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(Continued.)

"Ha! ha!" he cried, mockingly, ere I had gone fifty yards; "so the beggar would ride on horseback, would he? Pride goes before a fall. The pauper who refuses alms to-day may to-morrow dispute with the dogs for a bone. Even a Highlander may find it hard to feed on his pride."

I turned quickly on my heel, under a frantic impulse to go back and rend my tormentor on the spot. Perhaps it was the vision of jeering faces that deterred me, for the crowd were chiefly his friends, or it may have been an acute sense of my physical disability, but I only called out in a frenzy of passion: "They laugh best who laugh last. I'll silence your tinkler tongue yet," and held on my way, my rage so furious that passers-by stared at me, my brain throbbing with the fellest purposes of revenge.

Poor fool! One brief moment's prescience, one glimpse of the future, and the keen-edged sword that fate held imminent over my head would very speedily have checked my passion and turned my mind to other things than petty aims of vengeance. Yet such foreknowledge would not have diminished my sense of wrong. My enemy's evil influence was predominant, and, little as I guessed, it was to shape my whole subsequent career.

On reaching my rooms I found a letter from home awaiting me. The superscription was my father's, a circumstance that at another time and in a calmer mood would immediately have struck me as peculiar, since my mother was the invariable correspondent at Kilburnie. But just then I had not eyes to observe. One thing and one thing alone I saw and thought of—the detested object of my wrath. He loomed upon my distracted mind like a portentous fate, shutting out all else. Instead of making haste to learn the news, I crushed the letter in my hand and strode about the apartment, darkening it with violent language.

At length I tore the envelope and read the letter. The effect was as if a fevered man were to plunge into an icy flood and have all his flaming currents chilled in an instant. I seemed to have passed in a moment from one dreadful state of existence into another still more dreadful. I had leaped, in the words of our poet, from "hell heat to arctic cold," from the region of anger into that of despair, and for awhile I was paralyzed. At first I read incredulously, thinking that fury must have disordered my brain. Holding my head in my hand, I read again, and yet again, hoping to prove the first interpretation wrong. But perusal only brought out the fatal truth the more clearly. Then I thought that my father must have been mad when he wrote, but that hypothesis also had to be abandoned. The letter indeed was mercilessly sane and explicit.

It was a voluminous document, covering a full half-dozen sheets of large, closely-written paper. That I might the better understand the crisis which had come upon us and the course of events leading up to it, my father related the history of all the preceding generations of our house. My ancestors, according to the partial historian, were men of rare virtues and splendid accomplishments, brave, generous, and well-favoured, aiming ever at keeping their honour bright and their hall full of good cheer for their friends. Their hospitality shone conspicuous in ages more princely than ours, and, said my father with a pride that had its touch of pathos, "No man of them was ever known to do what did not become a Kilgour or Kilburnie." But he was constrained to add,

"Though I am afraid they were not always as wise as Solomon."

The eulogy was the preface to a very bitter tale. Bog and crag and moorland but ill fit people with a chivalrous spirit and a lavish hand. The Kilgours having exhausted the treasury in keeping open house began to borrow. Then bit by bit the estate passed away, till only a remnant remained. "When I came into possession of it," wrote my father, with a stroke of sardonic humour, "it was like succeeding to an almshouse." Then he went on to tell of the incessant attacks of harpies—Israelitish usurers, aided by conscienceless lawyers—and how these harpies were now "closing in like ravenous beasts of prey howling for blood. Wherefore it comes," continued the letter, "that things are pressing hard on us at this present writing, and I and your mother are sore distressed." There was, however, a change of keeping the foe "beyond the gates" by temporizing until such time as I, the sole hope of the family, should be able to come to the rescue. The manner in which I was to bring relief was by beating the harpies at their own game. In other words, I was to retrieve our fallen fortunes by turning lawyer forthwith.

"After much meditation," pursued my father, "the law commends itself to me as a high and honorable profession. A lawyer in our family would fairly set us on our feet again. Lawyers are all rogues, Andrew, as I know to my cost, but you might get along enough spoon to sup with the best of them. Once started, once rising, none knows where you might stop. You might be my Lord Advocate yet, and go to court and make a great name and get influence, and then we could cock our bonnets and whistle with the highest of them."

This was bad enough and hopeless enough, but the pinch was yet to come. That my progress might be facilitated, I was to begin my legal career in the office of Thomas Clephane, in Dundee—that is to say, I was to put myself completely and unconditionally in my enemy's power. My father thanked Heaven that I had an opportunity of making so good a start. "I will write to your uncle immediately," he said "and it lies secure in my mind that he will admit you on favourable terms. Delay not, my son. Let our straits be a spur to your resolution. We look to you to save us, and I am sure we do not look in vain. I have a dim memory of hearing you once say that your cousin, who will naturally be your uncle's partner and successor, is your fellow student at the university. Cultivate his good-will, and by the grace of God he may befriend you."

