ANNIE O' THE BANKS O' DEE

BY

WILLIAM GORDON STABLES

Annie o' the Banks o' Dee by William Gordon Stables

Chapter One
At Bilberry Hall

"It may not be, it cannot be
That such a gem was meant for me;
But oh! if it had been my lot,
A palace, not a Highland cot,
That bonnie, simple gem had thrown
Bright lustre o'er a jewelled crown;
For oh! the sweetest lass to me
Is Annie—Annie o' the Banks o' Dee?"
Old Song.

Far up the romantic Dee, and almost hidden by the dark waving green of spruce trees and firs, stands the old mansion-house of Bilberry Hall.

Better, perhaps, had it still been called a castle, as undoubtedly it had been in the brave days of old. The many-gabled, turreted building had formerly belonged to a family of Gordons, who had been deprived of house and lands in the far north of Culloden, after the brutal soldiery of the Bloody Duke had laid waste the wild and extensive country of Badenoch, burning every cottage and house, murdering every man, and more than murdering every woman and child, and "giving their flesh to the eagles," as the old song hath it.

But quiet indeed was Bilberry Hall now, quiet even to solemnity, especially after sunset, when the moon sailed up from the woods of the west, when only the low moan of the wind through the forest trees could be heard, mingling with the eternal murmur of the broad winding river, or now and then the plaintive cry of a night bird, or the mournful hooting of the great brown owl.

It was about this time that Laird McLeod would summon the servants one and all, from the supercilious butler down to Shufflin' Sandie himself.

Then would he place "the big ha' Bible" before him on a small table, arrange his spectacles more comfortably astride his nose, clear his throat, and read a long chapter.

One of the Psalms of David in metre would then be sung. There wasn't a deal of music in the Laird's voice, it must be confessed. It was a deep, hoarse bass, that reminded one of the groaning of an old grandfather's clock just before it begins to strike. But when the maids took up the tune and sweet Annie Lane chimed in, the psalm or hymn was well worth listening to.

Then with one accord all fell on their knees by chairs, the Laird getting down somewhat stiffly. With open eyes and uplifted face he prayed long and earnestly. The "Amen" concluded the worship, and all retired save Annie, the Laird's niece and almost constant companion.

After, McLeod would look towards her and smile.

"I think, my dear," he would say, "it is time to bring in the tumblers." There was always a cheerful bit of fire in the old-fashioned grate, and over it from a sway hung a bright little copper kettle, singing away just as the cat that sat on the hearth, blinking at the fire, was doing.

The duet was the pleasantest kind of music to the Laird McLeod in his easy-chair, the very image of white-haired contentment.

Annie Lane—sixteen years of age she was, and beautiful as a rosebud—would place the punch-bowl on the little table, with its toddy-ladle, and flank it with a glass shaped like a thistle. Into the bowl a modicum of the oldest whisky was poured, and sugar added; the good Squire, or Laird, with the jolly red face, smiled with glee as the water bubbled from the spout of the shining kettle.

"Now your slippers, dear," Annie would say. Off came the "brogue shoes" and on went a pretty pair of soft and easy slippers; by their flowery ornamentation it was not difficult to tell who had made them.

A long pipe looked rather strange between such wee rosy lips; nevertheless, Annie lit that pipe, and took two or three good draws to make sure it was going, before handing it to her uncle. Then she bent over the back of the chair and kissed him on the bald pate, before going out with her maid for a walk on the lawn.

It might be in the sweet summer time, when those green grassy terraces were perfumed with roses of every hue, or scented with the sweet syringa; in spring, when every tree and bush were alive with bird song; in red-berried autumn, or in the clear frost of a winter's night, when the world was all robed in its white cocoon and every bush, brake, or tree had branches like the whitest of coral.

Jeannie Lee, the maid, was a great favourite with Annie, and Jeannie dearly loved her young mistress, and had done so for ten long years, ever since she had arrived at Bilberry Hall a toddling wee thing of six, and, alas! an orphan. Both father and mother had died in one week. They had loved each other in life, and in death were not divided. Jeannie was just four years older than her mistress, but she did not hesitate to confide to her all her secrets, for Jeannie was a bonnie lassie.

"She whiles had a sweetheart,
And whiles she had two."

Well, but strange as it may appear, Annie, young as she was, had two lovers. There was a dashing young farmer—Craig Nicol by name—he was well-to-do, and had dark, nay, raven hair, handsome face and manly figure, which might well have captivated the heart of any girl. At balls and parties, arrayed in tartan, he was indeed a splendid fellow. He flirted with a good many girls, it is true, but at the bottom of his heart there was but one image—that of Annie Lane. Annie was so young, however, that she did not know her own mind. And I really think that Craig Nicol was somewhat impetuous in his wooing. Sometimes he almost frightened her. Poor Craig was unsophisticated, and didn't know that you must woo a woman as you angle for a salmon.

He was a very great favourite with the Laird at all events, and many were the quiet games of cards they played together on winter evenings, many the bowl of punch they quaffed, before the former mounted his good grey mare and went noisily cantering homewards.

No matter what the weather was, Craig would be in it, wind or rain, hail or snow. Like Burns's Tam o' Shanter was Craig.

"Weel mounted on his grey mare, Meg,
A better never lifted leg,
Tam skelpit on through dub and mire,
Despising wind and rain and fire,
Whiles holding fast his gude blue bonnet,
Whiles crooning o'er some auld Scots sonnet."

Yes, indeed. Craig Nicol was a dashing young blade, and at times Annie thought she almost loved him.

But what of the girl's other lover? Well, he was one of a very different stamp. A laird he was too, and a somewhat wealthy one, but he was not a week under fifty.

He, too, was a constant visitor at Bilberry Hall, and paid great attention to Annie, though he treated her in a kind and fatherly sort of manner, and Annie really liked the man, though little did she think he was in love with her.

One lovely moonlight night in autumn, however, when Laird Fletcher—for that was his name—found himself seated beside Annie and her maid in an arbour that overlooked the dreamy, hazy forest, he suddenly said to Jeannie:

"Jeannie, I'd be the happiest man on earth if I only had this darling child to be my bride."

Annie never spoke. She simply smiled, thinking he was in fun.

But after a pause the Laird took Annie's hand:

"Ah! dear lassie, I'll give you plenty of time to think of it. I'd care for you as the apple of my eye; I'd love you with a love that younger men cannot even dream of, and not a lady in all the land should be dressed so braw as my own wee dove."

Annie drew her hand from his; then—I can't tell why—perhaps she did not know herself, she put her little white hands to her face and burst into tears.

With loving words and kind, he tried to soothe her, but like a startled deer she sprang away from him, dashed across the lawn, and sought shelter in her own boudoir.

The Laird, honest fellow, was sad, and sorry, too, that he had proposed to Annie; but then he really was to be excused. What is it a man will not do whom love urges on?

Laird Fletcher was easy-minded, however, and hopeful on the whole.

"Ah! well," he said to himself; "she'll come round in time, and if that black-haired young farmer were only out of the way, I'd win the battle before six months were over. Gives himself a mighty deal too much side, he does. Young men are mostly fools—I'll go into the house and smoke a pipe with my aged friend, McLeod."

Shufflin' Sandie seemed to spring from the earth right in front of him.

A queer little creature was Sandie, soul and body, probably thirty years old, but looking older; twinkling ferrety eyes and red hair, a tuft of which always stuck up through a hole on the top of the broad Prince Charlie bonnet he wore; a very large nose always filled with snuff; and his smile was like the grin of a vixen.

Sandie was the man-of-all-work at Bilberry. He cleaned knives and boots in-doors, ran errands, and did all kinds of odd jobs out of doors. But above all Sandie was a fisherman. Old as he was, Squire McLeod, or Laird, as he was most often called, went to the river, and Sandie was always with him. The old man soon tired; then Sandie took the rod, and no man on all Deeside could make a prettier cast than he. The salmon used to come at his call.

“Hullo!” said Laird Fletcher, “where did you come from?”

“Just ran round, sir, to see if you wanted your horse.”

“No, no, Sandie, not for another hour or two.”

The truth is that Sandie had been behind the arbour, listening to every word that was said.

Sandie slept in a loft above the stable. It was there he went now, and threw himself on his bed to think.

“Folks shouldn’t speak aloud to themselves,” he thought, “as Laird Fletcher does. Wants Farmer Nicol got out of the way, does he? The old rascal! I’ve a good mind to tell the police. But I think I’d better tell Craig Nicol first that there is danger ahead, and that he mustn’t wear his blinkers. Poor man! Indeed will I! Then I might see what the Laird had to say as well. That’s it, Sandie, that’s it. I’ll have twa strings to my bow.”

And Sandie took an enormous pinch of snuff and lay back again to muse.

I never myself had much faith to put in an ignorant, deformed, half-dwarfed creature, and Shufflin’ Sandie was all that, both physically and morally.

I don’t think that Sandie was a thief, but I do believe he would have done almost anything to turn an honest penny. Indeed, as regards working hard there was nothing wrong with Sandie. Craig Nicol, the farmer, had given him many a half-crown, and now he saw his way, or thought he did, to earn another.

Well, Sandie, at ten o'clock, brought round Laird Fletcher's horse, and before mounting, the Laird, who, with all his wealth, was a wee bit of a niggard, gave him twopence.

"The stingy, close-fisted, old tottering brute. Tuppince, eh!"

Shufflin' Sandy shook his fist after the Laird.

"You marry our bonnie Annie?" he said, half-aloud. "Man, I'd sooner see the dearie floating down the Dee like a dead hare than to see her wedded to an old fossil like you."

Sandie went off now to his bed in the loft, and soon all was peace around Bilberry Hall, save when the bloodhounds in their kennels lifted up their bell-like voices, giving warning to any tramp, or poacher that might come near the Hall.

Annie knelt reverently down and said her prayers before getting into bed.

The tears were in her eyes when she got up.

"Oh," she said to her maid, "I hope I haven't hurt poor Mr Fletcher's feelings! He really is a kind soul, and he was very sincere."

"Well, never mind, darling," said Jeannie; "but, lor, if he had only asked my price I would have jumped at the offer."

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Chapter Two.

“There is Danger in the Sky.”

“What!” said Annie Lane, “would you really marry an old man?”

“Ay, that would I,” said the maid. “He’s got the money. Besides, he is not so very old. But let me sing a bit of a song to you—very quietly, you know.”

Jeannie Lee had a sweet voice, and when she sang low, and to Annie alone, it was softer and sweeter still, like a fiddle with a mute on the bridge. This is the little song she sang:

“What can a young lassie, what shall a young lassie,
  What can a young lassie do with an old man?
Bad luck on the penny that tempted my minnie
  To sell her poor Jenny for silver and land.

“He’s always complaining from morning till eenin’,
  He coughs and he hobbles the weary day long;
He’s stupid, and dozin’, his blood it is frozen—
  Oh! dreary’s the night wi’ a crazy old man!

“He hums and he hankers, he frets and he cankers—
  I never can please him, do all that I can;
He’s peevish and jealous of all the young fellows—
  Oh! grief on the day I met wi’ an old man!

“My old Aunty Kitty upon me takes pity:
  I’ll do my endeavour to follow her plan;
I’ll cross him and rack him until I heart-break him,
  And then his old brass will buy a new pan!”

“But, oh, how cruel!” said Annie. “Oh, I wish you would marry that Laird Fletcher—then he would bother me no more. Will you, Jeannie, dear?”

Jeannie Lee laughed.

“It will be you he will marry in the long run,” she said; “now, I don’t set up for a prophet, but remember my words: Laird Fletcher will be your husband, and he will be just like a father to you, and your life will glide on like one long and happy dream.”

It will be observed that Jeannie could talk good English when she cared to. When speaking seriously—the Scots always do—the Doric is for the most part of the fireside dialect.

“And now, darling,” continued Annie’s maid, “go to sleep like a baby; you’re not much more, you know. There, I’ll sing you a lullaby, an old, old one:

“‘Hush, my dear, lie still and slumber,
Holy angels guard thy bed;
Countless blessings without number
Gently falling on thy head.’”

The blue eyes tried to keep open, but the eyelids would droop, and soon Annie o’ the Banks o’ Dee was wafted away to the drowsy land.

Shufflin’ Sandie was early astir next morning. First he fed and attended to his horses, for he loved them as if they had been brothers; then he went to the kennels to feed the hounds, and in their joy to see him they almost devoured him alive.

This done, Sandie had a big drink of water from the pump, for Sandie had had a glass too much the night before.

He was none the worse, however; so he hied him to the kitchen.

There were lots of merry Scotch lassies here, and they delighted to torment and tease Sandie.

“Sandie,” said one, “I’ve a good mind to tie the dish-cloth round your head.”

“Tie it round your own,” said Sandie. “Anything becomes a good-looking face, my bonnie Betsy.”

“Sandie,” said another buxom girl, “you were drunk last night. I’m sure of it.”

“No, not so very full, Fanny. I hadn’t enough to get happy and jolly on.”

“But wouldn’t you like a hair of the doggie that bit you this morning?”

“Indeed would I, Fanny. I never say no to a drop of good Scotch.”

“Well, ye’ll have to go to the village. Ye’ll get none here. Just make your brose, and be content.”

Sandie did as he was bidden. Into a huge wooden bowl, called a “caup,” he put three large handfuls of fine oatmeal and a modicum of salt. The kettle was boiling wildly on the fire, so the water was poured on and stirred, and the “brose” was made.

A huge piece of butter was placed in the centre, and the bowl was flanked by a quart of new milk.

And this was Shufflin’ Sandie’s breakfast, and when he had finished all save the bit he always left for Collie and the cat, he gave a sigh of contentment, and lit his pipe.

And now the lasses began their banter again.

“That’s the stuff to make a man of you,” said Fanny.

“Make a man of an ill-shapen dwarf like him,” said Maggie Reid. “Well! well! well!”

“Hush, Mag,” cried Fanny, “hush! God could have made you just as misshapen as poor Sandie.”

But Sandie took no heed. He was thinking. Soon he arose, and before Fanny could help herself, he had kissed her. Fanny threw the dish-cloth after him, but the laugh was all against her.

The Laird would be downstairs now, so Sandie went quietly to the breakfast-room door and tapped.

“Come in, Sandie,” cried the Laird. “I know it is you.”

The Laird had a good Scotch breakfast before him. Porridge, fresh herrings and mashed potatoes, with ducks’ eggs to follow and marmalade to finish off with.

“Will you have a thistle, Sandie?”

“Indeed I will, sir, and glad to.”

“Well, there’s the bottle, and yonder’s the glass. Help yourself, lad.”

Sandie did that, right liberally, too.

“Horses and hounds all well, Sandie?”

“All beautiful, Laird. And I was just going to ask if I could have the bay mare, Jean, to ride o’er to Birnie-Boozle (Craig Nicol’s farm possessed that euphonic name). I’ve news for the fairmer.”

“All right, Sandie. Take care you don’t let her down, though.”

“I’ll see to her, Laird.”

And away went Sandie exultant, and in ten minutes more was clattering along the Deeside road.

It was early autumn, and the tints were just beginning to show red and yellow on the elms and sycamores, but Sandie looked at nothing save his horse’s neck.

“Was the farmer at home?”

“Yes; and would Sandie step into the parlour for a minute. Mary would soon find him.”

“Why, Sandie, man, what brings you here at so early an hour?”

Sandie took a lordly pinch of snuff, and handed the box to Craig Nicol.

“I’ve something to tell ye, sir. But, hush! take a peep outside, for fear anybody should be listening.”

“Now,” he continued, in a half-whisper, “ye’ll never breathe a word of what I’m going to tell you?”

“Why, Sandie, I never saw you look so serious before. Sit down, and I’ll draw my chair close to yours.”

The arrangement completed, Sandie’s face grew still longer, and he told him all he heard while listening behind the arbour.

“I own to being a bit inquisitive like,” he added; “but man, farmer, it is a good thing for you on this occasion that I was. I’ve put you on your guard.”

Craig laughed till the glasses on the sideboard jingled and rang.

“Is that all my thanks?” said Sandie, in a disheartened tone.

“No, no, my good fellow. But the idea of that old cockalorum—though he is my rival—doing a sturdy fellow like me to death is too amusing.”

“Well,” said Sandie, “he’s just pretty tough, though he is a trifle old. He can hold a pistol or a jock-the-leg knife easily enough; the dark nights will soon be here. He’d be a happy man if you were dead, so I advise you to beware.”

“Well, well, God bless you, Sandie; when I’m saying my prayers to-night I’ll think upon you. Now have a dram, for I must be off to ride round the farm.”

Just before his exit, the farmer, who, by the way, was a favourite all over the countryside, slipped a new five-shilling piece into Sandie’s hand, and off the little man marched with a beaming face.

“I’ll have a rare spree at Nancy Wilson’s inn on Saturday,” he said. “I’ll treat the lads and lassies too.”

But Shufflin’ Sandie’s forenoon’s work was not over yet.

He set spurs to his mare, and soon was galloping along the road in the direction of Laird Fletcher’s mansion.

The Laird hadn’t come down yet. He was feeling the effects of last evening’s potations, for just as—

“The Highland hills are high, high, high,
The Highland whisky’s strong.”

Sandie was invited to take a chair in the hall, and in about half an hour Laird Fletcher came shuffling along in dressing-gown and slippers.

“Want to speak to me, my man?”

“Seems very like it, sir,” replied Sandie.

“Well, come into the library.”

The Laird led the way, and Sandie followed.

“I’ve been thinkin’ all night, Laird, about the threat I heard ye make use of—to kill the farmer of Birnie-Boozle.”

Gentlemen of fifty who patronise the wine of Scotland are apt to be quick-tempered.

Fletcher started to his feet, purple-faced and shaking with rage.

“If you dare utter such an expression to me again,” he cried, banging his fist on the table, “I won’t miss you a kick till you’re on the Deeside road.”

“Well, well, Laird,” said Sandie, rising to go, “I can take my leave without kicking, and so save your old shanks; but look here. I’m going to ride straight to Aberdeen and see the Fiscal.”

Sandie was at the door, when Laird Fletcher cooled down and called him back.

“Come, come, my good fellow, don’t be silly; sit down again. You must never say a word to anyone about this. You promise?”

“I promise, if ye square me.”

“Well, will a pound do it?”

“Look here, Laird, I’m saving up money to buy a house of my own, and keep dogs; a pound won’t do it, but six might.”

“Six pounds!”

“Deuce a dollar less, Laird.” The Laird sighed, but he counted out the cash. It was like parting with his heart’s blood. But to have such an accusation even pointed at him would have damned his reputation, and spoilt all his chances with Annie o’ the Banks o’ Dee. Shufflin’ Sandie smiled as he stowed the golden bits away in an old sock. He then scratched his head and pointed to the decanter.

The Laird nodded, and Sandie drank his health in one jorum, and his success with Miss Lane in another. Sly Sandie!

But his eyes were sparkling now, and he rode away singing “Auld Lang Syne.”

He was thinking at the same time about the house and kennels he should build when he managed to raise two hundred pounds.

“I’ll save every sixpence,” he said to himself. “When I’ve settled down I’ll marry Fanny.”

That same forenoon Craig called at Bilberry Hall. He was dressed for the hill in a dark tweed kilt, with a piece of leather on his left shoulder.

He had early luncheon with McLeod, Annie presiding. In her pretty white bodice she never looked more lovely. So thought Craig.

“Annie, come to the hill with me. Do.”

“Annie, go,” added her uncle.

“Well, I’ll go, and bring you some birds, uncle dear, and Sandie shall ghillie me.”

“I have a ghillie,” said Craig.

“Never mind. Two are better than one.”

They had really a capital day of it, for the sun shone brightly and the birds laid close.

Gordon setters are somewhat slow, and need a drink rather often, but they are wondrous sure, and Bolt, the retriever, was fleet of foot to run down a wounded bird. So just as the sun was sinking behind the forests of the west, and tingeing the pine trees with crimson, they wended their way homeward, happy—happy with the health that only the Highland hills can give.

Shufflin’ Sandie had had several drops from Craig’s flask, but he had also had good oatcakes and cheese, so he was as steady as a judge of session.

When near to Bilberry Hall, Nicol and Annie emptied their guns in the air, and thus apprised of their approach, white-haired old McLeod came out to bid them welcome.

A good dinner!

A musical evening!

Prayers! The tumblers! Then, bidding Annie a fond adieu, away rode the jolly young farmer.

Shufflin' Sandie's last words to him were these:

"Mind what I told you. There's danger in the sky. Good-night, and God be with you, Farmer Craig."

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Chapter Three.

Sandie Tells the Old, Old Story.

“I wonder,” said Craig Nicol to himself that night, before going to bed, and just as he rose from his knees, “if there can be anything in Shufflin’ Sandie’s warning. I certainly don’t like old Father Fletcher, close-fisted as he is, and stingy as any miser ever I met. I don’t like him prowling round my darling Annie either. And he hates me, though he lifts his hat and grimaces like a tom-cat watching a bird whenever we meet. I’ll land him one, one of these days, if he can’t behave himself.”

