—that the brides were to be in white with veils and orange blossoms, the bridegrooms in full regalia, so to speak, and that “the Three Musketeers” were to be bridesmaids, while James was to make himself useful as attendant squire to the maids, seeing that on no provocation and by no possibility could he be made ornamental.

The best men were to be a cousin of Stratheilan’s, the next bachelor of importance after the bridegroom in the Clan of the Urquharts of Morne, and John’s best friend, a well-known writer. Another relative of Stratheilan’s, a bishop, was to come to help to marry them.

The alterations to the house had been completed in the last few weeks and Betty had arrived to take charge, bringing “Petticoat” with her. Petticoat was a little French dog, left to Betty by one of Mrs. Flint’s lodgers when he was taken off to hospital to die. The Frenchman had told Betty his little dog’s name, presumably something in French, which had sounded like “Petticoat” to Betty, so Petticoat he was, and his fame soon spread far and wide. Possibly he had been a performing dog in a troupe, no one knew, but he was the cleverest, and, it must be admitted, the most temperamental creature any of them had ever known. He should have come to Bendibus in the first chapter instead of the last, but suffice it to say that there was no trick he could not do, from walking on his hind legs with a cane under his front paw, and a hat on the side of his head, to counting the pennies he insisted on collecting in a little tin pail. He died for the king, and lived for the king, and saluted the flag and did all the well-known tricks, but must also have acted “Toby” in Punch and Judy, as well as other parts, as John discovered when he got up a Punch and Judy show for Dorky’s birthday party. He adored Betty—and no one else—he hated all boys and at once bit their ankles as a sort of preliminary introduction, so it was just as well that he would go nowhere outside the garden without his lead.

He sulked if he was laughed at except when he meant you to laugh, and would only eat the tiniest quantities of the most dainty foods. He slept on Betty’s bed and liked a daily bath, bringing his sponge to remind Betty of her duty. Indeed he was an aristocrat, and a tyrant, and everyone adored him.

He was soon in such demand for entertainments that John insisted on Betty charging a good stiff fee for him, else they would never have had any peace. As it was, gorgeous motor-cars were sent for Petticoat from all over the place, and Betty was offered large sums of money for him but she would no more have sold him than she would have sold her own child if she had had one.

Fan and Mungo utterly despised him and his tricks, but treated him as a spoiled baby, a “froggy” who could not be taken seriously by responsible British dogs, but must be indulged and made the best of.

But more of Petticoat some other time; he only comes in here because he had already become as much part of the household as Betty herself and was one of those who danced at the wedding. The only boy he endured was James and, dressed up in a huge blue silk bow, he ably assisted him to marshall the guests and look after the Musketeers.

After the wedding John and Sally were going off to Paris, where they had many friends, for a week or two, and Stratheilan was to take his bride straight home to Morne, while Betty took charge at Bendibus, for Betty had flowered out like a butterfly from its chrysalis in the kindly air of Bendibus, though anything less like a butterfly than plain sonsy Betty, it would be indeed hard to find. She at once “found her feet,” as Sally put it, and took house and family to her heart. She had been brought up as a work-house child, a plain, dull brat to all seeming, but with a heart starving for love and Rexie was the first creature who had ever given her a warm personal friendship and she never forgot it. But everyone was kind and friendly to her at Bendibus and, in return, she not only worked like a hatter, but took on responsibilities as though she had been double her age.

She was to go to Morne later on, but in the meantime could not be done without at Bendibus.

The next weeks were so busy that Stratheilan and Rexie saw little of each other, though he came over nearly every day, if it were only for a few minutes, and talked so much of Morne that Rexie began to feel she might even come to like it as much as Bendibus one day.

“You will love it more,” Stratheilan told her and did not seem to have a single doubt on that score.

The wedding day came with a dawn as clear as crystal, and as they were all up betimes they enjoyed it to the full.

Mrs. Urquhart had come from Morne where she had been superintending improvements to make the house fit for a bride, she said. Stratheilan had warned Rexie that she would find it old-fashioned, but Rexie did not mind that—not even the lamps and candles with which they would have to make do till Stratheilan saw his way to put in electric light.

Most of the guests had arrived the day before as it was to be an early wedding to let travellers get well started on their travels before the end of the day. Everything went well, and the Musketeers, in blue and pink, vied with the brides for the admiration of the populace. But it was Tam who

caused the greatest sensation. No one had ever seen Tam dressed before, and when he arrived, washed and shaved, his hair cut and sporting a new grey suit, a blue shirt, and a geranium in his button-hole, nobody knew him.

Even Rexie, seeing this early guest arriving with a large bunch of flowers and a parcel, from one of the new upstairs windows, was completely at a loss.

“Who’s that, Sally?” she asked, but Sally was too busy to pay much attention.