I read this letter a dozen times, dazed by its news, sickened at heart by its misplaced and tragic hopefulness. Locking the door to prevent intrusion, I sat down and tried to think. What was this burden that had been so suddenly laid upon me? What was I asked to do? Not half an hour before Peter had publicly ground his heel in the dust to signify how he would crush me, and I had answered in angry defiance. Now I was to plead for his favour, his help, his good-will. I was to court his scorn, to invite him to heap insults and humiliations on my head. He might taunt me and tempt me, call his companions to join him in making sport of me, he might spit on me, treat me like a dog, and I could give nothing in return but the crouching subserviency which a dog owes to its master.

I sprang to my feet and began to pace the room in a tumult of revolt and indignation. No, by Heaven, it should never be! Never as long as he drew breath would Peter Clephane call me slave. To be snubbed, contemned, jeered at, treated as a creature of the mire every time the humour seized him, was a prospect to be cancelled at once. He must be aware of our condition. Already he had flung at me the gibe that I was a pauper and given me a foretaste of the treatment I might expect at his hands. My father could have no knowledge of what his proposal meant. He would not willingly deliver me bound into the hands of my worst enemy.

And then, with a subduing and sobering effect, it struck home to my heart that all this was but the rebellion of a selfish pride. The individual has his rights, private feelings have their place and value, but to weigh them against the claims of duty is impious. Could I be guilty of such impiety? Could I turn a heedless ear to the call for help that had reached me? No, a thousand times, no! Better suffer any humiliation; better sacrifice freedom and liking forever than turn traitor to those I loved. Help? Yes, I would help. If necessary I would go to Dundee and be deaf and dumb under Peter's persecution. He could lay on, and I would never so much as protest.

The gloaming came, and my landlady entered with a light. The cheerful glow of lamp and fire strengthened my resolution. My writing materials were on the table, and I sat down eagerly to reply that I would do in all particulars according to my father's wishes. As I wrote my paltry objections grew less and less till they were no more than a vague shadow at the back of my mind! My spirits rose, the prospect brightened. I was almost glad of the opportunity that had arisen to do something practical. I would throw myself into my new studies with all my soul and—who knew? I might yet realize my father's dream, and be a legal luminary and restore the fortunes of my family. I had read of such things; I would make my life a romance.

My sheet was perhaps half full when all at once there arose a great shouting under my window. I stopped to hearken, but unable to distinguish what was said I raised the sash and thrust out my head. The moon, which was near the full, shone in an unclouded sky, so that the light was good. Below I saw half a dozen familiar figures, and in their midst, with a leer on his face, was Peter Clephane. He broke into a tirade of reviling and mockery as soon as he saw me, asking me how I liked my drubbing, and whether I wouldn't come down and get more. I closed the window, firmly resolved to make no response. Words are but wind, and they would not turn me from my purpose. But the clamour waxing louder and more aggressive, so that I could not write with any degree of self-possession, I put out my head again to beg them to go peaceably away. I was received with a volley of very ill-smelling slime and a shout of derisive laughter.

"That's a slight expression of our respect and esteem for a scabby Highland man," cried Peter. "How does it taste?"

I shook off the filth with a dizzy head and a sharp constriction of the throat that made me gasp. I did not speak—I could not, but there was a fascination that held my eyes fast on my enemy. As I did not withdraw, I was bespattered a second time. They shouted in their glee louder than ever, Peter's voice being high over all. The rising tumult within drowned the noise without. I did not hear what was said. Lights began to leap in a fantastic maze before my sight, and there was a sound in my ears like the vicious song of a million bullets. I cleaned myself again as well as possible, my assailants screaming in an ecstasy of joy at my plight, then turning backward I clapped on my bonnet and descended the stairs.

My appearance outside was the signal for another and a fiercer storm of ridicule. But my passion was already running high, and needed no fresh tempest of derision to make it surge. Walking straight up to Peter and looking him in the two eyes so that he flinched and fell back, I said in a voice that was strange even to myself:—"The time has come for you and me to settle some points. Come this way and bring your friends."

At the back of the house there was an unused plot of ground covered by a soft sward. It offered a desirable seclusion, and thither I led them. They took the thing as a fresh jest, making boisterously merry over it, little aware of the maddening electricity that tingled along my veins or the deadly intent that had brought me there.

Immediately upon entering the enclosure I threw off my coat and waistcoat, slipped the braces from my shoulders to have freer play, and tightened the belt about my waist. Peter stood regarding me with a look partly of curiosity, partly of contempt.

"I think you had better strip," I said, quietly. "I want no advantage." There was no longer any thought of the grimmed arm.

(To be Continued.)


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