But for quite a long time there was no chance of “landing the Laird one,” for Fletcher called on Annie at times when he knew Craig was engaged.

And so the days and weeks went by. Laird Fletcher’s wooing was carried on now on perfectly different lines. He brought Annie many a little knick-knack from Aberdeen. It might be a bracelet, a necklet of gold, or the last new novel; but never a ring. No; that would have been too suggestive.

Annie accepted these presents with some reluctance, but Fletcher looked at her so sadly, so wistfully, that rather than hurt his feelings she did receive them.

One day Annie, the old Laird and the younger started for Aberdeen, all on good horses—they despised the train—and when coming round the corner on his mare, whom should they meet face to face but Craig Nicol? And this is what happened.

The old man raised his hat.

The younger Laird smiled ironically but triumphantly.

Annie nodded, blushed, and smiled.

But the young farmer’s face was blanched with rage. He was no longer handsome. There was blood in his eye. He was a devil for the present. He plunged the spurs into his horse’s sides and went galloping furiously along the road.

“Would to God,” he said, “I did not love her! Shall I resign her? No, no! I cannot. Yet—

“‘Tis woman that seduces all mankind;
By her we first were taught the wheedling arts.’”

Worse was to follow.

Right good fellow though he was, jealousy could make a very devil of Craig.

“For jealousy is the injured woman’s hell.”

And man’s also. One day, close by the Dee, while Craig was putting his rod together previous to making a cast, Laird Fletcher came out from a thicket, also rod in hand.

“Ah, we cannot fish together, Nicol,” said the Laird haughtily. “We are rivals.”

Then all the jealousy in Nicol’s bosom was turned for a moment into fury.

“You—you! You old stiff-kneed curmudgeon! You a rival of a young fellow like me! Bah! Go home and go to bed!”

Fletcher was bold.

“Here!” he cried, dashing his rod on the grass; “I don’t stand language like that from anyone!”

Off went his coat, and he struck Craig a well-aimed blow under the chin that quite staggered him.

Ah! but even skill at fifty is badly matched by the strength and agility of a man in his twenties. In five minutes’ time Fletcher was on the grass, his face cut and his nose dripping with blood.

Craig stood over him triumphantly, but the devil still lurked in his eyes.

“I’m done with you for the time,” said Fletcher, “but mark me, I’ll do for you yet!”

“Is that threatening my life, you old reprobate? You did so before, too. Come,” he continued fiercely, “I will help you to wash some of that blood off your ugly face.”

He seized him as he spoke, and threw him far into the river.

The stream was not deep, so the Laird got out, and went slowly away to a neighbouring cottage to dry his clothes and send for his carriage.

“Hang it!” said Craig aloud; “I can’t fish to-day.”

He put up his rod, and was just leaving, when Shufflin’ Sandie came upon the scene. He had heard and seen all.

“Didn’t I tell ye, sir? He’ll kill ye yet if ye don’t take care. Be warned!”

“Well,” said Craig, laughing, “he is a scientific boxer, and he hurt me a bit, but I think I’ve given him a drubbing he won’t soon forget.”

“No,” said Sandie significantly; “he—won’t—forget. Take my word for that.”

“Well, Sandie, come up to the old inn, and we’ll have a glass together.”

For a whole fortnight Laird Fletcher was confined to his rooms before he felt fit to be seen.

“A touch of neuralgia,” he made his housekeeper tell all callers.

But he couldn’t and dared not refuse to see Shufflin’ Sandie when he sent up his card—an old envelope that had passed through the post-office.

“Well,” said the Laird, “to what am I indebted for the honour of this visit?”

“Come off that high horse, sir,” said Sandie, “and speak plain English. I’ll tell you,” he added, “I’ll tell you in a dozen words. I’m going to build a small house and kennels, and I’m going to marry Fanny—the bonniest lassie in all the world, sir. Ah! won’t I be happy, just!”

He smiled, and took a pinch, then offered the box to the Laird.

The Laird dashed it aside.

“What in thunder?” he roared, “has your house or marriage to do with me?”

“Ye’ll soon see that, my Laird. I want forty pounds, or by all the hares on Bilberry Hill I’ll go hot-foot to the Fiscal, for I heard your threat to Craig Nicol by the riverside.”

Half-an-hour afterwards Shufflin' Sandie left the Laird to mourn, but Sandie had got forty pounds nearer to the object of his ambition, and was happy accordingly.

As he rode away, the horse's hoofs making music that delighted his ear, Sandie laughed aloud to himself.

"Now," he thought, "if I could only just get about fifty pounds more, I'd begin building. Maybe the old Laird'll help me a wee bit; but I must have it, and I must have Fanny. My goodness! how I do love the lassie! Her every look or glance sends a pang to my heart. I cannot bear it; I shall marry Fanny, or into the deepest, darkest kelpie's pool in the Dee I'll fling myself.

"'O love, love! Love is like a dizziness,
That winna let a poor body go about his bus-i-ness.'"

Shufflin' Sandie was going to prove no laggard in love. But his was a thoroughly Dutch peasant's courtship.

He paid frequent visits by train to the Granite City, to make purchases for the good old Laird McLeod. And he never returned without a little present for Fanny. It might be a bonnie ribbon for her hair, a bottle of perfume, or even a bag of choice sweets. But he watched the chance when Fanny was alone in the kitchen to slip them into her hand half-shyly.

Once he said after giving her a pretty bangle:

"I'm not so very, very ugly, am I, Fanny?"

"'Deed no, Sandie!"

"And I'm not so crooked and small as they would try to make me believe. Eh, dear?"

"'Deed no, Sandie, and I ay take your part against them all. And that you know, Sandie."

How sweet were those words to Sandie's soul only those who love, but are in doubt, may tell.

"Tis sweet to love, but sweeter far

To be beloved again;
But, ah! how bitter is the pain
To love, yet love in vain!”

“Ye haven’t a terrible lot of sweethearts, have you, Fanny?”

“Well, Sandie, I always like to tell the truth; there’s plenty would make love to me, but I can’t bear them. There’s ploughman Sock, and Geordie McKay. Ach! and plenty more.”

She rubbed away viciously at the plate she was cleaning.

“And I suppose,” said Sandie, “the devil a one of them has one sixpence to rub against another?”

“Mebbe not,” said Fanny. “But, Fanny—”

“Well, Sandie?”

“I—I really don’t know what I was going to say, but I’ll sing it.”

Sandie had a splendid voice and a well-modulated one.

“My love is like a red, red rose,
That’s newly sprung in June;
My love is like a melody,
That’s sweetly played in tune.

“As fair art thou, my bonnie lass,
So deep in love am I;
And I will love you still, my dear,
Till a’ the seas go dry.

“Till a’ the seas go dry, my lass,
And the rocks melt with the sun;
Yes, I will love you still, my dear,
Till sands of life are run.”

The tears were coursing down the bonnie lassie’s cheeks, so plaintive and sweet was the melody.

“What! ye’re surely not crying, are ye?” said Sandie, approaching and stretching one arm gently round her waist.

“Oh, no, Sandie; not me!”

But Sandie took the advantage, and kissed her on the tear-bedewed cheeks.

She didn’t resist.

“I say, Fanny—”

“Yes, Sandie.”

“It’ll be a bonnie night to-night, the moon as bright as day. Will you steal out at eight o’clock and take a wee bit walk with me? Just meet me on the hill near Tammie Gibb’s ruined cottage. I’ve something to tell you.”

“I’ll—I’ll try,” said Fanny, blushing a little, as all innocent Scotch girls do.

Sandie went off now to his work as happy as the angels.

And Fanny did steal out that night. Only for one short hour and a half. Oh, how short the time did seem to Sandie!

It is not difficult to guess what Sandie had to tell her.

The old, old story, which, told in a thousand different ways, is ever the same, ever, ever new.

And he told her of his prospects, of the house—a but and a ben, or two rooms—he was soon to build, and his intended kennels, though he would still work for the Laird.

“Will ye be my wife? Oh, will you, Fanny?”

“Yes.”

It was but a whispered word, but it thrilled Sandie’s heart with joy.

“My ain dear dove!” he cried, folding her in his arms.

They were sitting on a mossy bank close by the forest’s edge.

Their lips met in one long, sweet kiss.

Yes, peasant love I grant you, but I think it was leal and true.

"They might be poor—Sandie and she;
  Light is the burden love lays on;
Content and love bring peace and joy.
  What more have queens upon a throne?"

Homeward through the moonlight, hand-in-hand, went the rustic lovers, and parted at the gate as lovers do.

Sandie was kind of dazed with happiness. He lay awake nearly all the livelong night, till the cocks began to crow, wondering how on earth he was to raise the other fifty pounds and more that should complete his happiness. Then he dozed off into dreamland.

He was astir, all the same, at six in the morning. And back came the joy to his heart like a great warm sea wave.

He attended to his horses and to the kennel, singing all the time; then went quietly in to make his brose.

Some quiet, sly glances and smiles passed between the betrothed—Scotch fashion again—but that was all. Sandie ate his brose in silence, then took his departure.

One morning a letter arrived from Edinburgh from a friend of Craig Nicol.

Craig was sitting at the table having breakfast when the servant brought it in and laid it before him. His face clouded as he read it.

The friend's name was Reginald Grahame, and he was a medical student in his fourth year. He had been very kind to Craig in Edinburgh, taking him about and showing him all the sights in this, the most romantic city on earth—

"Edina, Scotia's darling seat."

Nevertheless, Craig's appetite failed, and he said "Bother!" only more so, as he pitched the letter down on the table.

Annie o' the Banks o' Dee by William Gordon Stables

Chapter Four.

“This Quarrel, I Fear, must end in Blood.”

Reginald Grahame was just as handsome a young fellow as ever entered the quad of Edinburgh University. Not the same stamp or style as Craig; equally as good-looking, but far more refined.

“My dear boy,” ran the letter,—“next week look out for me at Birnie-Boozle. I’m dead tired of study. I’m run down somewhat, and will be precious glad to get a breath of your Highland air and a bit of fishing. I’m only twenty-one yet, you know, and too young for my M.D. So I’m going soon to try to make a bit of money by taking out a patient and her daughter to San Francisco, then overland to New York, and back home. Why, you won’t know your old friend when he comes back,” etc, etc.

“Hang my luck!” said Craig, half-aloud. “This is worse than a dozen Laird Fletchers. Annie has never said yet that she loved me, and I feel a presentiment that I shall be cut out now in earnest. Och hey! But I’ll do my best to prevent their meeting. It may be mean, but I can’t help it. Indeed, I’ve half a mind to pick a quarrel with him and let him go home.”

Next week Reginald did arrive, looking somewhat pale, for his face was “Sicklied o’er with the pale cast of thought,” but very good-looking for all that. Probably his paleness added to the charm of his looks and manner, and there was the gentleman in every movement, grace in every turn.

They shook hands fervently at the station, and soon in Craig’s dogcart were rattling along towards Birnie-Boozle.

Reginald’s reception was everything that could be desired, and the hospitality truly Highland. Says Burns the immortal:

“In Heaven itself I’ll seek nae mair
Than just a Highland welcome!”

For over a week—for well-nigh a fortnight, indeed—they fished by the river, and caught many a trout, as well as lordly salmon, without seeing anyone belonging to Bilberry Hall, except Shufflin' Sandie, for whom the grand old river had irresistible attractions.

Sandie smelt a rat, though, and imagined he knew well enough why Craig Nicol did not bring his friend to the Hall. Before falling asleep one night, Craig had an inspiration, and he slept more soundly after it.

He would take his friend on a grand Highland tour, which should occupy all his vacation.

Yes. But man can only propose. God has the disposal of our actions. And something happened next that Craig could not have calculated on.

They had been to the hill, which was still red and crimson with the bonnie blooming heather, and were coming down through the forest, not far from Bilberry Hall, when suddenly they heard a shot fired, then the sounds of a fearful struggle.

Both young men grasped their sturdy cudgels and rushed on. They found two of McLeod's gamekeepers engaged in a terrible encounter with four sturdy poachers. But when Craig and his friend came down they were man to man, and the poachers fled.

Not, however, before poor Reginald was stabbed in the right chest with a skean dhu, the little dagger that kilted Highlanders wear in their right stocking.

The young doctor had fallen. The keepers thought he was dead, the blood was so abundant.

But he had merely fainted. They bound his wound with scarves, made a litter of spruce branches, and bore him away to the nearest house, and that was the Hall. Craig entered first, lest Annie should be frightened, and while Shufflin' Sandie rode post-haste for the doctor poor Reginald was put to bed downstairs in a beautiful room that overlooked both forest and river.

So serious did the doctor consider the case that he stayed with him all night.

A rough-looking stick was this country surgeon, in rough tweed jacket and knickerbockers, but tender-hearted to a degree.

Craig had gone home about ten, somewhat sad-hearted and hopeless. Not, it must be confessed, for his friend's accident, but Reginald would now be always with Annie, for she had volunteered to nurse him.

But Craig rode over every day to see the wounded man for all that.

"He has a tough and wondrous constitution," said Dr McRae. "He'll pull through under my care and Annie's gentle nursing."

Craig Nicol winced, but said nothing. Reginald had brought a dog with him, a splendid black Newfoundland, and that dog was near him almost constantly.

Sometimes he would put his paws on the coverlet, and lean his cheek against his master in a most affectionate way. Indeed, this action sometimes brought the tears to Annie's eyes.

No more gentle or kind nurse could Reginald have had than Annie.

To the guileless simplicity of a child was added all the wisdom of a woman. And she obeyed to the very letter all the instructions the doctor gave her. She was indefatigable. Though Fanny relieved her for hours during the day, Annie did most of the night work.

At first the poor fellow was delirious, raving much about his mother and sisters. With cooling lotions she allayed the fever in his head. Ay, she did more: she prayed for him. Ah! Scots folk are strange in English eyes, but perhaps some of them are saints in God's.

Reginald, however, seemed to recover semiconsciousness all at once. The room in which he lay was most artistically adorned, the pictures beautifully draped, coloured candles, mirrors, and brackets everywhere. He looked around him half-dazed; then his eyes were fixed on Annie.

"Where am I?" he asked. "Is this Heaven? Are you an—an—angel?"

He half-lifted himself in the bed, but she gently laid him back on the snow-white pillows again.

"You must be good, dear," she said, as if he had been a baby. "Be good and try to sleep."

And the eyes were closed once more, and the slumber now was sweet and refreshing. When he awoke again, after some hours, his memory had returned, and he knew all. His

voice was very feeble, but he asked for his friend, Craig Nicol. But business had taken Craig away south to London, and it would be a fortnight before he could return.

Ah! what a happy time convalescence is, and happier still was it for Reginald with a beautiful nurse like Annie—Annie o' the Banks o' Dee.

In a week's time he was able to sit in an easy-chair in the drawing-room. Annie sang soft, low songs to him, and played just as softly. She read to him, too, both verse and prose. Soon he was able to go for little drives, and now got rapidly well.

Is it any wonder that, thrown together in so romantic a way, these two young people fell in love, or that when he plighted his troth Annie shyly breathed the wee word Yes?

Craig Nicol came back at last, and he saw Reginald alone.

Reginald—impulsive he ever was—held out his hand and asked for congratulations on his engagement to Annie.

Craig almost struck that hand away. His face grew dark and lowering.

"Curse you!" he cried. "You were my friend once, or pretended to be. Now I hate you; you have robbed me of my own wee lamb, my sweetheart, and now have the impudence—the confounded impertinence—to ask me to congratulate you! You are as false as the devil in hell!"

"Craig Nicol," said Reginald, and his cheeks flushed red, "I am too weak to fight you now, but when I am well you shall rue these words! Au revoir. We meet again."

This stormy encounter took place while the young doctor sat on a rocking-chair on the gravelled terrace. Shufflin Sandie was close at hand.

"Gentlemen," said Sandie, "for the Lord's sake, don't quarrel!"

But Craig said haughtily, "Go and mind your own business, you blessed Paul Pry."

Then he turned on his heel and walked briskly away, and soon after his horse's hoofs might have been heard clattering on the road as he dashed briskly on towards his farm of Birnie-Boozle.

Annie Lane came round from the flower-garden at the west wing of Bilberry Hall. She carried in her hand a bouquet of autumnal roses and choice dahlias—yellow, crimson,

and white; piped or quilled cactus and single. She was singing low to herself the refrain of that bonnie old song:

"When Jackie's far awa' at sea,
When Jackie's far awa' at sea,
What's a' the pleasure life can gie,
When Jackie's far awa'?"

Perhaps she never looked more innocently happy or more beautiful than she did at that moment.

"Like dew on the gowans lying
Was the fa' o' her fairy feet;
And like winds in summer sighing,
Her voice was low and sweet."

But when she noticed the pallor on her lovers cheek she ceased singing, and advanced more quickly towards him.

"Oh, my darling," she cried, "how pale you are! You are ill! You must come in. Mind, I am still your nursie."

"No, no; I am better here. I have the fresh air. But I am only a little upset, you know."

"And what upset you, dear Reginald?"

She had seated herself by his side. She had taken his hand, and had placed two white wee fingers on his pulse.

"I'll tell you, Annie mine—"

"Yes, I'm yours, and yours only, and ever shall be."

"Craig Nicol has been here, and we have quarrelled. He has cursed and abused me. He says I have stolen your heart from him, and now he must for ever hate me."

"But, oh, Reginald, he never had my heart!"

"I never knew he had sought it, dearest."

“Yet he did. I should have told you before, but he persecuted me with his protestations of love. Often and often have I remained in my room all the evening long when I knew he was below.”

“Well, he cursed me from the bottom of his heart and departed. Not before I told him that our quarrel could not end thus, that I was too proud to stand abuse, that when well I should fight him.”

“Oh, no—no—no! For my sake you must not fight.”

“Annie, my ain little dove, do you remember these two wee lines:

“‘I could not love thee half so much,
Loved I not honour more.’

“There is no hatred so deep and bitter as that between two men who have once been friends. No; both Craig and I will be better pleased after we fight; but this quarrel I fear must end in blood.”

Poor Annie shuddered. Just at that moment Shufflin’ Sandie appeared on the scene. He was never far away.

“Can I get ye a plaid, Mr Grahame, to throw o’er your legs? It’s gettin’ cold now, I fear.”

“No, no, my good fellow; we don’t want attendance at present. Thank you all the same, however.”

Oscar, Reginald’s great Newfoundland, came bounding round now to his master’s side. He had been hunting rats and rabbits. The embrace he gave his master was rough, but none the less sincere. Then he lay down by his feet, on guard, as it were; for a dog is ever suspicious.

Annie was very silent and very sad. Reginald drew her towards him, and she rested her head on his shoulder. But tears bedimmed her blue eyes, and a word of sympathy would have caused her to burst into a fit of weeping that would probably have been hysterical in its nature. So Reginald tried to appear unconcerned.

They sat in silence thus for some time. The silence of lovers is certainly golden.

Presently, bright, neatly-dressed Fanny came tripping round, holding in advance of her a silver salver.

“A letter, sir,” she said, smiling.

Reginald took it slowly from the salver, and his hand shook visibly.

“Annie,” he said, somewhat sadly, “I believe this contains my sailing orders.”

Annie o' the Banks o' Dee by William Gordon Stables

Chapter Five.

A Discovery That Appalled and Shocked Everyone.

Reginald had guessed aright. The good barque Wolverine would sail from Glasgow that day month, wind and weather permitting, for the South Atlantic, and round the Horn to the South Pacific Islands and San Francisco.

This was from the captain; but a note was enclosed from Mrs Hall, Reginald's pet aunt, hoping he was quite restored to health and strength, and would join them some hours before sailing. She felt certain, she said, that the long voyage would quite restore her, and her daughter Ilda and wee niece Matty were wild with delight at the prospect of being—

"All alone on the wide, wide sea."

"Oh, my darling!" cried Annie, "I believe my heart will break to lose you."

"But it will not be for long, my love—a year at most; and, oh, our reunion will be sweet! You know, Annie, I am very poor, with scarce money enough to procure me an outfit. It is better our engagement should not be known just yet to the old Laird, your uncle. He would think it most presumptuous in me to aspire to the hand of his heiress. But I shall be well and strong long before a month; and think, dearest, I am to have five hundred pounds for acting as private doctor and nurse to Mrs Hall! When I return I shall complete my studies, set up in practice, and then, oh, then, Annie, you and I shall be married!

"'Two souls with but a single thought,
Two hearts that beat as one.'"

But the tears were now silently chasing each other down her cheeks.

"Cheer up, my own," said Reginald, drawing her closer to him.

Presently she did, and then the woman, not the child, came uppermost.

“Reginald,” she said, “tell me, is Miss Hall very beautiful?”

“I hardly know how to answer you, Annie. I sometimes think she is. Fragile, rather, with masses of glittering brown hair, and hazel eyes that are sometimes very large, as she looks at you while you talk. But,” he added, “there can be no true love unless there is a little jealousy. Ah, Annie,” he continued, smiling, “I see it in your eye, just a tiny wee bit of it. But it mustn’t increase. I have plighted my troth to you, and will ever love you as I do now, as long as the sun rises over yonder woods and forests.”