“Somebody from the village,” said she, and it was left to Betty to unravel the mystery by bursting in on the brides to say to Rexie, “Lord-a-Mercy, Miss, ’ave ye seen Tam?” and then collapsing in a fit of the giggles.

Even Stratheilan in all “his braws” caused less admiration, not to speak of consternation, in the village than Tam, for washed and dressed, shaven and shorn, it was discovered that Tam was not nearly so old or withered as he had appeared but was indeed quite a personable figure.

It was Sally as usual who put her finger on the spot.

“We needn’t think it’s for *us* Tam has metamorphosed himself into a gay young spark,” said she to Rexie, “I believe he’s in love with Betty!”

Rexie had the wind so completely knocked out of her sails that she didn’t get over it all day.

The parcel contained a present for Rexie of an ornate honey dish, with a life-size bumble-bee on the lid, which worried Tam a little as it wasn’t the proper kind of bee for honey-making, but Rexie soon put that right by telling Tam with perfect truth that she much preferred “bumblers.” Sally got a little “jeely dish,” as became her lesser importance.

After the ceremony, they all walked in a gay procession to Bendibus where a real wedding breakfast was enjoyed, with champagne and speeches and all the rest of it.

Later on there was to be a grand party for the school children presided over by James and the Musketeers, and not to waste the decorations, the village was having a dance, in the evening, liberally contributed to by the two bridegrooms.

Stratheilan and Rexie departed first to catch a connection for the boat that was to take them part of the way to Morne.

To say that Rexie enjoyed that part of her honeymoon would be to tell a lie. Though later on she was to love the sea, on her wedding journey she considered it the most concentrated welter of horrors she had ever met, and even begged Stratheilan on the final stage when she had to leave the

comparative safety of the steamer to get into a small boat and be rowed ashore, to either leave her and go on by himself or turn the ship round and take her back home!

So Stratheilan, seeing that in her state of sea-sickness and terror she had, as John would have said, “taken leave of her wits,” threw a plaid entirely over her and carried her, as she wrote to Sally in her first letter, “ashore, like a pig in a poke.”

It was towards evening of the same day that she began to come to herself, the long motor run over mountain tracks and by the shores of lovely lochs where the birch trees and twisted pines mirrored themselves in the quiet waters, where the little silvery beaches sparkled with mica or shone with white pebbles, where the black and white oyster catchers strolled about on pink legs and plunged their orange beaks among emerald weeds, where the eagle sailed over head, and groups of red deer stood outlined for a moment against the gleaming evening sky, all enchanted her and when at last the car stopped beside a still loch with a boat lying against a short wooden pier beyond which lay an island where a turreted house, whose lit windows shone like silver among the purple shadows, stood at the foot of a central hill, she could only stand and gaze entranced.

“Is it——” She began and Stratheilan answered:

“It is Morne,” and, lifting his Glengarry, stood gazing as if his hungry eyes could never have their fill.

“Oh,” said Rexie, “I do love it. I love it already and I’ll love it for ever and ever. I never thought Morne was like that—it is made out of magic!”

From the boat rose four oarsmen in kilts, with gillyflowers of their clan in their bonnets and welcomed home their returning laird and his bride.

Stratheilan was a bit afraid of Rexie’s reaction to yet another boat, but the water lay as still as a mill pond in the soft evening light, gleaming with the reflected colours of the sky, and before she knew it she was actually enjoying the smooth sweep through the water as the boat shot gently across at a word from Stratheilan.

He carried her over the threshold of her home and set her down in a flagged hall, where a great fire of wood and peat burned and three dogs rose from the great rug before it to greet their master.

“Oh!” said Rexie, suddenly abashed that she had forgotten her favourites in all the horror of boats and salt water. “Where are Mungo and Fan?”

At that moment there was a terrific noise and in came an excited Mungo with a disapproving Fan behind her, led by an old serving-man.

Then an inner door opened and an old woman in a “Mutch” and followed by three sturdy girls came in, one, Christina, being introduced as maid to “herself of Morne,” and told to take “herself” to her room, attend to her and bring her down again to tea.

After that, all was excitement with Ewen wanting to show her every corner of the stately, old-world house with its tapestries and pictures, its hunting trophies and Chinese, Indian and other treasures brought home by the men-folk of the family, and its needlework treasures, from samplers to upholstery, from firescreens to bits of cobwebby lace, patiently wrought by the women, while their squires were out of doors at the hunt or away at wars.

Not that he had time to do more than race her through a room or two with Beathag, the old woman, on their heels, begging them to come to the lovely tea awaiting them in the hall with its home-made cakes, its Highland butter and preserves made of berries such as Rexie had never tasted before, its heather honey and lime honey, its bannocks and scones from oven and girdle.

When Rexie had eaten her last delicious cake made of rich pastry, surmounted by blueberries in a thick syrup and a cap of whipped cream, she was rushed off again to see what Stratheilan called her “boudoir,” a round room in one of the turrets that had belonged to all the ladies of the house for generations and which he had not allowed to be altered in any way till Rexie saw it; she could do what she liked with it herself but no one else was to touch it.