“I know, I know you will,” said Annie, and once more the head was laid softly on his shoulder.

“There is one young lady, however, of whom you have some cause to be jealous.”

“And she?”

“I confess, Annie, that I loved her a good deal. Ah, don’t look sad; it is only Matty, and she is just come five.”

Poor Annie laughed in a relieved sort of way. The lovers said little more for a time, but presently went for a walk in the flower-gardens, and among the black and crimson buds of autumn. Reginald could walk but slowly yet, and was glad enough of the slight support of Annie’s arm.

“Ah, Annie,” he said, “it won’t be long before you shall be leaning on my arm instead of me on yours.”

“I pray for that,” said the child-woman.

The gardens were still gay with autumnal flowers, and I always think that lovers are a happy adjunct to a flower-garden. But it seemed to be the autumn buds that were the chief attraction for Reginald at present. They were everywhere trailing in vines over the hedgerows, supported on their own sturdy stems or climbing high over the gables and wings of the grand old hall.

The deadly nightshade, that in summer was covered with bunches of sweetest blue, now grew high over the many hedges, hung with fruitlike scarlet bunches of the tiniest grapes. The Bryonia Alba, sometimes called the devil’s parsnip, that in June snows the country hedges over with its wealth of white wee flowers, was now splashed over with crimson budlets. The holly berries were already turning. The black-berried ivy crept high up the shafts of the lordly Lombardy poplars. Another tiny berry, though still

green, grew in great profusion—it would soon be black—the fruit of the privet. The pyrocanthus that climbs yonder wall is one lovely mass of vermilion berries in clusters. These rival in colour and appearance the wealth of red fruit on the rowan trees or mountain ashes.

"How beautiful, Annie," said Reginald, gazing up at the nodding berries. "Do you mind the old song, dear?—

"'Oh, rowan tree, oh, rowan tree,
Thou'lt ay be dear to me;
Begirt thou art with many thoughts
Of home and infancy.

"'Thy leaves were ay the first in spring
Thy flowers the summer's pride;
There wasn't such a bonnie tree
In a' the countryside,
Oh, rowan tree!'"

"It is very beautiful," said Annie, "and the music is just as beautiful, though plaintive, and even sad. I shall play it to you to-night."

But here is an arbour composed entirely of a gigantic briar, laden with rosy fruit. Yet the king-tree of the garden is the barberry, and I never yet knew a botanist who could describe the lavish loveliness of those garlands of rosy coral. With buds of a somewhat deeper shade the dark yews were sprinkled, and in this fairy-like garden or arboretum grew trees and shrubs of every kind.

Over all the sun shone with a brilliancy of a delightful September day. The robins followed the couple everywhere, sometimes even hopping on to Reginald's shoulder or Annie's hat, for these birds seem to know by instinct where kindness of heart doth dwell.

"Annie," said Reginald, after a pause, "I am very, very happy."

"And I, dear," was the reply, "am very hopeful."

How quickly that month sped away. Reginald was as strong as ever again, and able to play cards of an evening with Laird McLeod or Laird Fletcher, for the latter, knowing that the farmer of Birnie-Boozle came here no longer, renewed his visits.

I shall not say much about the parting. They parted in tears and in sorrow, that is all; with many a fond vow, with many a fond embrace.

It has often grieved me to think how very little Englishmen know about our most beautiful Scottish songs. Though but a little simple thing, “The Pairtin’” (parting) is assuredly one of the most plaintively melodious I know of in any language. It is very àpropos to the parting of Reginald and Annie o’ the Banks o’ Dee.

“Mary, dearest maid, I leave thee,
Home and friends, and country dear,
Oh, ne’er let our pairtin’ grieve thee,
Happier days may soon be here.

“See, yon bark so proudly bounding,
Soon shall bear me o’er the sea;
Hark! the trumpet loudly sounding,
Calls me far from love and thee.

“Summer flowers shall cease to blossom,
Streams run backward from the sea;
Cold in death must be this bosom
Ere it cease to throb for thee.

“Fare thee well—may every blessing
Shed by Heaven around thee fa’;
One last time thy lov’d form pressing—
Think on me when far awa’.”

“If you would keep song in your hearts,” says a writer of genius, “learn to sing. There is more merit in melody than most people are aware of. Even the cobbler who smoothes his wax-ends with a song will do as much work in a day as one given to ill-nature would do in a week. Songs are like sunshine, they run to cheerfulness, and fill the bosom with such buoyancy, that for the time being you feel filled with June air or like a meadow of clover in blossom.”

How lonely the gardens and the Hall itself seemed to Annie now that her lover had gone, and how sad at heart was she!

Well, and how reluctant am I myself to leave all these pleasant scenes, and bring before the mind's eye an event so terrible and a deed so dark that I almost shudder as I describe it; but as the evolution of this ower-true tale depends upon it, I am obliged to.

First, I must tell you that just two days before joining his ship, Reginald had to go to Aberdeen to see friends and bid them adieu.

But it happened that Craig Nicol had made a visit on foot to Aberdeen about the same time. Thirty, or even forty, miles was not too much for a sturdy young fellow like him. He had told his housekeeper a week before that he was to draw money from the bank—a considerable sum, too.

This was foolish of him, for the garrulous old woman not only boasted to the neighbouring servants of the wealth of her master, but even told them the day he would leave for the town.

Poor Craig set off as merrily as any half-broken hearted lover could be expected to do. But, alas! after leaving Aberdeen on his homeward journey, he had never been seen alive again by anyone who knew him.

As he often, however, made a longer stay in town than he had first intended, the housekeeper and servants of Birnie-Boozle were not for a time alarmed; but soon the assistance of the police was called in, with the hopes of solving the mystery. All they did find out, however, was that he had left the Granite City well and whole, and that he had called at an inn called the Five Mile House on the afternoon to partake of some refreshment. After that all was a dread and awful blank. There was not a pond, however, or copse along from this inn that was not searched. Then the river was dragged by men used to work of this sort.

But all in vain. The mystery remained still unrevealed. Only the police, as usual, vaunted about having a clue, and being pressed to explain, a sergeant said:

"Why, only this: you see he drew a lot of cash from the bank in notes and gold, and as we hear that he is in grief, there is little doubt in our minds that he has gone, for a quiet holiday to the Continent, or even to the States."

Certain in their own minds that this was the case, the worthy police force troubled themselves but little more about the matter. They thought they had searched everywhere; but one place they had forgotten and missed. From the high road, not many miles from Birnie-Boozle, a road led. It was really little more than a bridle-path, but it

shortened the journey by at least a mile, and when returning from town Craig Nicol always took advantage of this.

Strange, indeed, it was, that no one, not even the housekeeper, had thought of giving information about this to the police. But the housekeeper was to be excused. She was plunged deeply in grief. She and she only would take no heed of the supposed clue to the mystery that the sergeant made sure he had found.

“Oh, oh,” she would cry, “my master is dead! I know, I know he is. In a dream he appeared to me. How wan and weird he looked, and his garments were drenched in blood and gore. Oh, master, dear, kind, good master, I shall never, never see you more!” And the old lady wrung her hands and wept and sobbed as if her very heart would break.

Reginald’s ship had been about two days at sea. The wind was fair and strong, so that she had made a good offing, and was now steering south by west, bearing up for the distant shores of South America.

And it was now that a discovery was made that appalled and shocked everyone in all the countryside.

Annie o' the Banks o' Dee by William Gordon Stables

Chapter Six.

A Verdict of Murder.

About half-way up the short cut, or bridle-path, was a dark, dingy spruce-fir copse. It was separated from the roads by a high whitethorn hedge, trailed over with brambles, the black, shining, rasp-like fruit of which were now ripe and juicy. They were a great attraction to the wandering schoolboy. Two lads, aged about eight or ten—great favourites with Craig's housekeeper—were given a basket each in the forenoon and sent off to pick the berries and to return to tea about four o'clock.

There was a gate that entered from the path, but it was seldom, if ever, opened, save probably by the wood-cutters.

Well, those two poor little fellows returned hours and hours before tea-time. They were pale and scared-looking. In their terror they had even dropped their baskets.

"Oh, the man! the man!" they cried, as soon as they entered. "The poor, dead man!"

Although some presentiment told the aged housekeeper that this must indeed be the dead body of her unhappy master, she summoned courage to run herself to the police-station. An officer was soon on the fatal spot, guided by the braver of the two little lads. With his big knife the policeman hacked away some of the lower branches of the spruce-fir, and thus let in the light.

It was indeed Craig, and there was little doubt that he had been foully murdered. But while one officer took charge of the corpse, he did not touch it, but dispatched another to telegraph to Aberdeen at once for a detective. He arrived by the very next train, accompanied by men with a letter. The news had spread like wildfire, and quite a crowd had by this time gathered in the lane, but they were kept far back from the gate lest their footsteps should deface any traces of the murder. Even the imprint of a shoe might be invaluable in clearing up an awful mystery like this. Mr C., the detective, and the surgeon immediately started their investigations.

It was only too evident that Craig Nicol had been stabbed to the heart. His clothes were one mass of gore, and hard with blood. On turning the body over, a discovery was made that caused the detective's heart to palpitate with joy. Here, underneath it, was found a Highlander's skean dhu (stocking dirk). The little sheath itself was found at a distance of

a few yards, and it must evidently have been dropped by the murderer, in his haste to conceal the body.

“Ha! this is indeed a clue,” said the detective. “This knife did the deed, George. See, it is encrusted with blood.”

“I think so, sir.”

“And look, on the silver back of the little sheath are the letters R.G.”

He took the dagger in his hand, and went back to the little crowd.

“Can anyone identify this knife?” he asked, showing it to them.

No one could.

“Can you?” said the detective, going to the rear and addressing Shufflin’ Sandie. Sandie appeared to be in deep grief.

“Must I tell?”

“You needn’t now, unless you like, but you must at the inquest.”

“Then, sir, I may as well say it now. The knife belongs to Mr Grahame.”

A thrill of horror went through the little crowd, and Sandy burst into tears.

“Where does he live, this Mr Grahame?”

“He did live at Bilberry Hall, sir,” blubbered Sandie; “but a few days ago he sailed away for the Southern Seas.”

“Was he poor or rich, Sandie?”

“As poor as a church mouse, sir. I’ve heard him tell Miss Annie Lane so. For I was always dandlin’ after them.”

“Thank you; that will do in the meantime.”

Craig had evidently been robbed, for the pockets were turned inside out, and another discovery made was this: the back of the coat was covered with dust or dried mud, so

that, in all human probability, he must have been murdered on the road, then dragged and hidden here. There was a terrible bruise on one side of the head, so it was evident enough to the surgeon, as well as to the detective, that the unfortunate man must first have been stunned and afterwards stabbed. There was evidence, too, that the killing had been done on the road; there were marks of the gravel having been scraped away, and this same gravel, blackened with blood, was found in the ditch.

The detective took his notes of the case, then calling his man, proceeded to have the man laid on the litter. The body was not taken home, but to the barn of an adjoining cottage.

Here when the coroner was summoned and arrived from Aberdeen, part of the inquest was held. After viewing the body, the coroner and jury went to Birnie-Boozle, and here more business was gone through.

The housekeeper was the first to be examined. She was convulsed with grief, and could only testify as to the departure and date of departure of her master for the distant city, with the avowed intention of drawing money.

“That will do, my good woman; you can retire.”

The next witness to be examined was Shufflin’ Sandie. He was exceedingly cool, and took a large pinch of snuff before answering a question.

“Were not Craig Nicol and Reginald Grahame particular friends?”

“Once upon a time, sir; but he was awfully jealous was Craig, and never brought Grahame to the Hall; but after the fight with thae devils of poachers, Grahame was carried, wounded, to Bilberry Hall, and nursed by Miss Annie. Not much wonder, sir, that they fell in love. I would have done the same myself. I—”

“Now, don’t be garrulous.”

“Oh, devil a garrylus; I’ll not say another word if ye like.”

“Well, go on.”

“Well, sir, they were engaged. Then one day Craig comes to the Hall, and there was terrible angry words. Craig cursed Grahame and called him all the ill names he could lay his tongue to.”

“And did Grahame retaliate?”

“Indeed did he, sir; he didn’t swear, but he said that as soon as he was well, the quarrel should end in blood.” (Sensation in court.) “Had Craig any other enemy?”

“That he had—old Laird Fletcher. They met at the riverside one day, and had a row, and fought. I saw and heard everything. Craig Nicol told the old Laird that he would have nobody snuffling round his lady love. Then they off-coat and fought. Man! it was fine! The Laird put in some good ones, but the young ’un had it at last. Then he flung the Laird into the river, and when he got out he threatened to do for poor Craig Nicol.” (Sensation.)

Sandie paused to wipe his eyes with his sleeve, and took snuff before he could proceed.

“You think,” said the coroner, “that Laird Fletcher meant to carry out his threat?”

“I don’t know. I only know this—he was in doonright devilish earnest when he made it.”

“I am here,” said Laird Fletcher, “and here, too, are five witnesses to prove that I have not been twice outside my own gate since Craig Nicol started for Aberdeen. Once I was at the Hall, and my groom here drove me there and back; I was too ill to walk.”

The witnesses were examined on oath, and no alibi was ever more clearly proven. Laird Fletcher was allowed to leave the court without a stain on his character.

“I am sorry to say, gentlemen,” addressing the jury, “that there appears no way out of the difficulty, and that his poverty would alone have led Grahame to commit the terrible deed, to say nothing of his threat that the quarrel would end in blood. Poor Craig Nicol has been robbed, and foully, brutally murdered, and Reginald Grahame sails almost immediately after for the South Seas. I leave the verdict with you.”

Without leaving the box, and after a few minutes of muttered conversation, the foreman stood up.

“Have you agreed as to your verdict?”

“Unanimously, sir.”

“And it is?”

“Wilful murder, sir, committed by the hands of Reginald Grahame.”

“Thank you. And now you may retire.”

Ill news travels apace, and despite all that Fanny and Annie’s maid could do, the terrible accusation against her lover soon reached our poor heroine’s ears.

At first she wept most bitterly, but it was not because she believed in Reginald’s guilt. No, by no means. It was because she felt sorrow for him. He was not here to defend himself, as she was sure he could. Perhaps love is blind, and lovers cannot see.

But true love is trusting. Annie had the utmost faith in Reginald Grahame—a faith that all the accusations the world could make against him could not shake, nor coroners’ verdicts either.

“No, no, no,” she exclaimed to her maid passionately, through her tears, “my darling is innocent, though things look black against him. Ah! how unfortunate that he should have gone to the city during those three terrible days!” She was silent for a couple of minutes. “Depend upon it, Jeannie,” she added, “someone else was the murderer. And for all his alibi, which I believe to be got up, I blame that Laird Fletcher.”

“Oh, don’t, dearest Annie,” cried the maid, “believe me when I say I could swear before my Maker that he is not guilty.”

“I am hasty, because in sorrow,” said Annie. “I may alter my mind soon. Anyhow, he does not look the man to be guilty of so terrible a crime, and he has been always kind and fatherly to me, since the day I ran away from the arbour. Knowing that I am engaged, he will not be less so now. But, oh, my love, my love! Reginald, when shall I ever see thee again? I would die for thee, with thee; as innocent thou as the babe unborn. Oh Reginald my love, my love!”

Her perfect confidence in her lover soon banished Annie’s grief. He would return. He might be tried, she told herself, but he would leave the court in robes of white, so to speak, able to look any man in the face, without spot or stain on his character. Then they would be wedded.

A whole month flew by, during which—so terrible is justice—an expedition was sent to San Francisco overland, with policemen, to meet the Wolverine there, and at once to capture their man.

They waited and waited a weary time. Six months flew by, nine months, a year; still she came not, and at last she was classed among the ships that ne’er return.

Reginald Grahame will never be seen again—so thought the 'tecs—"Till the sea gives up the dead."

Annie o' the Banks o' Dee by William Gordon Stables

Chapter Seven.

Buying the Bonnie Things.

To say that Annie was not now in grief would be wrong. Still hope told a flattering tale. And that tale sufficed to keep her heart up.

He must have been wrecked somewhere, but had she not prayed night and day for him? Yes, he was safe—must be. Heaven would protect him. Prayers are heard, and he would return safe and sound, to defy his enemies and his slanderers as well.

Fletcher had been received back into favour. Somewhat penurious he was known to be, but so kind and gentle a man as he could never kill. Had she not seen him remove a worm from the garden path lest it might be trodden upon by some incautious foot?

He kept her hopes up, too, and assured her that he believed as she did, that all would come right in the end. If everybody else believed that the Wolverine was a doomed ship, poor Annie didn't.

There came many visitors to the Hall, young and middle-aged, and more than one made love to Annie. She turned a deaf ear to all. But now an event occurred that for a time banished some of the gloom that hung around Bilberry Hall.

About two months before this, one morning, after old Laird McLeod had had breakfast, Shufflin' Sandie begged for an audience.

"Most certainly," said McLeod. "Show the honest fellow in."

So in marched Sandie, bonnet in hand, and determined on this occasion to speak the very best English he could muster.

"Well, Sandie?"

"Well, Laird. I think if a man has to break the ice, he'd better do it at once and have done with it. Eh? What think you?"

"That's right, Sandie."

“Well, would you believe that a creature like me could possibly fall in love over the ears, and have a longing to get married?”

“Why not, Sandie? I don’t think you so bad-looking as some other folks call you.”

Sandie smiled and took a pinch.

“Not to beat about the bush, then, Laird, I’m just awfully gone on Fanny.”

“And does she return your affection?”

“That she does, sir; and sitting on a green bank near the forest one bonnie moonlit night, she promised to be my wife. You wouldn’t turn me away, would you, sir, if I got married?”

“No, no; you have been a faithful servant for many a day.”

“Well, now, Laird, here comes the bit. I want to build a bit housie on the knoll, close by the forest, just a but and a ben and a kennel. Then I would breed terriers, and make a bit out of that. Fanny would see to them while I did your work. But man, Laird, I’ve scraped and scraped, and saved and saved, and I’ve hardly got enough yet to begin life with.”

“How much do you need?”

“Oh, Laird, thirty pounds would make Fanny and me as happy as a duke and duchess.”

“Sandie, I’ll lend it to you. I’ll take no interest. And if you’re able some time to pay it back, just do it. That will show you are as honest as I believe you are.”

The tears sprang, or seemed to spring, to Sandie’s eyes, and he had to take another big noseful of snuff to hide his emotions.

“May the Lord bless ye, Laird! I’ll just run over now and tell Fanny.”

It does not take so long to build a Highland cot as it would to erect a Crystal Palace, and in three weeks’ time Shufflin’ Sandie’s house was complete and furnished. He had even laid out a garden or kail-yard, and planted a few suitable trees. Then, when another month had passed away, Sandie once more sought audience of the good Laird, and formally begged for Fanny’s hand.

Next the wedding-day was settled, and the minister's services requisitioned. And one day Shufflin' Sandie set off for Aberdeen by train to buy the "bonnie things," as they are termed.

Perhaps there are no more beautiful streets in Great Britain than Union Street and King Street, especially as seen by moonlight. They then look as if built of the whitest and purest of marble. While the beautiful villas of Rubislaw, with their charming flower-gardens, are of all sorts of architecture, and almost rival the snow in their sheen.

Fanny was charmed. Strange to say this simple servant lassie had never been to the city before. It was all a kind of fairyland to her, and, look wherever she might, things of beauty met her eyes. And the windows—ah, the windows! She must pull Sandie by the sleeve every other minute, for she really could not pass a draper's shop nor a jeweller's without stopping to glance in and admire.

"Oh!" she would cry, "look, look, Sandie, dear, at the chains and the watches, and the bracelets and diamonds and pearls. Surely all the gold in Ophir is there!"

One particularly well-dressed window—it was a ladies' drapery shop—almost startled her. She drew back and blushed a little as her eyes fell on a full-length figure of a lady in fashionable array.

"Oh, Sandie, is she living?"

"De'il a living?" said Sandie. "Her body's timber, and her face and hands are made out of cobbler's wax. That's how living she is."

"But what a splendid dress! And yonder is another. Surely Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these!"

"Well, Fanny, lassie, beautiful though this shop be, it is a pretty cheap one, so we'll buy your marriage dress here."

The shop-walker was very obsequious. "Marriage dress, sir. Certainly, sir. Third counter down, my lady."

Fanny had never been so addressed before, and she rose several inches in her own estimation.

"I—that is, she—is needing a marriage dress, missie."

“Ready-made?”

“Ay, that’ll do, if it isn’t over dear. Grand though we may look in our Sunday clothes, we’re not o’er-burdened with cash; but we’re going to be married for all that.”

Sandie chuckled and took snuff, and Fanny blushed, as usual.

“I’m sure I wish you joy,” said the girl in black.

“I’m certain ye do. You’re a bit bonnie lassie yerself, and some day ye’ll get a man. Ye mind what the song says:

“‘Oh, bide ye yet, and bide ye yet,
Ye little know what may betide ye yet;
Some bonnie wee mannie may fa’ to your lot,
So ay be canty and thinkin’ o’t.’”

The girl in black certainly took pleasure in fitting Fanny, and, when dressed, she took a peep in the tall mirror—well, she didn’t know herself! She was as beautiful as one of the wax figures in the window. Sandy was dazed. He took snuff, and, scarce knowing what he was doing, handed the box to the lassie in black who was serving them.

Well, in an hour’s time all the bonnie things that could be purchased in this shop were packed in large pasteboard boxes, and dispatched to the station waiting-room.

But before sallying forth Sandie and Fanny thought it must be the correct thing to shake hands with the girl in black, much to her amusement.

“Good-bye, my lady; good-bye, sir. I hope you were properly served.” This from the shop-walker.

“That we were,” said Sandie. “And, man, we’ll be married—Fanny and me—next week. Well, we’re to be cried three times in one day from the pulpit. To save time, ye see. Well, I’ll shake hands now, and say good-day, sir, and may the Lord be ay around you. Good-bye.”

“The same to you,” said the shop-walker, trying hard to keep from laughing. “The same to you, sir, and many of them.”

There were still a deal of trinkets to be bought, and many gee-gaws, but above all the marriage ring. Sandie did feel very important as he put down that ten shillings and sixpence on the counter, and received the ring in what he called a bonnie wee boxie.

"Me and Fanny here are going to be married," he couldn't help saying.

"I'm sure I wish ye joy, sir, and"—here the shopman glanced at Fanny—"I envy you, indeed I do."

Sandie must now have a drop of Scotch. Then they had dinner. Sandie couldn't help calling the waiter "sir," nor Fanny either.

"Hold down your ear, sir," Sandie said, as the waiter was helping him to Gorgonzola. "We're going to be married, Fanny and I. Cried three times in one Sunday. What think ye of that?"

Of course, the waiter wished him joy, and Sandie gave him a shilling.

"I hope you'll not be offended, sir, but just drink my health, you know."

The joys of the day ended up with a visit to the theatre. Fanny was astonished and delighted.

Oh, what a day that was! Fanny never forgot it. They left by a midnight train for home, and all the way, whenever Fanny shut her eyes, everything rose up before her again as natural as life—the charming streets, the gay windows, and the scenes she had witnessed in the theatre, and the gay crowds in every street. And so it was in her dreams, when at last she fell asleep.

But both Fanny and Sandie went about their work next day in their week-day clothes as quietly as if nothing very extraordinary had happened, or was going to happen in a few days' time.

Of course, after he had eaten his brose, Sandie must "nip up," as he phrased it, to have a look at the cottage.

Old Grannie Stewart—she was only ninety-three—was stopping here for the present, airing it, burning fires in both rooms, for fear the young folks might catch a chill.

“Ah, grannie!” cried Sandie, “I’m right glad to see you. And look, I’ve brought a wee drappie in a flat bottle. Ye must just taste. It’ll warm your dear old heart.”

The old lady’s eyes glittered.

“Well,” she said, “it’s not much of that comes my way, laddie. My blood is not so thick as it used to be. For—would you believe it!—I think I’m beginnin’ to grow auld.”

“Nonsense,” said Sandie.

Old or young the old dame managed to whip off her drop of Scotch, though it brought the water to her eyes.

And now all preparations were being made for the coming marriage.

For several days Sandie had to endure much chaff and wordy persecution from the lads and lasses about his diminutive stature and his uncouth figure.

Sandie didn’t mind. Sandie was happy. Sandie took snuff.

Annie o' the Banks o' Dee by William Gordon Stables

Chapter Eight.

A Scottish Peasant's Wedding and a Ball.

Old Laird McLeod had a right good heart of his own, and willingly permitted the marriage to take place in his drawing-room. There were very few guests, however.

The grey-haired old minister was there in time to taste the wine of Scotland before the ceremony began, which, after all, though short, was very solemn. No reading of prayers. The prayer that was said was from the heart, not from a book; that sort of prayer which opens Heaven.

A long exhortation followed, hands were joined, the minister laid his above, and Sandie and Fanny were man and wife. Then the blessing.

I don't know why it was, but Fanny was in tears most of the time.

The marriage took place in the afternoon; and dinner was to follow.

Annie good-naturedly took Fanny to her own room and washed away her tears.

In due time both sailed down to dinner. And a right jolly dinner it was, too. Fanny had never seen anything like it before. Of course that lovely haunch of tender venison was the pièce de résistance, while an immense plum-pudding brought up the rear. Dessert was spread, with some rare wines—including whisky—but Sandie could scarce be prevailed upon to touch anything. He was almost awed by the presence of the reverend and aged minister, who tried, whenever he could, to slip in a word or two about the brevity of life, the eternity that was before them all, the Judgment Day, and so on, and so forth. But the minister, for all that, patronised the Highland whisky.

"No, no," he said, waving the port wine away. "'Look not thou upon the wine when it is red; when it giveth his colour to the cup... at the last it biteth like a serpent and stingeth like an adder.'"

It was observed, however, that as he spoke he filled his glass with Glenlivet.

Well, I suppose no man need care to look upon the wine when it is red, if his tumbler be flanked by a bottle of Scotch.

The dinner ended, there was the march homeward to Sandie's wee house on the knoll, pipers first, playing right merrily; Sandie and his bride arm-in-arm next; then, four deep, lads and lasses gay, to the number of fifty at least.

And what cheering and laughing as they reached the door. But finally all departed to prepare for the ball that was to take place later on in the great barn of Bilberry Hall.

And it was a barn, too!—or, rather, a loft, for it was built partly on a brae, so that after climbing some steps you found yourself on level ground, and entered a great door.

Early in the evening, long ere lad and lass came linking to the door, the band had taken their places on an elevated platform at one side of, but in the middle of, the hall.

The floor was swept and chalked, the walls all around densely decorated with evergreens, Scotch pine and spruce and heather galore, with here and there hanging lamps.

Boys and girls, however, hovered around the doorway and peeped in now and then, amazed and curious. To them, too, the tuning of the musicians' fiddles sent a thrill of joy expectant to their little souls. How they did long, to be sure, for the opening time.

As the vultures scent a battle from afar, so do the Aberdeen "sweetie" wives scent a peasant's ball. And these had already assembled to the number of ten in all, with baskets filled to overflowing with packets of sweets. These would be all sold before morning. These sweetie wives were not young by any means—save one or two—

"But withered beldames, auld and droll,
Rig-woodie hags would spean a foal."

They really looked like witches in their tall-crowned white cotton caps with flapping borders.

A half-hour goes slowly past. The band is getting impatient. A sweet wee band it is—three small fiddles, a 'cello, a double bass, and clarionet. The master of ceremonies treats them all to a thistle of the wine of the country. Then the leader gives a signal, and they strike into some mournfully plaintive old melodies, such as "Auld Robin Grey," "The Flowers o' the Forest," "Donald," etc, enough to draw tears from anyone's eyes.

But now, hurrah! in sails Fanny with Shufflin' Sandie on her arm, looking as bright as a new brass button. There is a special seat for them, and for the Laird, Annie, and the quality generally, at the far end of the hall—a kind of arbour, sweetly bedecked with heather, and draped with McLeod tartan. Here they take their seats. There is a row of seats all round the hall and close to the walls.

And now crowd in the Highland lads and lasses gay, the latter mostly in white, with ribbons in their hair, and tartan sashes across their breasts and shoulders. Very beautiful many look, with complexions such as duchesses might envy, and their white teeth flashing like pearls as they whisper to each other and smile.

As each couple file in at the door, the gentleman takes his partner to a seat, bows and retires to his own side, for the ladies and gentlemen are seated separately, modestly looking at each other now and then, the lads really infinitely more shy than the lasses.

Now Laird McLeod slowly rises. There is a hush now, and all eyes are turned towards the snowy-haired grand old man.

"Ladies and gentlemen all," he says, "I trust you will enjoy a really happy evening, and I am sure it will be an innocent one. 'Youth's the season made for joy.' I have only to add that the bridegroom himself will open the ball with a hornpipe."

A deafening cheer rang out, the musicians struck up that inimitable College Hornpipe, and next moment, arrayed in his best clothes, Shufflin' Sandie was in the middle of the floor. He waited, bowing to the McLeod and the ballroom generally, till the first measure was played. Then surely never did man-o'-war sailor dance as Sandie danced! His legs seemed in two or three places at one time, and so quickly did he move that scarce could they be seen. He seemed, indeed, to have as many limbs as a daddy-long-legs. He shuffled, he tripled and double-tripled, while the cracking of his thumbs sounded for all the world like a nigger's performance with the bones. Then every wild, merry "Hooch!" brought down the house. Such laughing and clapping of hands few have ever heard before. Sandie's uncouth little figure and droll face added to the merriment, and when he had finished there was a general cry of "Encore!" Sandie danced another step or two, then bowed, took a huge pinch of snuff, and retired.

But the ball was not quite opened yet. A foursome reel was next danced by the bride and Annie herself, with as partners Shufflin' Sandie and McLeod's nephew, a handsome young fellow from Aberdeen. It was the Reel of Tulloch, and, danced in character, there is not much to beat it.

Then came a cry of “Fill the floor!” and every lad rushed across the hall for his partner. The ball was now indeed begun. And so, with dance after dance, it went on for hours:

“Lads and lassies in a dance;
Nae cotillion brent new frae France;
But hornpipes, jigs, strathspeys, and reels
Put life and mettle in their heels.”

Sandie hardly missed a dance. He was indeed the life and soul of the ballroom.

The sweetie wives were almost sold out already, for every Jock must treat his own Jeannie, or the other fellow’s Jeannie, to bags and handfuls of sweets. And the prettier the girl was the more she received, till she was fain to hand them over to her less good-looking sisters.

But at midnight there came a lull—a lull for refreshments. White-aproned servants staggered in with bread, butter, and cheese, and bucketfuls of strong whisky punch.

There was less reserve now. The lads had their lasses at either side of the hall, and for the most part on their knees. Even the girls must taste the punch, and the lads drank heartily—not one mugful each, but three! Nevertheless, they felt like giants refreshed.

“And now the fun grew fast and furious”—and still more so when, arrayed in all the tartan glory of the Highland dress, two stalwart pipers stalked in to relieve the band, grand men and athletes!

“They screwed their pipes and made them skirl,
Till roofs and rafters all did dirl.
The pipers loud and louder blew,
The dancers quick and quicker flew.”

But at two o’clock again came a lull; more biscuits, more bread-and-cheese, and many more buckets of toddy or punch. And during this lull, accompanied by the violins, Sandie sang the grand old love-song called “The Rose of Allandale.” It was duly appreciated, and Sandie was applauded to the “ring of the bonnet,” as he himself phrased it.

Then Annie herself was led to the front by her uncle. Everyone was silent and seemingly dazzled by her rare but childlike beauty.

Her song was “Ever of thee I’m fondly dreaming.” Perhaps few were near enough to see, but the tears were in the girl’s eyes, and almost streaming over more than once before she had finished.

And now McLeod and his party took their leave, Sandie and his bride following close behind.

The ball continued after this, however, till nearly daylight in the morning. Then “Bob at the Booster”—a kind of kiss-in-the-ring dance—brought matters to a close, and, wrapped in plaids and shawls, the couples filed away to their homes, over the fields and through the heather.

Next day Shufflin’ Sandie was working away among his horses as quietly and contentedly as if he had not been married at all yesterday, or spent the evening in a ballroom.

Before, however, leaving his little cottage by the wood, he had dutifully made his wife a cup of tea, and commanded her to rest for hours before turning out to cook their humble dinner. And dutifully she obeyed.

The Laird and Sandie came to an arrangement that same forenoon as to how much work he was to do for him and how much for himself.

“Indeed, sir,” he told McLeod, “I’ll just get on the same as I did before I got the wife. My kail-yard’s but small as yet, and it’ll be little trouble to dig and rake in the evening.”

“Very well, Sandie. Help yourself to a glass there.”

Sandie needed no second bidding. He was somewhat of an enthusiast as far as good whisky was concerned; perfectly national, in fact, as regarded the wine of “poor auld Scotland.”

Nearly three years passed away. The ship had not returned. She never would, nor could.

Annie o' the Banks o' Dee by William Gordon Stables

Chapter Nine.

A Bolt from the Blue.

Nearly three years! What a long, lonesome time it had been for Annie! Yet she still had somewhat of hope—at times, that is.

Her cousin, Mr Beale, from the city, had spent his holiday very delightfully at Bilberry Hall; he had gone shooting, and fishing also, with Annie; yet, much though he admired her, and could have loved her, he treated her with the greatest respect, condoled with her in her sorrow, and behaved just like a brother to her.

Her somewhat elderly lover was different. Lover he was yet, though now fifty and three years of age, but fatherly and kind to a degree.

“We all have griefs to bear in this world, Annie dear,” he said once. “They are burdens God sends us to try our patience. But your sorrow must soon be over. Do you know, dear, that it is almost sinful to grieve so long for the dead?”

“Dead!” cried Annie. “Who knows, or can tell?”

“Oh, darling, I can no longer conceal it from you. Perhaps I should have told you a year ago. Here is the newspaper. Here is the very paragraph. The figurehead of the unfortunate Wolverine and one of her boats have been picked up in the midst of the Pacific Ocean, and there can remain no doubt in the mind of anyone that she foundered with all hands. The insurance has been paid.”

Annie sat dumb for a time—dumb and dry-eyed. She could not weep much, though tears would have relieved her. She found voice at last.

“The Lord’s will be done,” she said, simply but earnestly.

Laird Fletcher said no more then. But he certainly was very far from giving up hope of eventually leading Annie to the altar.

And now the poor sorrowing lassie had given up all hope. She was, like most Scotch girls of her standing in society, pious. She had learnt to pray at her mother’s knee, and, when mother and father were taken away, at her uncle’s. And now she consoled herself thus.

“Dear uncle,” she said, “poor Reginald is dead; but I shall meet him in a better world than this.”

“I trust so, darling.”

“And do you know, uncle, that now, as it is all over, I am almost relieved. A terrible charge hung over him, and oh! although my very soul cries out aloud that he was not guilty, the evidence might have led him to a death of shame. And I too should have died.”

“You must keep up your heart. Come, I am going to Paris for a few weeks with friend Fletcher, and you too must come. Needn’t take more than your travelling and evening dresses,” he added. “We’ll see plenty of pretty things in the gay city.”

So it was arranged. So it was carried out. They went by steamer, this mode of travelling being easier for the old Highlander.

Fletcher and McLeod combined their forces in order to give poor Annie “a real good time,” as brother Jonathan would say. And it must be confessed at the end of the time, when they had seen everything and gone everywhere, Annie was calmer and happier than she ever remembered being for years and years, and on their return from Paris she settled down once more to her old work and her old ways.

But the doctor advised more company, so she either visited some friends, or had friends to visit her, almost every night.

Old Laird McLeod delighted in music, and if he did sit in his easy-chair with eyes shut and hands clasped in front of him, he was not asleep, but listening.

How little do we know when evil is about to befall us!

It was one lovely day in spring. Annie had kissed her uncle on his bald, shining head, and gone off to gather wildflowers, chaperoned by Jeannie, her maid, and accompanied by Laird Fletcher. This man was a naturalist—not a mere classifier. He did not fill cases with beetles or moths, give them Latin names, and imagine that was all. He knew the life story and habits of almost every flower and tree, and every creature that crept, crawled, or flew.

So he made just the kind of companion for Annie that she delighted in. When he found himself thus giving her pleasure he felt hopeful—nay, sure—that in the end his suit would be successful.

It was indeed a beautiful morning. Soft and balmy winds sighing through the dark pine tree tops, a sky of moving clouds, with many a rift of darkest blue between, birds singing on the bonnie silver birches, their wild, glad notes sounding from every copse, the linnet on the yellow patches of whins or gorse that hugged the ground and perfumed the air for many a yard around, and the wild pigeon murmuring his notes of love in every thicket of spruce. Rare and beautiful wildflowers everywhere, such as never grow in England, for every country has its own sweet flora.

The little party returned a few minutes before one o'clock, not only happy, but hungry too. To her great alarm Annie found her uncle still sitting on his chair, but seemingly in a stupor of grief. Near his chair lay a foolscap letter.

"Oh, uncle dear, are you ill?"

"No, no, child. Don't be alarmed; it has pleased God to change our fortunes, that is all, and I have been praying and trying hard to say 'Thy will be done on earth as it is in Heaven,'—I cannot yet. I may ere long."

But Annie was truly alarmed. She picked up the lawyer's letter and read it twice over ere she spoke. And her bonnie face grew ghastly pale now.

"Oh, uncle dear," she said at last, "what does this mean? Tell me, tell me."

"It means, my child, that we are paupers in comparison to the state in which we have lived for many years. That this mansion and grounds are no longer our own, that I must sell horses and hounds and retire to some small cottage on the outskirts of the city—that is all."

"Cheer up, uncle," said Annie, sitting down on his knee with an arm round his neck, as she used to do when a child. "You still have me, and I have you. If we can but keep Jeannie we may be happy yet, despite all that fate can do."

"God bless you, my child! You have indeed been a comfort to me. But for you, I'd care nothing for poverty. I may live for ten years and more yet, to the age of my people and clansmen, but as contentedly in a cottage as in a castle. God has seen fit to afflict us, but in His mercy He will temper the wind to the shorn lamb."

Luncheon was brought in, but neither McLeod nor his niece did much justice to it. The weather, however, remained bright and clear, and as the two went out to the beautiful arbour and seated themselves, they could hear the birds—mavis, chaffinch, and blackie—singing their wild, ringing lilts, as if there was no such thing as sorrow in all this wide and beautiful world.

"Uncle," said Annie at last, "tell me the sad story. I can bear it now."

"Then, dear, I shall, but must be very brief. I love not to linger over sorrow and tribulation. The young fellow Francis Robertson, then, who now lays claim to the estate, is, to tell the honest truth, a roué and a blackguard from the Australian diggings. He is but twenty-two. Even when a boy he was rough and wild, and at fifteen he was sentenced to six years' imprisonment for shooting a man at the gold diggings. He has but recently come out of gaol and found solicitors in Australia and here to take up the cudgels for him. His father disappeared long, long ago, and I, not knowing that, before his death, he had married, and had one son, succeeded to this estate. But, ah me! the crash has come."

"But may this young fellow not be an impostor?"

"Nay, child, nay. You see what the letter says: that if I go to law I can only lose; but that if I trouble and tire Robertson with a lawsuit he will insist upon back rents being paid up. No," he added, after a pause, "he is fair enough. He may be good enough, too, though passionate. Many a wild and bloody scene is enacted at the diggings, but in this case the police seem to have been wonderfully sharp. Ah, well; he will be here to-morrow, and we will see."

That was an anxious and sleepless night for poor Annie. In vain did her maid try to sing her off into dreamland. She tossed and dozed all night long.

Then came the eventful day. And at twelve o'clock came young Francis Robertson, with a party of witnesses from Australia.

McLeod could tell him at once to be the heir. He was the express image of his dead father.

The Laird and his solicitor, hastily summoned from Aberdeen, saw them alone in the drawing-room, only Annie being there. Robertson was tall, handsome, and even gentlemanly. The witnesses were examined. Their testimony under oath was calm, clear, and to the point. Not a question they did not answer correctly. The certificate of birth, too, was clear, and succinct. There were no longer any doubts about anything.

Then Laird McLeod—laird now, alas! only by courtesy—retired with his advocate to another room to consult.

Said the advocate: “My dear Laird, this is a sad affair; but are you convinced that this young fellow is the rightful owner?”

“He is, as sure as yonder sun is shining.”

“And so am I convinced,” said the advocate. “Then there must be no lawsuit?”

“No, none.”

“That is right. At your age a long and troublesome lawsuit would kill you.”

“Then, my dear Duncan,” said Laird McLeod, “look out for a pretty cottage for me at once.”

“I will do everything for you, and I know of the very place you want—a charming small villa on the beautiful Rubislaw Road. Choose the things you want. Have a sale and get rid of the others. Keep up your heart, and all will yet be well. But we must act expeditiously.”

And so they did. And in a fortnight’s time all was settled, and the little villa furnished.

Till the day of the sale Francis Robertson was a guest at the Hall.

Now I must state a somewhat curious, but not altogether rare, occurrence. The young man, who really might be rash, but was not bad-hearted, sought audience of the Laird on the very day before the sale.

“My dear uncle,” he said, “I would rather you did not leave. Be as you were before. I will occupy but a small portion of the house. Stay with me.”

“Francis Robertson,” replied McLeod, “we go. I’ll be no man’s guest in a house that once was mine.”

“Be it so, sir. But I have something further to add.”

“Speak on.”

“From the first moment I saw her I fell in love with Miss Annie Lane. Will you give me her hand?”

“Have you spoken to herself?”

“I have not dared to.” McLeod at once rang the bell and summoned Annie, his niece.

“Annie, dear, this gentleman, your relation, says he loves you, and asks for your hand. Think you that you could love him?”