It was up a short winding stair in the turret and the golden evening light poured in from windows all round the circular outside wall. Rexie adored it at once. It looked down on to a garden which ended in a grassy slope to the lake divided by a broad path with a few marble steps at intervals, the last leading into the water where a small boat lay moored. This was her own garden and there was a private door into it from the turret.

Of course, the room was shabby and faded, but full of treasures to go over when she had time to settle down to it. It needed fresh hangings and new covers for the well-preserved needlework upholstery, all done by hand, whose colourings were but little faded so carefully had it been covered with dimity or linen, “brown holland” or chintz, as the years went by and the fashions changed.

Rexie could foresee herself happy there, on bright sunny days of spring with windows open to the sheltered garden—she would have it full of spring flowers, or on soft autumn days with heather purpling the mainland, and

roses and clematis climbing round her windows and Stratheilan rowing home across the loch to tea. Then, on stormy winter days, a great fire would blaze in the wide hearth and she would have leisure to go over all the quaint tallboys and escritaires, the needlework boxes, some with silks and bits of unfinished work still in them, the aumries and quaint cupboards stuffed full of the treasure-trove of years, lots of it rubbish, no doubt, but all intensely interesting to Rexie, as the last persons who had used it were Stratheilan's own mother and grandmothers.

Mrs. Urquhart had told Rexie she had never used this room, partly out of sentiment and partly because she preferred to be near things on the ground floor, and so had chosen the room beneath, identical in shape, but with a French window on to the garden and a door opening straight into the hall.

"I'll make that into a parlour, for Ewen and me," thought Rexie. "We'll have breakfast there when we are alone and it won't matter if he comes in with his dirty boots—that lovely carpet upstairs would show every mark."

Then there were the downstairs places and the kitchens to visit, the gun room and Stratheilan's own comfortable "office," or den, in the opposite tower, furnished with huge desk and arm-chairs and hung with his own particular trophies; and then various introductions had to be made to men who appeared on this or that errand, though the real presentations were to take place on the morrow, when there was to be a dinner for the principal inhabitants of the island and a party for the children. Stratheilan never called the people his tenants for, though the island might be called his, the clachans and holdings practically belonged to the people who held them.

Stratheilan said he would try to explain to her one of these days, but it was more as if the island belonged to the branch of the clan of which he was head, than to him, though they were not by any means all called Urquhart—as Rexie was inclined to think when she met so many Urquharts!

Then came their first dinner, a feast to which all the island had contributed, not one thing being bought, a salmon here, a bird there, cream from so and so's famous cow, pies and tarts from fruit out of private gardens or gathered by children from the hills. Beathag had it all off and knew where every berry had come from.

There were even dishes of sour cream from the poorest folk, a new dainty to Rexie which she tasted rather tentatively.

"Herself will be having to learn to like the sour cream," said Beathag, "for it will be offered everywhere when himself iss taking her round the Clachans."

“Will there be sugar on it?” asked Rexie, fearfully, for even as Beathag had prepared it, strewn with a thick crust of powdered brown sugar, it had been rather too much for her.

“It will be all right,” said Stratheilan, and rose for it was time now, he thought, to have his bride to himself and talk of other things than sour cream.

So Beathag and the shaky old man in a kilt who had hovered behind Stratheilan’s chair and who, Stratheilan explained, considered it his duty to wait upon him though he was now too feeble to do anything, were left to dispute with each other the right way to eat sour cream while Rexie was settled with Ewen in a huge chair by the “parlour” fire now blazing up the chimney.

“Home at last,” he said, pushing Fan and Mungo out of the way, for they, of course, considered themselves privileged dogs, not to be confounded with the riff-raff in the hall and stables, but with their own place on the rug of any sitting-room occupied by Rexie or Stratheilan.

“Home at Morne,” echoed Rexie. “Oh, Ewen, this is a *happy* house. I feel happiness all about it, in these sunny round rooms with the wide sky around them, in the crooked stairs, and the up-and-downy corridors, it peeps in at all the windows and laughs out of the corners of the doorways—we’ll be happy here, and it’s *good*, too, a good-feeling house with no gloomy hints of past wrongs and dark sins about it, like some old houses—I don’t wonder that you love it.”

“And you must love it, too, my Sweet, my Darling, for it will be happiest of all now with my small bride to tread the floors on her light feet, and her laughter to sound through the hall, with her flower face to be looking through the windows at the sunny loch or watching the snow sweeping down the glens, while I out on the wild hills in the storm will be happy thinking of my treasure safe within its strong walls, of her sweet eyes watching for my coming——”

“Bringing joy home with you,” said Rexie.

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

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[The end of *Can I Go There?* by Anne Hepple Dickinson (as Anne Hepple)]