Annie drew herself haughtily up. She said but one word, a decisive and emphatic one: “No.”

“You have had your answer,” said McLeod. Francis bowed and went somewhat mournfully away.

Annie o' the Banks o' Dee by William Gordon Stables

Chapter Ten.

"What Must be Must—'tis Fate."

The old Laird McLeod possessed that true Christian feeling which we so rarely see displayed in this age, and as he left the door of the old mansion where he had lived so long and so happily he held out his hand to Francis.

"God bless you, lad, anyhow. Be good, and you'll prosper."

"The wicked prosper," said Francis.

"All artificial, lad, and only for a time. Never can they be said to be truly happy."

"Good-bye—or rather, au revoir."

"Au revoir."

Then the old man clambered slowly into the carriage. Poor Annie was already there. She cast just one longing, lingering look behind, then burst into an uncontrollable fit of weeping. But the day was beautiful, the trees arrayed in the tender tints of spring, while high above, against a fleecy cloud, she could see a laverock (lark), though she could not hear it. But his body was quivering, and eke his wings, with the joy that he could not control. Woods on every side, and to the right the bonnie winding Dee, its wavelets sparkling in the sunshine.

Everything was happy; why should not she be? So she dried her tears, and while her uncle dozed she took her favourite author from her satchel, and was soon absorbed in his poems.

After they had settled down in McLeod Cottage, as the snow-white pretty villa had now been called, I do believe that they were happier than when in the grand old mansion, with all its worries and work and trouble. They were not very well off financially, that was all.

But it was a new pleasure for Annie and her maid to do shopping along Union Street the beautiful, and even round the quaint old New Market. She used to return happy and exultant, to show her uncle the bargains she had made.

One night Annie had an inspiration. She was a good musician on piano and zither. Why not give lessons?

She would. Nor was she very long in finding a pupil or two. This added considerably to the fund for household expenditure. But nevertheless the proud old Highlander McLeod thought it was somewhat infra dignitate. But he bore with this because it seemed to give happiness to the child, as he still continued to call her.

So things went on. And so much rest did the Laird now have that for a time, at least, his life seemed all one happy dream. They soon made friends, too, with their neighbours, and along the street wherever Annie went she was known, for she was always followed by a grand and noble dog, a Great Dane, as faithful and as true as any animal could well be.

One evening she and Jeannie, her maid, were walking along a lovely tree-shaded lane, just as the beams of the setting sun were glimmering crimson through the leafy grandeur of the great elms. For some purpose of his own the dog was in an adjoining field, when suddenly, at the bend of the road, they were accosted by a gigantic and ragged tramp, who demanded money on the pain of death. Both girls shrieked, and suddenly, like a shell from a great gun, darted the dog from the hedge, and next moment that tramp was on his back, his ragged neckerchief and still more ragged waistcoat were torn from his body, and but for Annie his throat would have been pulled open.

But while Jeannie trembled, Annie showed herself a true McLeod, though her name was Lane. She called the dog away; then she quickly possessed herself of the tramp's cudgel. Annie was not tall, but she was strong and determined.

"Get up at once," she cried, "and march back with us. If you make the least attempt to escape, that noble dog shall tear your windpipe out!"

Very sulkily the tramp obeyed.

"I'm clean copped. Confound your beast of a dog!"

Within a few yards of her own door they met a policeman, who on hearing of the assault speedily marched the prisoner off to gaol.

When she related the adventure to her uncle he was delighted beyond measure, and must needs bless her and kiss her.

They had parted with the carriage. Needs must where poverty and the devil drives! But they still had a little phaeton, and in this the old man and his niece enjoyed many a delightful drive. He would take her to concerts, too, and to the theatre also, so that, on the whole, life was by no means a galling load to anyone.

But a very frequent visitor at McLeod Cottage was Laird Fletcher. Not only so, but he took the old man and Annie frequently out by train. His carriage would be waiting at the station, and in this they drove away to his beautiful home.

The house itself was modern, but the grounds, under the sweet joy of June, looked beautiful indeed. It was at some considerable distance from the main road, and so in the gardens all was delightfully still, save for the music of happy song-birds or the purr of the turtle-dove, sounding low from the spreading cedars.

"A pleasing land of drowsyhead it was,
Of dreams that wave before the half-shut eye;
And of gay castles in the clouds that pass,
For ever flushing round a summer sky.
There eke the soft delights, that witchingly
Instil a wanton sweetness through the breast,
And the calm pleasures always hovered nigh;
But whate'er smacked of 'noyance or unrest
Was far, far off expelled from this delicious nest."

Through these lovely rose-gardens and tree-shaded lawns frequently now wandered Annie, alone with Fletcher. He was so gentle, winning, and true that she had come to like him. Mind, I say nothing of love. And she innocently and frankly told him so as they sat together in a natural bower beneath a spreading deodar cedar. He was happy, but he would not risk his chance by being too precipitate.

Another day in the same arbour, after a moment or two of silence, she said: "Oh, I wish you were my uncle!" Fletcher winced a little, but summoned up courage to say:

"Ah, Annie, could we not be united by a dearer tie than that? Believe me, I love you more than life itself. Whether that life be long or short depends upon you, Annie."

But she only bent her head and cried, childlike.

"Ah, Mr Fletcher," she said at last, "I have no heart to give away. It lies at the bottom of the sea."

“But love would come.”

“We will go to the house now, I think,” and she rose.

Fletcher, poor fellow, silently, almost broken-heartedly, followed, and, of course, the Great Dane was there.

That night she told her uncle all. He said not a word. She told her maid in the bedroom.

“Oh, Miss Annie,” said Jeanie, “I think you are very, very foolish. You refuse to marry this honest and faithful man, but your mourning will not, cannot restore the dead. Reginald Grahame is happier, a thousand, million times more happy, than anyone can ever be on this earth. Besides, dear, there is another way of looking at the matter. Your poor Uncle McLeod is miles and miles from the pines, from the heath and the heather. He may not complain, but the artificial life of a city is telling on him. What a quiet and delightful life he would have at Laird Fletcher’s!”

Annie was dumb. She was thinking. Should she sacrifice her young life for the sake of her dear uncle? Ah, well, what did life signify to her now? He was dead and gone.

Thus she spoke:

“You do not think my uncle is ill, Jeannie?”

“I do not say he is ill, but I do say that he feels his present life irksome at times, and you may not have him long, Miss Annie. Now go to sleep like a baby and dream of it.”

And I think Annie cried herself asleep that night.

“It becomes not a maiden descended from the noble clan McLeod to be otherwise than brave,” she told herself next morning. “Oh, for dear uncle’s sake I feel I could—” But she said no more to herself just then.

Fletcher called that very day, and took them away again to his bonnie Highland home. It was a day that angels would have delighted in. And just on that same seat beneath the same green-branched cedar Fletcher renewed his wooing. But he, this time, alluded to the artificial city life that the old Laird had to lead, he who never before during his old age had been out of sight of the waving pines and the bonnie blooming heather.

Fletcher was very eloquent to-day. Love makes one so. Yet his wooing was strangely like that of Auld Robin Grey, especially when he finished plaintively, appealingly, with the words:

“Oh, Annie, for his sake will you not marry me?”

Annie o’ the Banks o’ Dee wept just a little, then she wiped her tears away. He took her hand, and she half-whispered: “What must be must—’tis fate.”

Annie o' the Banks o' Dee by William Gordon Stables

Chapter Eleven.

The “Wolverine” Puts out to Sea.

With the exception of the Sunbeam, probably no more handsome steam yacht ever left Southampton Harbour than the Wolverine. She was all that a sailor’s fancy could paint.

Quite a crowd of people were on the quay to witness her departure on her very long and venturesome cruise. Venturesome for this reason, that, though rigged as a steam barque, she was but little over four hundred tons register.

Seamen on shore, as they glanced at her from stem to stem, alow and aloft, criticised her freely. But Jack’s opinion was on the whole well embodied in a sentence spoken by a man-o’-wars-man, as he hitched up his nether garments and turned his quid in his mouth:

“My eyes, Bill and Elizabeth Martin, she is a natty little craft! I’ve been trying to find a flaw in her, or a hole, so to speak, but there’s ne’er a one, Bill—above water, anyhow. Without the steam she reminds me of the old Aberdeen clippers. Look at her bilge, her lines, her bows, her jibboom, with its smart and business-like curve. Ah, Bill, how different to sail in a yacht like that from living cooped up in a blooming iron tank, as we are in our newest-fashioned man-o’-war teakettles! Heigho! Blowed if I wouldn’t like to go on board of her! Why, here is the doctor—splendid young fellow!—coming along the pier now. I’ll overhaul him and hail him. Come on, Bill!”

Reginald Grahame was coming somewhat slowly towards them. It was just a day or two before the discovery of Craig Nicol’s murder and the finding of his body in the wood.

Reginald was thinking of Bilberry Hall and Annie o’ the Banks o’ Dee. Sorrow was depicted in every lineament of his handsome but mobile and somewhat nervous countenance. Was he thinking also of the cold, stiff body of his quondam friend Craig, hidden there under the dark spruce trees, the tell-tale knife beside him? Who can say what the innermost workings of his mind were? Some of the most bloodthirsty pirates of old were the handsomest men that ever trod the deck of a ship. We can judge no man’s heart from his countenance. And no woman’s either. There be she-devils who bear the sweet and winning features of saints. Our Scottish Queen Mary was beautiful, and as graceful as beautiful.

“If to her share some human errors fall,
Look in her face, and you’ll forget them all.”

“Beggin’ yer pardon, sir,” said Jack, touching his hat and scraping a bit, like a horse with a loose shoe, “we’re only just two blooming bluejackets, but we’ve been a-admiring of your craft—outside like. D’ye think, sir, they’d let us on board for a squint?”

“Come with me, my lads. I’ll take you on board.”

Next minute, in company with Reginald—who was now called Dr—Grahame, they were walking the ivory-white decks. Those two honest man-o’-war sailors were delighted beyond measure with all they saw.

“Why,” said Jack—he was chief spokesman, for Bill was mute—“why, doctor, you have sailors on board!—and mind you, sir, you don’t find real sailors nowadays anywhere else except in the merchant service. We bluejackets are just like our ships—fighting machines. We ain’t hearts of oak any longer, sir.”

“No,” said the doctor, “but you are hearts of iron. Ha! here comes the postman, with a letter for me, too. Thank you, postie.”

He gave him sixpence, and tore the letter open, his hand shaking somewhat. Yes, it was from Annie. He simply hurriedly scanned it at present, but he heaved a sigh of relief as he placed it in his bosom. Then he rejoined the bluejackets.

“Well, sir, we won’t hinder you. I see you’ve got the Blue Peter up. But never did I see cleaner white decks; every rope’s end coiled, too. The capstan itself is a thing o’ beauty; all the brasswork looks like gold, all the polished woodwork like ebony; and, blow me, Bill, just look at that binnacle! Blest if it wouldn’t be a beautiful ornament for a young lady’s boodwar (boudoir)! Well, sir, we wishes you a pleasant, happy voyage and a safe return. God bless you, says Jack, and good-bye.”

“Good-bye to you, lads; and when you go to war, may you send the foe to the bottom of the ocean. There,”—he handed Jack a coin as he spoke—“drink bon voyage to us.”

“Ah, that will we!”

The sailors once more scraped and bowed, and Reginald hurried below to read Annie’s letter. It was just a lover’s letter—just such a letter as many of my readers have had in their day—so I need not describe it.

Reginald sat in his little cabin—it was only six feet square—with his elbow leaning on his bunk, his hand under his chin, thinking, thinking, thinking. Then an idea struck him. The skipper of the yacht—called "captain" by courtesy—and Reginald were already the best of friends. Indeed, Dickson—for that was his name—was but six or seven years older than Reginald.

"Rat-tat-tat!" at the captain's door. His cabin was pretty large, and right astern, on what in a frigate would be called "the fighting deck." This cabin was of course right abaft the main saloon, and had a private staircase, or companion, that led to the upper deck.

"Hullo, doctor, my boy!"

"Well, just call me Grahame, mon ami."

"If you'll call me Dickson, that'll square it."

"Well, then, Dickson, I'm terribly anxious to get out and away to sea. If not soon, I feel I may run off—back to my lady love. When do we sail for sure?"

The captain got up and tapped the glass.

"Our passengers come on board this afternoon, bag and baggage, and to-morrow morning early we loose off, and steam out to sea—if it be a day on which gulls can fly."

"Thanks, a thousand times. And now I won't hinder you."

"Have a drop of rum before you go, and take a cigar with you."

Reginald's heart needed keeping up, so he did both.

"When I am on the sea," he said, "I shall feel more happy. Ay, but Annie, I never can forget you."

More cheerily now, he walked briskly off to the hotel to meet his patients. There were two, Mr and Mrs Hall, wealthy Americans; besides, there were, as before mentioned, Miss Hall and the child Matty. They were all very glad to see Reginald.

"You are very young," said Mr Hall, offering him a cigar.

"I think," he answered, "I am very fit and fresh, and you will find me very attentive."

“I’m sure of it,” said Mrs Hall.

Little Matty took his hand shyly between her own two tiny ones.

“And Matty’s su’e too,” she said, looking up into his face.

They say that American children are thirteen years of age when born. I know they are precocious, and I like them all the better for it. This child was very winning, very pert and pretty, but less chubby, and more intellectual-looking than most British children. For the life of him Reginald could not help lifting her high above his head and kissing her wee red lips as he lowered her into his arms.

“You and I are going to be good friends always, aren’t we?”

“Oh, yes, doc,” she answered gaily; “and of torse the dleat (great) big, big dog.”

“Yes, and you may ride round the decks on him sometimes.”

Matty clapped her hands with joy.

“What a boo’ful moustache you has!” she said.

“You little flatterer!” he replied, as he set her down. “Ah! you have all a woman’s wiles.”

Everything was on board, and the Wolverine was ready to sail that night. But the captain must go on shore to see his friends and bid them adieu first.

The night closed in early, but the sky was studded with stars, and a three-days’-old moon shone high in the west like a scimitar of gold. This gave Reginald heart. Still, it might blow big guns before morning, and although he sat up pretty late, to be initiated by Mr Hall into the game of poker, he went often to the glass and tapped it. The glass was steadily and moderately high. Reginald turned into his bunk at last, but slept but little, and that little was dream-perturbed.

Early in the morning he was awakened by the roar of steam getting up. His heart leaped for joy. It is at best a wearisome thing, this being idle in harbour before sailing.

But at earliest dawn there was much shouting and giving of orders; the men running fore and aft on deck; other men on shore casting off hawsers. Then the great screw

began slowly to churn up the murky water astern. The captain himself was on the bridge, the man at the wheel standing by to obey his slightest command.

And so the Wolverine departed, with many a cheer from the shore—ay, and many a blessing.

As she went out they passed a man-o'-war, in which the captain had many friends. Early as it was, the commander had the band up, and sweetly across the water came the music of that dear old song I myself have often heard, when standing out to sea, "Good-bye, sweetheart, good-bye."

By eventide they were standing well down towards the Bay of Biscay, which they would leave on their port quarter. They would merely skirt it, bearing up for Madeira. But a delightful breeze had sprung up; the white sails were set, and she was running before it, right saucily, too, bobbing and curtseying to each rippling wavelet very prettily, as much as to say: "Ah! you dear old sea, we have been together before now. You will never lose your temper with me, will you?" It is well, indeed, that sailors do not know what is before them.

The dinner-hour was seven. Mr and Mrs Hall were seated on chairs on the quarter-deck. Neither was over-well, but Ilda and Reginald were pacing briskly up and down the quarter-deck, chatting pleasantly. I think, though, that Ilda had more to say than he. American girls are born that way.

Wee Matty was making love to Oscar, the splendid and good-natured Newfoundland. Nobody more happy than bonnie Matty, bonnie and gay, for her happiness, indeed, was a species of merry madness. Only no one could have heard her childish, gleesome and silvery laugh without laughing with her.

The bell at last! Reginald took Ilda down below, then hurried on deck to help his patients. Matty and Oscar seemed to come tumbling down.

And so the evening passed away, the stars once more glittering like crystal gems, the great star Sirius shining in ever-changing rays of crimson and blue.

It was indeed a goodly night, and Reginald slept to-night. The incubus Love had fled away.

Annie o' the Banks o' Dee by William Gordon Stables

Chapter Twelve.

“I say, Cap,” said Mr Hall, “I should Maroon a Fellow like that!”

While the whole countryside—ay, and the Granite City itself—were thrilled with awe and horror at the brutal murder of poor unoffending Craig Nicol, the Wolverine was making her way on the wings of a delightful ten-knot breeze to the Isle of Madeira.

Reginald had ascertained that there was nothing very serious the matter with Mr and Mrs Hall. They were run down, however, very much with the gaieties of Paris and London, to say nothing of New York, and thought rightly that a long sea voyage would be the best thing to restore them.

Madeira at last! The beach, with its boulders or round sea-smoothed stones, was a difficult one to land upon. The waves or breakers hurled these stones forward with a hurtling sound that could be heard miles and miles away, then as quickly sucked them back again. Nevertheless, the boat was safely beached, and there were men with willing hands and broad shoulder to carry Mr and Mrs Hall and daughter safely on to dry land.

Reginald was sure of foot, and lifting Matty in his arms as she crowed with delight, he bore her safe on shore. The great Newfoundland despised a boat, and hardly was she well off the yacht ere he leaped overboard with a splash. And he also landed, shaking himself free of gallons of water, which made rainbows and halos around him. He drenched his master pretty severely. But it was a fine joke to Oscar, so, grinning and laughing as only this breed can, he went tearing along the beach and back again at the rate of fifteen knots an hour. When he did come back, he licked his master’s hand and little Matty’s face. “Nothing like a good race,” he seemed to say, “to set the blood in motion after a long bath.”

While the party sit in the piazza of a beautiful tree-shaded hotel, sipping iced sherbet, let me say a word about the nature of the Wolverine’s voyage.

The yacht did not belong to the Halls. She was lent them for the cruise round the Horn to the South Pacific, and many a beautiful island they meant to visit, and see many a strange and wondrous sight. For hitherto all their travelling experiences had been confined to Europe. But your true American wants to see all the world when he can afford it.

It was health the Halls were in search of, combined with pleasure if possible; but they meant to collect all the curios they could get, and they also felt certain—so Mrs Hall said—that they would find the South Sea savages very interesting persons indeed.

So have I myself found them, especially when their spears were whisking over my boat and they were dancing in warlike frenzy on the beach. In such cases, however, a shot or two from a good revolver has a wonderfully persuasive and calmative effect on even Somali Indians.

We British have called Scotland and England an isle of beauty, but I question very much if it can cope with Madeira. Here not only have we splendid mountains, clad in all the beauty of tropical and sub-tropical shrubs and trees, tremendous cliffs and gorges, raging torrents and cataracts, with many a bosky dell, lovely even as those birchen glades in Scotia, but in this heavenly isle there is the sunshine that overspreads all and sparkles on the sea. And that sea, too!—who could describe the splendour of its blue on a calm day, patched here and there towards the shore with browns, seagreens, and opals? No wonder that after making several visits and picnics in shore and high among the mountains, borne there by sturdy Portuguese in hammocks, Mrs Hall should declare that she felt better already.

It was with some reluctance that Mr Hall ordered the anchor to be got up at last, and all sail made for the Canaries. Near sunset was it when they sailed slowly away, a sunset of indescribable beauty. A great grey misty bank of cloud was hanging many degrees above the mountains, but beneath it was more clear and streaked with long trailing cloudlets of crimson, light yellow, and purple, the rifts between being of the deepest sea-green. But over the hills hung a shadow or mist of smoky blue.

Then descended the sun, sinking in the waters far to the west, a ball of crimson fire with a pathway of blood ’twixt the horizon and the yacht.

Then night fell, with but a brief twilight. There was going to be a change, however. The mate, a sturdy, red-faced, weather-beaten, but comely fellow, sought the captain’s cabin and reported a rapidly-falling glass, and the gradual obliteration of the stars, that erst had shone so sweetly.

How swiftly comes a squall at times in these seas! A huge bank of blackest darkness was seen rapidly advancing towards the ship, and before sail could be taken in or steam got up she was in the grasp of that merciless demon squall.

For a minute or two she fled before it and the terrible waves, quivering the while from stem to stern like a dying deer.

Then high above the roaring of the wind, and booming and hissing of the waves, great guns were heard. It seemed so, at least, but it was but the bursting of the bellying sails, and platoon-firing next, as the rent ribbons of canvas crackled and rattled in the gale.

To lie to was impossible now. With the little sail they had left they must fly on and on. Men staggered about trying to batten down, but for a time in vain.

Then came a huge pooping wave, that all but swept the decks. It smashed the bulwarks, it carried away a boat, and, alas! one poor fellow found a watery grave. He must have been killed before being swept overboard. Anyhow, he was seen no more. Everything movable was carried forward with tremendous force. Even the winch was unshipped, and stood partly on end.

The man at the wheel and the men battening down were carried away on the current, but though several were badly bruised, they were otherwise unhurt. Sturdy Captain Dickson had rushed to the wheel, else would the Wolverine have broached to and sunk in a few minutes.

The water had poured down the companions like cataracts, and it drowned out the half-lit fires. Mr Hall and party had shut themselves up in their state-rooms, but everything in the saloon was floating in water two feet deep.

However, this storm passed away almost as quickly as it had come, and once more the seas calmed down, and sky and waters became brightly, ineffably blue. The ship was baled out, and, as the wind had now gone down, fires were got up, and the Wolverine steamed away for the Canaries and the marvellous Peak of Teneriffe.

But poor Bill Stevens's death had cast a general gloom throughout the ship. He was a great favourite fore and aft, always merry, always laughing or singing, and a right good sailor as well.

So next morning, when red and rosy the sun rose over the sea, orders were sent forward for the men to "lay aft" at nine o'clock for prayers. Then it was "wash and scrub decks, polish the wood, and shine the brasswork."

Right rapidly did the sun dry the decks, so that when Mrs Hall, who had received a bad shock, was helped on deck by Reginald, everything 'twixt fo'c'sle and wheel looked clean and nice. The winch had not been badly damaged, and was soon set to rights.

I should not forget to mention that the only one not really alarmed during the terrible black Squall was that busy, merry wee body Matty. When she saw the cataract of waters coming surging in, she speedily mounted the table. The fiddles had been put on, and to these she held fast; and she told Reginald all this next morning, adding, “And, oh, doc, it was so nice—dust (just) like a swinging-rope!”

But she had had a companion; for, after swimming several times round the table, as if in search of dry land, the beautiful dog clambered up on the table beside Matty. To be sure, he shook himself, but Matty shut her eyes, and wiped her face, and on the whole was very glad of his company.

How solemn was that prayer of Mr Hall for the dead. Granted that he was what is so foolishly called “a Dissenter” in England, his heart was in the right place, and he prayed right from that Even his slight nasal twang in no way detracted from the solemnity of that prayer. Ilda Hall had her handkerchief to her face, but poor little cabin-boy Ralph Williams wept audibly. For the drowned sailor had ever been kind to him.

The captain was certainly a gentleman, and an excellent sailor, but he had sea ways with him, and now he ordered the main-brace to be spliced; so all the Jacks on board soon forgot their grief.

“His body has gone to Davy Jones,” said one, “but his soul has gone aloft.”

“Amen,” said others.

They stayed at Orotava long enough to see the sights, and Reginald himself and a sailor got high up the peak. He was on board in time for dinner, but confessed to being tired. He had not forgotten to bring a splendid basket of fruit with him, however, nor wildflowers rich and rare.

A long lonely voyage was now before them—south-west and away to Rio de Janeiro—so ere long everyone on board had settled quietly down to a sea life.

I must mention here that it was the first mate that had chosen the crew. He had done so somewhat hastily, I fear, and when I say that there were two or three Spaniards among them, and more than one Finn, need I add that the devil was there also?

One Finn in particular I must mention. He was tall to awkwardness. Somewhat ungainly all over, but his countenance was altogether forbidding. He had an ugly beard, that grew only on his throat, but curled up over his chin—certainly not adding to his beauty.

Christian Norman was his name; his temper was vile, and more than once had he floored poor boy Williams, and even cut his head. He smoked as often as he had the chance, and would have drunk himself to insensibility if supplied with vile alcohol.

“I don’t like him,” said the captain one evening at dinner.

“Nor I,” said Reginald.

“I say, cap,” said Mr Hall, “I’d maroon a fellow like that! If you don’t, mark my words, he will give us trouble yet.”

And he did, as the sequel will show.

Annie o' the Banks o' Dee by William Gordon Stables

Chapter Thirteen.

The Breakdown—Savages!

Captain Dickson was just as kind to Norman, the Finn, as he was to anyone else. Perhaps more so. Not that he dreaded him. Dickson would have shot him with as little compunction as shooting a panther had he given him even a mutinous answer. But he often let him have double allowance of rum. “You’re a big man,” he would say; “you need a little more than the little ones.”

Norman would smile grimly, but swallow it. He would even buy the men’s, for he seemed to have plenty of money. When half-seas-over Norman would swagger and rant and sing, and with little provocation he would have fought. The other Finns and the Spaniard, besides an Englishman or two, always took Norman’s side in an argument.

So things went on until Rio was reached. What a splendid harbour—ships of all nations here; what a romantic city as seen from the sea, and the surroundings how romantic, rivalling even Edinburgh itself in beauty!

It was early summer here, too. They had left autumn and the coming winter far away in the dreary north. I shall make no attempt to describe the floral grandeur of the country here. I have done so before. But not only Reginald, but all the Halls, and Matty as well, were able to walk round and admire the tropical vegetation and the gorgeous flowers in the gardens; and in the town itself the fish-market and fruit-market were duly wondered at, for everything was new and strange to the visitors.

Further out into the country they drove all among the peaked and marvellous mountains and the foliaged glens, and Matty, who sat on Reginald’s knee, clapped her hands with delight to see the wee, wee humming-birds buzzing from flower to flower “like chips of rainbows,” as Ilda phrased it, and the great butterflies as big as fans that floated in seeming idleness here, there, and everywhere.

A whole week was spent here, and every day afforded fresh enjoyments. But they must sail away at last. The captain had half-thought of leaving the Finn Norman here, but the man seemed to have turned over a new leaf, so he relented.

South now, with still a little west in it. The good ship encountered more bad weather. Yet so taut and true was she, and so strong withal, that with the exception of the waves that

dashed inboards—some of them great green seas that rolled aft like breakers on a stormy beach—she never leaked a pint.

Captain Dickson and his mate paid good attention to the glass, and never failed to shorten sail and even batten down in time, and before the approach of danger.

But all went well and the ship kept healthy. Indeed, hardly was there a sick man among the crew. Little Matty was the life and soul of the yacht. Surely never on board ship before was there such a merry little child! Had anyone been in the saloon as early as four, or even three, bells in the morning watch, they might have heard her lightsome laugh proceeding from her maid's cabin; for Matty was usually awake long before the break of day, and it is to be presumed that Maggie, the maid, got little sleep or rest after that.

Reginald used to be on deck at seven bells, and it was not long before he was joined by Matty. Prettily dressed the wee thing was, in white, with ribbons of blue or crimson, her bonnie hair trailing over her back just as wild and free as she herself was.

Then up would come Oscar, the great Newfoundland. Hitherto it might have been all babyish love-making between Reginald and Matty.

"I loves 'oo," she told him one morning, "and when I'se old eno' I'se doin' (going) to mally 'oo."

Reginald kissed her and set her down on the deck.

But the advent of the grand dog altered matters considerably. He came on deck with a dash and a spring, laughing, apparently, all down both sides.

"You can't catch me," he would say, or appear to say, to Matty.

"I tan tatch 'oo, twick!" she would cry, and off went the dog forward at the gallop, Matty, screaming with laughter, taking up the running, though far in the rear.

Smaller dogs on board ship are content to carry and toss and play with a wooden marlin-spike. Oscar despised so puny an object. He would not have felt it in his huge mouth. But he helped himself to a capstan bar, and that is of great length and very heavy. Nevertheless, he would not drop it, and there was honest pride in his beaming eye as he swung off with it. He had to hold his head high to balance it. But round and round the decks he flew, and if a sailor happened to cross his hawse the bar went whack! across his shins or knees, and he was left rubbing and lamenting.

Matty tried to take all sorts of cross-cuts between the masts or boats that lay upside down on the deck, but all in vain. But Oscar would tire at last, and let the child catch him.

“Now I’se tatched ’oo fairly!” she would cry, seizing him by the shaggy mane.

Oscar was very serious now, and licked the child’s cheek and ear in the most affectionate manner, well knowing she was but a baby.

“Woa, horsie, woa!” It was all she could do to scramble up and on to Oscar’s broad back. Stride-legs she rode, but sometimes, by way of practical joke, after she had mounted the dog would suddenly sit down, and away slid Matty, falling on her back, laughing and sprawling, all legs and arms, white teeth, and merry, twinkling eyes of blue.

“Mind,” she would tell Oscar, after getting up from deck and preparing to remount, “if ’oo sits down adain, ’oo shall be whipped and put into the black hole till the bow-mannie (an evil spirit) tomes and takes ’oo away!”

Oscar would now ride solemnly aft, ’bout ship and forward as far as the fo’c’s’le, and so round and round the deck a dozen times at least.

When dog and child were tired of playing together, the dog went in search of breakfast down below, to the cook’s galley. There was always the stockpot, and as every man-jack loved the faithful fellow he didn’t come badly off.

But even Norman the Finn was a favourite of Matty’s, and he loved the child. She would run to him of a morning, when his tall form appeared emerging from the fore-hatch. He used to set her on the capstan, from which she could easily mount astride on his shoulders, grasping his hair to steady herself.

How she laughed and crowed, to be sure, as he went capering round the deck, sometimes pretending to rear and jib, like a very wicked horse indeed, sometimes actually bucking, which only made Matty laugh the more.

Ring, ding, ding!—the breakfast bell; and the child was landed on the capstan once more and taken down—now by her devoted sweetheart, Reginald Grahame.

The ship was well found. Certainly they had not much fresh meat, but tinned was excellent, and when a sea-bank was anywhere near, as known from the colour of the water, Dickson called away a boat and all hands, and had fish for two days at least.

Fowls and piggies were kept forward. Well, on the whole she was a very happy ship, till trouble came at last.

It was Mr Hall's wish to go round the stormy and usually ice-bound Horn. The cold he felt certain would brace up both himself and his wife. But he wished to see something of the romantic scenery of Magellan's Straits first, and the wild and savage grandeur of Tierra del Fuego, or the Land of Fire. They did so, bearing far to the south for this purpose.

The weather was sunny and pleasant, the sky blue by day and star-studded by night, while high above shone that wondrous constellation called the Southern Cross. Indeed, all the stars seemed different from what they were used to in their own far northern land.

Now, there dwells in this fierce land a race of the most implacable savages on earth. Little is known of them except that they are cannibals, and that their hands are against everyone. But they live almost entirely in boats, and never hesitate to attack a sailing ship if in distress.

Hall and Dickson were standing well abaft on the quarter-deck smoking huge cigars, Mr Hall doing the "yarning," Dickson doing the laughing, when suddenly a harsh grating sound caused both to start and listen.

Next minute the vessel had stopped. There she lay, not a great way off the shore, in a calm and placid sea, with not as much wind as would lift a feather, "As idle as a painted ship, upon a painted ocean."

In a few minutes' time the Scotch engineer, looking rather pale, came hurrying aft.

"Well, Mr McDonald, what is the extent of the damage? Shaft broken?"

"Oh, no, sir, and I think that myself and men can put it all to rights in four days, if not sooner, and she'll be just as strong as ever."

"Thank you, Mr McDonald; so set to work as soon as possible, for mind you, we are lying here becalmed off an ugly coast. The yacht would make very nice pickings for these Land of Fire savages."

"Yes, I know, sir; and so would we."

And the worthy engineer departed, with a grim smile on his face. He came back in a few minutes to beg for the loan of a hand or two.

“Choose your men, my good fellow, and take as many as you please.”

Both Hall and Dickson watched the shore with some degree of anxiety. It was evident that the yacht was being swept perilously near to it. The tide had begun to flow, too, and this made matters worse. Nor could anyone tell what shoal water might lie ahead of them.

There was only one thing to be done, and Dickson did it. He called away every boat, and by means of hawsers to each the Wolverine was finally moved further away by nearly a mile.

The sailors were now recalled, and the boats hoisted. The men were thoroughly exhausted, so the doctor begged the captain to splice the main-brace, and soon the stewardess was seen marching forward with “Black Jack.” Black Jack wasn’t a man, nor a boy either, but simply a huge can with a spout to it, that held half a gallon of rum at the very least.

The men began to sing after this, for your true sailor never neglects an opportunity of being merry when he can. Some of them could sing charmingly, and they were accompanied by the carpenter on his violin. That grand old song, “The Bay of Biscay,” as given by a bass-voiced sailor, was delightful to listen to. As the notes rose and fell one seemed to hear the shrieking of the wind in the rigging, the wild turmoil of the dashing waters, and the deep rolling of the thunder that shook the doomed ship from stem to stern.

“Hullo?” cried Hall, looking shorewards. “See yonder—a little black fleet of canoes, their crews like devils incarnate!”

“Ha!” said Dickson. “Come they in peace or come they in war, we shall be ready. Lay aft here, lads. Get your rifles. Load with ball cartridge, and get our two little guns ready and loaded with grape.”

The savages were indeed coming on as swift as the wind, with wild shouts and cries, meant perhaps only to hurry the paddle-men, but startling enough in all conscience.

Annie o' the Banks o' Dee by William Gordon Stables

Chapter Fourteen.

Against Fearful Odds.

Hardly a heart on board that did not throb with anxiety, if not with fear, as that fiendish-looking cannibal fleet drew swiftly nigh. Armed with bows and arrows and spears were they, and Dickson could see also the glitter of ugly creases in the bottom of each canoe. Not tall men were any of them; all nearly naked, however, broad-shouldered, fierce, and grim.

The yacht was now stern on to the shore, but at a safe distance. Nevertheless, by the soundings they could tell that the water just here was not so deep as that further in; so both anchors were let go, the chains rattling like platoon-firing as these safeguards sank to the bottom.

There was no fear about Matty. To the astonishment of all she had clambered up into the dinghy that hung from davits abaft the binnacle.

“Hillo!” she was shouting, as she waved a wee red flag. “Hillo! ’oo bootiful neglos! Tome twick, Matty wants to buy some-fink!”

These dark boats and their savage crews were soon swarming round the Wolverine, but they had come to barter skins for tobacco, rum, and bread, not to fight, it seemed.

Peaceful enough they appeared in all conscience. Yet Dickson would not permit them to board. But both he and Hall made splendid deals. A dozen boxes of matches bought half-a-dozen splendid and well-cured otter skins, worth much fine gold; tobacco bought beautiful large guanaca skins; bread fetched foxes’ skins and those of the tuen-tuen, a charming little rodent; skins, also well-cured, of owls, hawks, rock-rabbits, and those of many a beautiful sea-bird.

The barter, or nicker, as the Yankee called it, pleased both sides, and the savages left rejoicing, all the more so in that, although the skipper would give them no rum to carry away with them, he spliced a kind of savage main-brace, and everyone swallowed a glass of that rosy fluid as a baby swallows its mother’s milk.

“The moon will be shining to-night, Hall,” said the captain, “and we’ll have a visit from these fire-fiends of another description. Glad we have got her anchored, anyhow.”

Soon after sunset the moon sailed majestically through the little fleecy clouds lying low on the horizon. She soon lost her rosy hue, and then one could have seen to pick up pins and needles on the quarter-deck. She made an immense silver triangular track from ship to shore. Matty was then on deck with Oscar, both merry as ever. But Reginald now took her in his arms and carried her below for bed. Both Dickson and Hall went below to console and hearten the ladies.

“Those fire savages will pay us a visit,” said Hall, “but you are not to be afraid. We will wipe them off the face of the creation world. Won’t we, skipper?”

“That will we!” nodded Dickson.

But neither Mrs Hall nor Ilda could be persuaded to retire. If a battle was to be fought they would sit with fear and trembling till all was over.

Out from under the dark shadows of the terrible snow-peaked mountain, that fell far over the water, just before eight bells in the first watch—the midnight hour—crept a fleet of canoes, silently—oh, so silently! But presently they got into that track of moonlit sea, so that they could be counted. Thirteen! Ominous number—but ominous for whom?

In twenty minutes the plash of the paddles could be distinctly heard, and the warriors could be seen, armed with spear and bow and deadly crease.

“Standoff! Standoff!”

It was a shout from Dickson.

But it was answered by a wilder shout of defiance and rage, and a cloud of arrows flew inboards.

“Now then, lads!” cried the captain, “give them fits! Quick is the word!”

The six-pounder Armstrong was trained on the foremost boat, with terrible effect. “Bang!” went the gun. Heavens! what a sight! No less than three canoes went down, with the dead and the shrieking wounded. The others but sped onwards the faster, however. A rifle volley now. Then the other gun was fired almost straight down among them, with awful results so far as the savages were concerned.

Hall was coolly emptying his revolvers as soon as his fingers could fill them. Had it been daylight his practice would have been better; as it was, there was nothing to be ashamed of.

But now the canoes were close under the ship's bows and sides. They would attempt to board.

They did, and partly succeeded, cutting through the netting easily with their knives. The sailors fought like true British tars, repelling the fiends with revolvers, with the butts of their rifles, and smashing many a chest and skull even with capstan bars. The officers defended the bows.

No less than six savages managed to get inboards. The Newfoundland was slightly wounded; then he was like a wild beast. He downed one savage, and, horrible to say, seizing him by the windpipe, drew it clean away from the lungs. The others were seen to by the sailors, and their bodies tossed overboard.

The fire-fiends had had enough of it, and prepared to retire. Grape was once more brought to bear on them, and two more canoes were sunk.

The loss to the Wolverine was one man killed and three wounded, but not severely. As long as a canoe was visible, a determined rifle fire was kept up, and many must have fallen.

When Hall and Reginald went below to report the victory, they found the ladies somewhat nervous, and there was little Matty on the table-top, barefooted and in her night-dress. The strange little Yankee maiden wouldn't stop in her state-room, and even when the battle was raging fiercest she had actually tried to reach the deck!

Then Oscar came down, laughing and gasping, and Matty quickly lowered herself down to hug her darling horsie, as she called him.

"Oh, look, auntie!" she cried, after she had thrown her little arms around his great neck and kissed him over and over again, "my pinny is all bluggy!"

The night-dress was indeed "bluggy," for poor Oscar had an ugly spear wound in his shoulder. But the doctor soon stitched it, the faithful fellow never even wincing. Then he licked the doctors red hands and Matty's ear, and then went off on deck to bed.

Next morning broke bright and crisp and clear, but it was cold, for autumn reigned in this dreary land. Once more a service for the dead, and as the body sank into the deep

the poor sailor's messmates turned sadly away, and more than one brought his arm to bear across his eyes.

As another attack was to be feared, it was determined to punish the islanders—to carry the war on shore, in fact—and so the four large boats were called away, only a few men being left on board to defend the ship. The guns were too heavy to take, but every man had a rifle, two revolvers and a cutlass.

For so small a vessel, the Wolverine was heavily manned, for from the beginning Captain Dickson had expected grim fighting.

This attack was more than the natives had calculated on. They did not stand the onset an instant, but fled from their village helter-skelter to the almost inaccessible mountains beyond, dropping their spears and bows to accelerate their flight. But the fire which was poured on them was a withering one, and brought many to the ground.

Emboldened by their success, Hall, with Dickson and his brave fellows, made a journey of several miles into the interior. The mountains were everywhere rugged and stern, and covered on their summits with snow that no doubt was perpetual.

But in the valleys beneath, which were quite uninhabited except by wild beasts and birds, were beautiful forests of dark waving cypresses, lofty pines, and beeches, their leaves tinted now with rose and yellow. Very silent and solemn were these woods; but for the savages that even now might be hidden in their dark depths, they seemed to woo one to that peace that only a forest can give.

A stream was meandering through the valley here, and many a glad fish leaped up from the pools, his scales shining like a rainbow in the sunlight.

All haste was now made to regain the shore, where but a few sailors had been left to guard the boats. Only just in time, for the savages were gathering for another attack, and coming down the hillsides in streams.

A hot volley or two dispersed them, however, and they once more hid behind the rocks.

Here in the village was evidence that these fire-fiends had been sitting down to a terrible feast of roasted human flesh! Doubtless they had killed the wounded and cooked them. It is a terrible thing to think of, but I have proof that a woman will eat of the dead body of either husband or brother, and the children too will ravenously partake. I dare not tell in a story like this the horrors of savage life that I have witnessed. I wish to interest, but not to horrify, my readers.

This village was probably one of the largest in the islands which constitute the Tierra del Fuego group. It consisted of nearly nine hundred huts in all, some well-built and comparatively comfortable. First and foremost it was looted, a large cargo of precious skins being secured. Some bows and arrows, spears, etc, were taken as curios; then, just as the sun was sinking red behind the sea, every hut and house was fired.

The blaze was tremendous; and back to the ship, by means of its light, the boats were steered. A breeze having sprung up increased the magnificence of the conflagration, and the sparks, like showers of golden snow, were carried far inland and up the mountain sides.

No wonder that Matty was clapping her wee hands and crowing with delight at the beauty of the "bonfire," as she called it.

Happy indeed were the adventurers when the breeze waxed steadier and stronger. It blew from the west, too. The anchors were quickly hoisted, the ship's head turned to the east, and before two days had fled she had wormed her way out once more into the open ocean. The engines had by this time been repaired, but were not now needed, for the breeze, though abeam, was steady, and good progress was made.

A few days more, and the wind having died down, clear sky by day, star-studded at night, and with sharp frost, the Wolverine was once more under steam and forcing her way round the storm-tormented Horn. For the waves are ofttimes houses high here when no wind is blowing, and they break and toss their white spray far over the green and glittering sides of the snow-clad bergs.

"And now there came both mist and snow,
  And it grew wondrous cold;
And ice mast-high came floating by,
  As green as emerald.

"The ice was here, the ice was there,
  The ice was all around;
It cracked and growled, and roared and howled,
  Like noises in a swound."

But at this time a greater danger than that from the ice was threatening, for Norman the Finn was hatching mutiny. Verily a curse seemed to follow the ship wherever she went.

Annie o' the Banks o' Dee by William Gordon Stables

Chapter Fifteen.

Mutiny—The Coming Storm.

Nobody would have credited Williams, the cabin-boy, with very much 'cuteness. We never know the hidden depths of even a young lad's mind.

The Finn Norman had in his two countrymen and in the Spaniards five men willing to do anything. To put it plainly, for gold they would use their knives against their dearest friends, and rejoice in it too.

Norman had not only a body of fearful physical strength, but a winning and persuasive tongue, and he wheedled over no less than three Englishmen, or rather Scotsmen, to join his forces.

Late one night a half-whispered conversation was held near to the winch. The Finn had been here before—that is, up in the South Pacific—and he could guide them to an island of gold. And what was it that gold could not purchase in this world? he added. "Everyone of you shall be wealthy. We shall then scrape the vessel from stem to stern, alter her name and rigging, and after loading up with gold, sail for distant Australia. There we shall sell the ship and, going to the diggings for a time, to avoid suspicion, will in a few months return to Sidney or Melbourne as lucky miners. Then hurrah for home!"

"We will join," said the Scotsman, "on one condition."

"And that is?"

"There must be no murder."

"Your request is granted. We will rise suddenly, batten down the men below, then rushing aft we shall secure the officers in the saloon. The vessel will then be ours. But we shall maroon the men on the nearest land, with biscuits and a few arms. The women will be best on board," he grinned.

"Bah!" said a Spaniard, drawing his ugly knife. "Let us throat them. Dead men tell no tales, you know. Take my advice."

But the marooning was finally decided on, and the mutineers retired to their bunks or to their duty.

Little did they know that the cabin-boy, with listening ears, though almost frightened out of his life, was hiding behind the winch and had heard every word they had said.

As soon as it was possible he escaped, and going at once aft, he reported in a frightened whisper all the details of the terrible plot.

“Horrible!” said Dickson.

“Strikes me,” said Hall, “that there must be a Jonah on board, or a murderer. Let us draw for him, putting all names in a hat, and then lynch the fellow!”

“If,” said Dickson, “there be a murderer on board, the fellow is that Finn.”

“Seize the scoundrel at once, then,” cried Hall, “and throw him to the sharks or put him in irons.”

“No, I’ll wait, and Williams shall be our spy.”

Nearly all the mutineers were in the same watch, only one good man and true being among them. Norman played his game well. He knew that if suspected at all, they would be watched by night, so he chose broad daylight for the awful dénouement. While the men were below at dinner, those in the cabin all having luncheon, then Norman suddenly gave the preconcerted signal.

The hatches were thrown on in a moment, and screwed down by two men, while the main band rushed aft and secured the saloon door.

“If you value your lives in there,” savagely shouted the Finn down through the skylight, as that too was being fastened securely down, “you’ll keep quiet.”

Hall had both his revolvers out in a trice, and fired; but the skylights were closed, and no harm or good was done.

Next the mutineers threw open the fore-hatch, and at pistol point ordered every man into the half-deck cabin abaft the galley and abaft the sailors’ sleeping bunks.

“I’ll shoot the first man dead,” cried Norman, “who does not look active!”

The communication door was then secured, and all was deemed safe. They would bear north now, and make for the nearest island.

The rum store was near the foot of the stair, or companion, and close to the stewardess's pantry. The key hung there, so more than a gallon of rum was got up and taken forward.

The engineers were told that if they did not crack on, they would be had on deck and made to walk the plank.

The Finn had not meant that any orgie should take place; but take place it did, and a fearful one too. The man at the wheel kept on for fear of death, and so did the engineers.

By twelve o'clock, or eight bells, in the first watch, the fellows were helplessly drunk and lying about in the galley in all directions.

Little Williams, the cabin-boy, had been overlooked. Wise he was indeed, for now he very quietly hauled on the fore-hatch—ay, and screwed it down. Then he went quickly aft and succeeded in releasing the officers. The men were next set free, and the door between secured aft.

In ten minutes' time every mutineer in the ship was in irons. Surely no mutiny was ever before quelled in so speedy and bloodless a manner!

"I knew," said Hall, "that we had a Jonah on board, and that Jonah is the double-dyed villain Christian Norman. Say, Captain Dickson, is it going to be a hanging match?"

"I am almost tempted to hang the ringleader," replied Dickson, "but this would be far too tragical, especially with ladies on board. Remember that, be his heart what it may, there is just one little good spot in his character. He dearly loved little Matty, and she loved him."

"Well, sir, what are you going to do about it? I'd like to know that."

"This. I cannot pardon any single one of these villains. The Scotsmen, indeed, are worse in a manner of speaking than the Finns or cowardly Spaniards. I shall mete out to them the same punishment, though in a lesser degree, that they would have meted out to us. Not on the inhospitable snow-clad shores of the Tierra del Fuego islands shall they be placed, but on the most solitary isle I can find in some of the South Pacific groups."

Now things went on more pleasantly for a time. The prisoners were not only in leg-irons, but manacled, and with sentries placed over them watch and watch by night and by day.

These men had orders to shoot at once any man who made the slightest attempt to escape.

It was about a week after this, the Wolverine had safely rounded the stormy Cape, and was now in the broad Pacific. A sailor of the name of Robertson had just gone on sentry, when, without a word of warning, Norman the Finn suddenly raised himself to his feet and felled him with his manacled hands. The strength of the fellow was enormous. But the ring of a rifle was heard next minute, and Norman fell on his face, shot through the heart.

He was thrown overboard that same evening with scant ceremony.

“I feel happier now,” said Hall, “that even our Jonah is no more. Now shall our voyage be more lucky and pleasant.”

Ah! but was it?

The Wolverine was purposely kept well out of the ordinary track of ships coming or going from either China or Australia. And luck or not luck, after ten days’ steaming westward and north, they sighted an island unknown to the navigator, unknown to any chart. It was small, but cocoa-nuts waved from the summit of its lofty hills.

Here, at all events, there must be fruit in abundance, with probably edible rodents, and fish in the sea. And here the mutineers were marooned. Not without fishing gear were they left, nor without a small supply of biscuits, and just three fowling pieces and ammunition, with some axes and carpenter’s tools.

They deserved a worse fate, but Dickson was kind at heart.

Well, at any rate, they pass out of our story. On that island they probably are until this day.

Everyone on the Wolverine seemed to breathe more freely now, and the vessel was once more headed eastwards to regain her direct route to California and San Francisco.

For a whole week the breeze blew so pleasantly and steadily that fires were bunked and all sail set. The very ship herself seemed to have regained cheerfulness and confidence, and to go dancing over the sunlit sea, under her white wing-like studding sails, as if she were of a verity a thing of life. Those on board soon forgot all their trials and misery. The mutineers were themselves forgotten. Matty and Oscar (who had recovered from his

spear wound) resumed their romps on deck, and surely never did sea-going yacht look more snug and clean than did the Wolverine at this time.

She was still far out of the usual track of ships, however, though now bearing more to the nor'ard. So far north were they, indeed, that the twilight at morn or even was very short indeed. In the tropics, it is not figurative language, but fact, to say that, the red sun seemed to leap from behind the clear horizon. But a few minutes before this one might have seen, high in the east, purple streaks of clouds, changing quickly to crimson or scarlet, then the sun, like a huge blood orange, dyeing the rippling sea.

At night the descent was just as sudden, but my pen would fail did I try to describe the evanescent beauty of those glorious sunsets.

Light and sunshine are ever lovely; so is colour; but here was light and colour co-mingled in a transformation scene so grand, so vast, that it struck the heart of the beholder with a species of wonder not unmixed with awe. And the beholders were usually silent. Then all night long in the west played the silent lightning, bringing into shape and form many a rock-like, tower-like cloud. It was behind these clouds of the night that this tropical lightning played and danced and shimmered.

Then at times they came into a sea of phosphorescent light. It was seen all around, but brighter where the vessel raised ripples along the quarter. It dropped like fire from her bows, ay, and even great fishes could be seen—sharks in all probability—sinking down, down, down into the sea's dark depths, like fishes of fire, till at last they were visible only like little balls of light, speedily to be extinguished.

About this latitude flying gurnets leapt on board by the score on some nights, and a delightful addition indeed did they prove to the matutinal menu. Sometimes a huge octopus would be seen in the phosphorescent sea. It is the devil-fish of the tropics, and, with his awful head and arms, so abhorrent and nightmarish was the sight that it could not be beheld without a shudder.

The Pacific Ocean! Yes, truly, very often pacific enough; so much so that with ordinary luck one might sail across its waters in a dinghy boat. But there are times when some portions of it are swept by terrific circular storms. Ah! happy is the ship that, overtaken by one of these, can manage to keep well out and away from its vortex.

One evening the sun went down amidst a chaos of dark and threatening clouds, from which thunder was occasionally heard like the sound of distant artillery, but muttering, and more prolonged. The glass went tumbling down. Captain Dickson had never seen it so low. The wind too had failed, and before sunset the sea lay all around them, a greasy

glitter on its surface like mercury, with here and there the fin of a basking shark appearing on the surface. Even the air was stifling, sickening almost, as if the foetus of the ocean's slimy depths had been stirred up and risen to the surface.

All sail was speedily taken in, and by the aid of oil, the fires were quickly roaring hot beneath the boilers.

Higher and higher rose that bank of clouds, darkening the sky. Then—

"The upper air burst into life!
  And a hundred fire flags sheen;
To and fro they were hurried about,
And to and fro, and in and out,
  The wan stars danced between."

Annie o' the Banks o' Dee by William Gordon Stables

Chapter Sixteen.

Shipwreck—The White Queen of the Isle of Flowers.

To and fro, to and fro, on the quarter-deck walked the imperturbable Yankee, Mr Hall, quietly pulling at his huge cigar. He had seen the ladies, and had told them straight that it was to be a fearful storm, and now he would wait to see what Fate had in store for them.

But more impatient far was Captain Dickson. Would steam never be got up? He had an idea which way the storm would come, and he wanted to steam southwards, and as much out of its track as possible.

At last the steam begins to roar, and now the screw revolves, and the good ship cleaves its way through the darkness of sky and sea. Dickson is somewhat relieved. He puts two men to the wheel, and sailors lash them to it. Well Dickson knows that the storm will be a fearful one.

Who is this fluttering up along the deck? A little dot all in white—nothing on but a night-dress. Matty, of course.

“I lunned away,” she explained, “and tomed (came up) to see the lightnin’s flash.”

“Oh, my darling!” cried Reginald, “you must come with me at once!”

He picked the little fairy up, and quickly had her safely below again.

The men were busy battening down when he returned to deck. Here and there along the bulwarks loose ropes were left that the men, if needful, might lash themselves to the rigging.

But now the rain began to come down, first in scattered drops, then in a hot and awful torrent. Louder and louder roared the thunder, brighter and still more vivid flashed the lightning. The thunder-claps followed the lightning so quickly that Dickson knew it was very near.

“Lash yourselves, lads!” the skipper roared through the speaking-trumpet. “She is coming!”

Ah! come she did. And no shoreman can ever tell what the vehemence of a circular hurricane like this sweeping across the ocean is like in strength and vehemence.

Dickson had just time to shout, “The first shock will be the strongest, boys,” when the terrible storm burst upon the doomed ship with a violence indescribable, and a noise like a hundred great guns fired at once.

Thrown at first almost on her beam-ends, she soon righted, and now she was tossed about like a cork. High up on a mighty wave at one moment, down in a dark gulf the next. The foam of the breaking waters and the incessant lightning was the only light they had, and in this glare the faces of the crew looked blue and ghastly.

Bravely did the men stick to the wheel. Hall himself had gone early below to comfort the ladies. Yet, although the waves and spray were making a clean breach over the ship, luckily she was well battened down, and it was dry below. The seas that tumbled inboard were hot and seething.

Mr Hall prevailed upon his wife and daughter to lie down on the lockers, or couches, and to these he did his best to lash them; but so great was the uncertain motion, that he had to clutch with one hand to the table while he did so.

The air down below was as hot as the waters on deck; hot and sulphurous, so that the perspiration stood on the brows of all below. It was indeed a fearful storm.

But it lulled at last, though two men had been called to their account—swept overboard in the clutches of a great green sea.

It lulled; but the intensity of the pitchy darkness still continued. It was no longer a circular storm, but a gale, settling down to less than half a gale towards the commencement of the morning watch. But the binnacle had been washed away, and the men were steering only by blind chance.

Just as daylight, grey and gloomy, began to appear in the east, an awful tell-tale rasping was heard beneath the keel of the Wolverine, and almost at once two of her masts went by the board.

“Axes, men!” cried Dickson—“axes, and clear away the wreck!”

It was a dangerous and difficult task, with every now and then a huge sea rushing in from astern, and all but sweeping the decks.

Daylight came in quickly now, though clouds seemingly a mile in depth obscured the sun, and the horizon was close on board of them all around.

But yonder, looming through the mist, was a coral shore, with huge rugged, and apparently volcanic, mountains rising behind it. Fearing she would soon break up, Captain Dickson determined to lower a boat at all hazards, manned by four of his strongest and best sailors. In this Hall begged that his wife might go with the maid, and the request was granted. Mr Hall watched that boat as she rose and fell on the troubled waters with the greatest anxiety and dread. Suddenly he staggered and clutched the rigging, and his eyes seemed starting from his head.

“Oh, my God! my God!” he cried. “My wife! my wife!”

For a bigger wave than any, a huge breaker or bore, in fact came rushing from seawards and engulfed the unfortunate boat.

And she was never seen, nor anyone who had gone in her. The crew and poor Mrs Hall, with her maid, now—

“Lie where pearls lie deep,
Yet none o’er their low bed may weep.”

Mr Hall was led below by the kind-hearted captain himself, and threw himself on a couch in an agony of grief. Dickson forced him to take a large stimulant, and put a man to watch him, fearing he might rush on deck and pitch himself into the sea.

As to their whereabouts, or the latitude and longitude of that strange, wild island, Dickson knew nothing. He had many times and oft sailed these seas, and was certain he had never seen those lofty peaks and rugged hills before. Although the wind continued, and the keel was breaking up, although she was fast making water below, he determined to hang on to her as long as possible, for there was a probability that the storm might soon die away.

Some of the crew, however, grew impatient at last, and, in spite of threats, lowered another boat, into which crowded six men.

Alas! they, too, went down before they were many yards from the wreck.

But see these figures now flitting up and down on the coral sands! And, strangest sight of all, there is among those dusky, almost naked savages, the tall and commanding figure of a white woman, dressed in skins. The savages are evidently obeying her slightest behest, for a queen she is.

With ropes of grass they are stoutly binding together three large canoes, flanked by outriggers, thus forming a kind of wide raft. Then these are launched, and right rapidly do the paddles flash and drip and ply, as the triple craft nears the ship. The raft seems to come through the seas rather than over them, but busy hands are baling, and, by the time this strange construction arrives on the lee bow, the canoes are free of water.

The Wolverine has but few on board her now, only eight men of the crew, with the officers, little Matty, Hall, and Miss Hall. These latter are lowered first, with three men. They are safely landed through the surf, and Dickson can see the strange white woman advance towards them with outstretched arms.

The raft comes back again, and all on board are now taken off, Captain Dickson being the last to leave the doomed ship.

Oscar, the grand Newfoundland, prefers to swim. No terrors have the waves or surf for him, and he is on shore barking joyfully as he races up and down the beach long before the raft rasps upon the silver sands.

The strange, skin-dressed lady met them. She was English, and dubbed herself Queen of the Isle of Flowers.

“For ten long years,” she told Captain Dickson, “I have been here, and yours is the first ship I have seen. But come to my house behind the hills, and I will tell you my strange story later on.”

Though drenched to the skin, they all most gladly followed the Queen, up glens, and by zigzag paths, and over wild hills, till at last they came to one of the wildest and most beautiful valleys these adventurers had ever beheld. Now they could understand how the Queen had named it the Isle of Flowers.

A beautiful stream went meandering through the valley with every species of tropical or semi-tropical flowering trees it is possible to imagine growing on its banks. No wonder that Matty, whom Reginald carried in his strong arms, cried:

“Oh, doc, dear, zis (this) is surely fairyland! Oh, doc, I’se dizzy wi’ beauty!”

“Hurry on,” said the Queen; “a keen wind is blowing on this hilltop.”

In the midst of a forest of magnolias that scented the air all around, they found the road that led to the Queen’s palace. A long, low building it was, and seemingly comfortable; but the path that led to it was bordered on each side with human skulls placed upon poles.

Noticing Dickson’s look of horror, she smiled.

“These are the skulls of our enemies—a tribe that in war canoes visited our island a few years ago, but never found their way back. My people insisted on placing those horrid relics there. Had I refused my permission, I should have been deposed, probably even slain.”

Into one room she showed the ladies, the officers and few remaining men into another. Here were couches all around, with comfortable mats of grass, and on these, tired and weary, everyone lay and many slept, till their garments were dried in the sun by the Queen’s servants.

It was afternoon now, but the wind had lulled, and soon it was night, clear and starry. The vessel had gone on shore at low tide, but some time during the middle watch a great wave had lifted her and thrown her on her beam-ends high up on the coral sands.

Next morning, when Dickson and Reginald went over the hills, after a hearty breakfast of roast yams and delicious fish, they found that the sea had receded so far that they could walk around the wreck on the dry sand.

That day was spent—with the assistance of the Queen’s special servants—in saving from the vessel everything of value, especially stores, and the ship’s instruments.

Casks of rum and flour, casks of beans, and even butter, with nearly all the bedding and clothes. These latter were spread on the beach to dry. Inland, to the Queen’s mansion, everything else was borne on litters.

But the greatest “save” of all was the arms and ammunition, to say nothing of tools of every description, and canvas wherewith good tents might be built later on.

When all was secured that could be secured, and the remainder of the crew had joined them—

“Men,” said Dickson, “let us pray.”

Down on the coral strand knelt the shipwrecked men, while, with eyes streaming with tears, Captain Dickson prayed as perhaps he had never prayed before, to that Heavenly Father who had spared the lives of those before him.

The natives stood aside wonderingly, but they listened intently and earnestly when, led by their captain, the mariners sang a portion of that beautiful psalm:

“God is our refuge and our strength,
  In straits a present aid;
Therefore, although the earth remove,
  We will not be afraid.”

Annie o' the Banks o' Dee by William Gordon Stables

Chapter Seventeen.

Crusoes on the Island of Flowers—a Threatened Armada.

For weeks and weeks mourned poor Hall for his wife; for weeks and weeks mourned he. He was like Rachel weeping for her children, who would not be comforted “because they were not.”

But the anguish of his grief toned down at last. His sorrow was deep still, but he could listen now to the consolations that Dickson never forgot to give him morn, noon, and night.

“Ah, well,” he said at last, “I shall meet her again in the Bright Beyond, where farewells are never said, where partings are unknown. That thought must be my solace.”

And this thought did console both him and Ilda, his daughter. As for Matty, she was too young to know what grief really was, and romped with Reginald’s dog in the Queen’s beautiful gardens, just as she had done on board the unfortunate yacht—now, alas! a yacht no more.

But busy weeks these had been for the shipwrecked mariners. Yet far from unhappy. They were Crusoes now to all intents and purposes, and acting like Crusoes, having saved all the interior stores, etc, that they could, knowing well that the very next storm would not leave a timber of the poor Wolverine. So at every low tide they laboured at breaking her up. At high tide they worked equally energetically in building a wooden house on a bit of tableland, that was easy of access, and could not be reached by a tide, however high.

The house was very strong, for the very best wood in the ship was used. Moreover, its back was close to the straight and beetling mountain cliff.

The six men of the crew that were saved worked like New Hollanders, as sailors say. The house had sturdy doors, and the vessel’s windows were transhipped. But this wooden house did not actually touch the ground, but was built on two-foot high stone supports. Soot could be strewn around them, and the white ants thus kept at bay. Stone, or rather scoria, steps led up to the dwelling, one end of which was to be not only the sleeping-place of the men, but a kind of recreation-room as well, for Dickson had succeeded in saving even the piano and violins. The other room to the right was not so large, but,

being furnished from the saloon of the Wolverine, was almost elegant, and when complete was always decorated and gay with lovely wildflowers. Indeed, all the flowers here were wild.

The Queen had begged that Miss Hall and wee Matty might sleep at the palace. This was agreed to; but to luncheon not only they but the Queen herself came over every fine day, and the days were nearly all fine.

One day a big storm blew and howled around the rocky mountain peaks. It increased in violence towards evening, and raged all night. Next day scarcely a timber of the wrecked yacht was to be seen, save a few spars that the tempest had cast up on the white and coralline beach.

Captain Dickson was far indeed from being selfish, and quite a quantity of saloon and cabin furniture saved from the wreck was carried on the backs of the natives over the mountain tracks to the beautiful Valley of Flowers, to furnish and decorate the house of the Queen.

Her Majesty was delighted, and when her rooms were complete she gave a great dinner-party, or rather banquet. She had much taste, and the table was certainly most tastefully decorated. The menu was a small one. There was fish, however, excellently cooked.

“I taught my cook myself,” said her Majesty, smiling.

This was followed by the pièce de résistance, a roast sucking-pig. The entrée was strange, namely, fillets of a species of iguana lizard. The huge and terrible-looking iguana lizard, as found on the coast of Africa, crawling on the trees, is very excellent eating, and so were these fillets.

But the fruits were the most delicious anyone around the festive board had ever tasted. There were, strangely enough, not only blushing pine-apples, but guavas, which eat like strawberries smothered in cream; mangoes, and many other fragrant fruits no one there could name.

Dickson had supplied the wine, but very little was used. Goats’ milk and excellent coffee supplied its place.

Poor Hall was still a patient of Reginald’s, and the latter compelled him to take a little wine for his grief’s sake.

Just a word or two about Queen Bertha. Though but twenty and five, her dark hair was already mixed with threads of silver. She was tall for a woman, very beautiful and very commanding. She never stirred abroad in her picturesque dress of skins without having in her hand a tall staff, much higher than herself. It was ornamented—resplendent, in fact—with gold, silver, precious stones and pearls.

"This is my sceptre," she said, "and all my people respect it." She smiled as she added: "I make them do so. I can hypnotise a man with a touch of it; but if a fellow is fractious, I have a strong arm, and he feels the weight of it across his shins. He must fling himself at my feet before I forgive him. My history, gentlemen, is a very brief one, though somewhat sad and romantic. I am the daughter of a wealthy English merchant, who had a strange longing to visit in one of his own ships the shores of Africa and the South Sea Islands. He did so eventually, accompanied by my dear mother and myself, then little more than a child, for I was only fifteen; also an elder brother. Alas! we were driven far out of our way by a gale, or rather hurricane, of wind, and wrecked on this island. My father's last act was to tie me to a spar. That spar was carried away by the tide, and in the débris of the wreck I was washed up on shore. Every soul on board perished except myself. The superstitious natives looked upon the dark-haired maiden as some strange being from another world, and I was revered and made much of from the first. I soon had proof enough that the islanders were cannibals, for they built great fires on the beach and roasted the bodies of the sailors that were washed up. There were, indeed, but few, for the sharks had first choice, and out yonder in that blue and sunlit sea the sharks are often in shoals and schools. Some devoured the human flesh raw, believing that thus they would gain extra strength and bravery in the day of battle."

"Are there many battles, then?" asked Reginald.

"Hitherto, doctor, my people have been the invaders of a larger island lying to the east of us. Thither they go in their war canoes, and so far fortune has favoured them. They bring home heads and human flesh. The flesh they eat, the heads they place on the beach till cleaned and whitened by crabs and ants; then they are stuck on poles in my somewhat ghastly avenue. I have tried, but all in vain, to change the cannibalistic ways of my people. They come to hear me preach salvation on Sundays, and they join in the hymns I sing; but human flesh they will have. Yes, on the whole I am very happy, and would not change my lot with Victoria of Britain herself. My people do love me, mind, and I would rather be somebody in this savage though beautiful island than nobody in the vortex of London society.

"But I have one thing else to tell you. The Red-stripe savages of the isle we have so often conquered are gathering in force, and are determined to carry the war into our country; with what results I cannot even imagine, for they are far stronger numerically than we

are, though not so brave. These savages are also cannibals; not only so, but they put their prisoners to tortures too dreadful even to think of. It will be many months before they arrive, but come they will. I myself shall lead my army. This will inspire my people with pluck and from the hilltops I hope you will see us repel the Armada in beautiful style."

She laughed right merrily as she finished her narrative.

"But my dear Queen," said Dickson, "do you imagine that myself and my brave fellows saved from the wreck will be contented to act as mere spectators from the hills, like the 'gods' in a theatre gallery, looking down on a play? Nay, we must be beside you, or near you, actors in the same drama or tragedy. Lucky it is, doctor, that we managed to save our two six-pounders, our rifles, and nearly all our ammunition. Why are they called the Red-stripe savages, your Majesty?"

"Because, though almost naked, their bodies when prepared for war are all barred over with red paint. The face is hideous, for an eye is painted on the forehead, and a kind of cap with the pricked ears of the wild fox, which is half a wolf, worn on the head. Their arms are bows, spears, shields of great size, which quite cover them, and terrible black knives."

"Our shrapnel, believe me, lady, will go through all that, and their heads as well."

"Though loth to seek your assistance," said Queen Bertha, "in this case I shall be glad of it. For if they succeed in conquering us the massacre would be awful. Not a man, woman or child would be left alive on our beautiful island."

"Assuredly we shall conquer them," said Dickson. "The very sound of our guns and crack of our rifles will astonish and demoralise them. Not a boat shall return of their invincible Armada; perhaps not a savage will be left alive to tell the tale hereafter."

"That would indeed be a blessing to us. And my people have half-promised not to make war on them again. We should therefore live in peace, and fear no more Armadas."

Mr Hall was now brightening up again, and all the survivors of the unfortunate Wolverine, having something to engage their attention, became quite jolly and happy. I scarce need mention Matty. The child was happy under all circumstances.

Ilda, too, was contented. Perhaps never more so than when taking long walks with Reginald up the lovely valley, gathering wildflowers, or fishing in the winding river.

Ilda was really beautiful. Her beauty was almost of the classical type, and her voice was sweet to listen to. So thought Reginald.

“How charmingly brown the sun has made you, dear Ilda,” said Reginald, as she leant on his arm by the riverside.

He touched her lightly on the cheek as he spoke. Her head fell lightly on his shoulder just then, as if she were tired, and he noticed that there were tears in her eyes.

“No, not tired,” she answered, looking up into his face.

Redder, sweeter lips surely no girl ever possessed.

For just a moment he drew her to his breast and kissed those lips.

Ah, well, Reginald Grahame was only a man.

I fear that Ilda was only a woman, and that she really loved the handsome, brown-faced and manly doctor.

They had now been one year and two months away from Scotland, and at this very moment the Laird Fletcher was paying all the attention in his power to Annie o’ the Banks o’ Dee. He was really a modern “Auld Robin Grey.”

“My mither she fell sick,
An’ my Jamie at the sea;
Then Aold Robin Grey came a-courting me.”

Annie o' the Banks o' Dee by William Gordon Stables

Chapter Eighteen.

A Cannibal Brewer and Cannibal Beer.

Queen Bertha of the Isle of Flowers had industriously laboured among her people. It gave her pleasure to do so. She even taught them English, which all could now speak after a fashion.

Well, while Dickson and Hall were drilling a small company of blacks as soldiers, and trying to make them experts in the use of the rifle—for they had over a score of these to spare—Reginald spent much of his time on the hills with his gun, shooting small wild pigs, rock-rabbits, tuen-tuens, etc. He was always accompanied by Ilda, merry Matty, and Oscar the Newfoundland. No matter where a wild bird fell, in river or lake, or in the bush, Oscar found it, and laid it at his master's feet.

But one day Reginald, while shooting, made a singular discovery indeed. Far up in the hills they came upon the grass hut of a very peculiar old man indeed. Before reaching the place quite, they met three natives, and they were evidently intoxicated, staggering, laughing, singing and dancing.

The old man was seated in his doorway. Around his hut were at least a dozen huge clay jars, with clay lids, and these contained beer of some sort. He was the most hideous old wretch that Reginald had yet clapped eyes on. Even Matty was terrified, and hugged the great dog round the neck as she gazed on that awful-looking and repulsive creature.

"These jars," said Reginald, "evidently contain some intoxicating drink. And the old brewer doesn't look a beauty, nor a saint either!"

Nor did he. Here he is, as I myself have seen him more than once. Squatting tailor-fashion outside the door of his dark and windowless hut, a man with a mop of rough silvery hair, thin lips, drawn back into a grin, so that one could see all his awful teeth—tusks they really seemed to be, each one filed into a pointed triangle, the better to tear human flesh. They were stained red. His eyes were red also, and like those of some scared wild beast and cheeks and brow were covered with symmetrical scars. But he was a brewer, and very busy plying his trade. Beside him were open cocoa-nuts and bunches of fragrant herbs.

"Go on," said Reginald; "don't let us interfere with business, pray."

The horrid creature put a huge lump of cocoa-nut into his mouth, then some herbs, and chewed the lot together; then taking a mouthful of water from a chatty, he spat the whole mass into a jar and proceeded as before. This awful mess of chewed cocoa-nut, herbs, and saliva ferments into a kind of spirit. This is poured off and mixed with water, and lo! the beer of the cannibal islanders!

Reginald, noticing a strange-looking chain hanging across the old man's scarred and tattooed chest, begged to examine it. To his astonishment, it consisted entirely of beautiful pearls and small nuggets of gold.

"Where did this come from, my man?"

"Ugh! I catchee he plenty twick. Plenty mo'. Ver' mooch plenty."

Reginald considered for a moment. Money was no good to an old wretch like this, but he wore around his waist a beautiful crimson sash. This he divested himself of, and held it up before the cannibal brewer.

"I will give you this for your chain," he said, "and another as good to-morrow, if you will come now and show us where you find these things."

The old man at once threw the chain at Reginald's feet, and seized the scarf delightedly.

"I come quick—dis moment!" he cried. And he was as good as his word.

It was a long walk, and a wild one. Sometimes Reginald carried Matty; sometimes she rode on the great dog. But they arrived at last at the entrance to a gloomy defile, and here in the hillsides were openings innumerable, evidently not made by hands of man. Here, however, was an El Dorado. Caves of gold! for numerous small nuggets were found on the floors and shining in the white walls around them.

It was evident enough that it only needed digging and a little hard work to make a pile from any single one of these caves.

Next about the pearls. The old savage took the party to the riverside. He waded in, and in five minutes had thrown on shore at least a hundred pearl oysters. These, on coming to bank, he opened one by one, and ten large and beautiful white pearls were found, with ever so many half-faced ones.

Strange and wondrous indeed was the story that Reginald Grahame had to relate in private to Mr Hall and Captain Dickson on his return to his home by the sea.

At present the trio kept the secret to themselves. That gold was to be had for the gathering was evident enough. But to share it with six men was another question. It might be better, at all events, if they were first and foremost to make their own pile. Anyhow, the men's services might be required; in that case they could choose their own claims, unless Reginald claimed the whole ravine. This he was entitled to do, but he was very far indeed from being mean and greedy.

But so intricate was the way to the ravine of gold that without a guide no one could possibly find it.

For six whole weeks no gold digging was thought about. Matters of even greater import occupied the minds of the white men.

The company of blacks was beautifully drilled by this time, and made fairly good marksmen with the rifle. They were, indeed, the boldest and bravest on the island, and many of them the Queen's own bodyguards.

Well, the bay enclosed by the reefs on one of which the Wolverine had struck was the only landing-place in the whole island. Every other part of the shore was guarded by precipitous rocks a thousand feet high at least, rising sheer and black out of the ocean. The Armada must come here, then, if anywhere; and, moreover, the bay faced the enemy's own island, although, with the exception of a mountain peak or two, seen above the horizon, it was far too distant to be visible.

A grass watch-tower was built on the brow of a hill, and a sentry occupied this by night as well as by day. Only keen-eyed blacks were chosen for this important duty, and they were told that if any suspicious sign was observed they must communicate immediately with Captain Dickson.

And now, facing the sea, a strong palisaded fort was built, and completely clayed over, so as to be almost invisible from the sea. It was roofed over with timber, as a protection against the enemy's arrows; it was also loop-holed for rifles, and here, moreover, were mounted the two six-pounders. Plenty of ammunition for both rifles and guns was placed at a safe distance from the ports.

One evening the sentry ran below to report that, seeing a glare in the sky, he had climbed high up the mountain side, and by aid of the night-glass could see that fires were lighted on the brow of every low hill on the enemy's island, and that savages in

rings were wildly dancing around them. The sentry had no doubt that the attack on the Isle of Flowers would soon follow this. Dickson thanked the man heartily for his attention, gave him coffee and biscuit, and sent him back to the sentry hut. So kind was the captain, and so interested in the welfare of the blacks, that any one of those he had trained would have fought at fearful odds for him. For kindness towards, a savage soon wins his heart, and his respect as well.

Three days more passed by—oh, so slowly and wearily! For a cloud hovered over the camp that the white men tried in vain to dispel. There was this fearful Armada to face and to fight, and the anxiety born of thinking about it was harder to bear than the actual battle itself would be.

Dickson was a strictly pious man. Never a morning and never an evening passed without his summoning his men to prayers, and in true Scottish fashion reading a portion from the little Bible which, like General Gordon, he never failed to carry in his bosom.

I think he did good. I think he made converts. Mind, without any preaching. He simply led these darkened intellects to the Light, the glorious Light of revealed religion.

The portion of the fort where the guns were placed was so fashioned as to be able to cover a wide space of sea on both sides, and from this arrangement Dickson expected great results.

A whole week had worn away since the first fires had been seen from the hilltop; but every night those fires had blazed.

It was evident enough the enemy was endeavouring to propitiate their gods before sailing. For by day, on climbing a mountain, Dickson, by means of his large telescope, could see on the beach that human sacrifices were being offered up.

It was fearful to behold. Men, or perhaps women, were chained to stakes on the beach, and pyres of wood built around them. As the fire curled up through the smoke in tongues, he could see the wretches writhing in agony, while round them danced the spear-armed savages.

Reginald had little to do at present, and would have but little to do until summoned to tight. So he was often at the Queen’s palace, and a very delightful conversationalist she proved herself to be. She had avowed her intention of being at the great battle herself. Her presence, and the sway of her pole-like sceptre, she assured the doctor, would give her people confidence, and mayhap be the turning point which would lead to victory.

Many a ramble together had Reginald and Ilda, nearly always followed by sweet wee Matty and her canine favourite Oscar.

One day, however, Matty was at the seaside camp, and Reginald went out with Ilda alone to collect bouquets for the Queen's table. The day was a hot one, but both were young, and when they zigzagged up a mountain side they found not only shade on a green mound beneath some spreading trees, but coolness as well.

All this morning Reginald had been thinking sorrowfully about his lost love, as he now called Annie, and of the country he never expected again to see, because never did ships visit this unknown island unless driven hither by storm or tempest.

But now there was the soft and dreamy light of love in Ilda's eyes, if ever there were in a woman's.

Reginald was very far indeed from being unfaithful at heart to his betrothed, but—well, he could not help thinking how strangely beautiful Ilda was. When she leant towards him and gave one coy glance into his face, it might have been but passion—I cannot say; it might be budding love. At all events, he drew her to his breast and kissed those red lips over and over again, she blushing, but unresisting as before.

What he might have said I do not know. But at that moment a half-naked armed savage burst hurriedly in upon the scene.

"Come, sah, come; de capatin he sendee me. De bad black mans' war canoes dey is coming, too. Plenty big boat, plenty spear and bow."

Reginald thought no more of love just then. His Scottish blood was on fire, and when he had seen Ilda safe in the palace he bade her an affectionate but hurried farewell, and hurried away to the front.

The Armada was coming in deadly earnest, and no one in the Isle of Flowers could even guess how matters might end.

Annie o' the Banks o' Dee by William Gordon Stables

Chapter Nineteen.

Gold and Pearls—Jack Carousing.

No confusion here in the fort. The men were all in, the other spear-armed corps of at least five hundred were hidden in the bush at the base of the mountain side. Inside everything was being conducted as quietly and regularly as—as—well, as a marriage in church.

But looking seaward, even without the aid of a glass, the great Armada could be seen approaching.

Huge black many-paddled war canoes, forty in all, and probably with fifty men in each, or nearly a thousand altogether.

Nearer and nearer they swept with many a wild or warlike shout that was meant to strike terror into the hearts of the Flower Islanders. They were soon so near that the rattling of their spears as they struck them against their big shields could be distinctly heard.

So near now that with a small opera-glass which the doctor carried, he could see their painted skins and faces, and the red and horrible streaks.

And now it was time to fire the first gun. A shot or shell would have carried much further, but grape would be ever so much more demoralising. Dickson himself trained that gun on the foremost or leading boat.

The surprise of the enemy was indeed great. Never had they seen a gun fired before, nor heard the roar of one. But yonder on shore and in front of the barricaded fort they could see a balloon of white smoke, with a stream of red fire in the centre. Then the roar of that piece of ordnance was appalling. Next moment the crowded boat or war canoe was filled with corpses and the shrieking, bleeding wounded. But she was in splinters, and quickly filled and sank. The other boats lay on their paddles for a minute, uncertain what to do.

Meanwhile, and just as Reginald was quickly sponging out the gun previous to reloading, and all was silent for a time, a curious thing occurred.

In at the tiny back door of the fort, which had not yet been closed, rushed a tiny, laughing figure, all in white and barefooted. It was Matty, and in jumped honest Oscar next. She was laughing merrily.

“Oh!” she cried, clapping her hands with glee. “They put me to bed, but I dot up again and runned away twickly, and I’se come to ’ssist!”

“Oh, my darling!” cried Reginald, in great concern, “why did you come?”

“I can tally (carry) tartridges and powder.”

“No, no, no, dear. You must obey me. Here, there is my coat, and in that corner you must sit till all the fight is over.”

Matty said: “Tiss me, then.”

He kissed her, and down she sat with the dog beside her, and looked very demure indeed, with that one wee forefinger in her mouth.

Strange to say, she soon fell fast asleep, with her head pillowed on the dog’s back, one hand clutching his mane.

The battle now became general all along the line. For the riflemen in the back, as well as those within the fort, began to fire.

And now slowly down the hill came Bertha, the Island Queen, sceptre-pole in hand, and dressed in skins of dazzling white. A very imposing figure she looked. But her presence gave extra courage to her people.

The officers in almost every boat were picked off easily, so short was now the range.

It must be admitted that the enemy showed no lack of courage, though boat after boat was sunk to the number of six, and rifles rang out from the bush and fort in a series of independent but incessant firing, and well did the foe understand that their main safety now consisted in landing as soon as they possibly could. They knew that in a hand-to-hand fight the “fire-sticks,” as savages call our rifles, would be of little avail.

The guns were worked with splendid results, however, and by the time the war canoes were beached only about four hundred men were left to fight. But these cannibals knew no fear.

One more telling volley from the bush, one more shot from a six-pounder, then from behind a bush rushed the white Queen waving aloft her sceptre, and instantly from their cover, spear-armed, now rushed the Flower Islanders, one thousand strong at least The fight was a fearful one. Dickson, Hall, with Reginald and the men in the fort, joined with revolver and cutlass. The Queen was in the front. No, she fought not, but her presence there was like that of Joan of Arc.

Many of the invaded fell dead and wounded; but even the fierce foe was forced to yield at last, and the miserable remnant of them tried once more to reach their boats.

They never did. It was a war of extermination, and the invaders were utterly and completely wiped out Never a boat, never a man returned home to their distant island to tell the fearful tale.

The Flower Islanders expected now a grand feast. Here was flesh—human flesh.

The Queen forbade it, and Dickson himself gave orders that every body—the wounded had been stabbed—should be rowed out to sea and thrown overboard to feed the sharks. They demurred. Dickson was determined and stern. If not obeyed instantly, he should turn the guns on the would-be cannibals.

Reginald suggested as a kind of compromise that each man who had been fighting should receive a large biscuit and a glass of rum. It was a happy thought, and after this the work was set about merrily. The sea-burial occupied all the afternoon till within an hour of sunset. Then the canoes returned. All was over. The Armada was no more.

But around him now Dickson gathered the Flower Island Army, and offered up a prayer of thanks to the God of Battle, who had fought on their side, and the islanders seemed much impressed. The enemy would probably never attempt invasion again—in our heroes' time, at all events.

The Queen gave a banquet that night, she herself presiding. Of course, nothing was talked about except the incidents of the recent terrible battle.

Matty came in for a share of praise, but was told she really must not run away again. And she promised, only adding that she thought she could "'ssist the poor dear doc."

The banquet lasted till late. The Queen had not forgotten how to play and sing. Dickson and Reginald were both good musicians, and one or two blacks gave inimitable performances, partly gesture, partly song; which would assuredly have brought down the house if given in a London music-hall.

Being freed now for a time from any fear of further invasion, attention was turned to the gold mines and to the pearl-fishing. At a meeting on the hillside it was resolved that the men—they were all honest fellows—should be admitted to the secret. To have shut them out would hardly have been fair, so thought all.

Well, naturally enough, Reginald chose what he considered the best two claims; then came Dickson's choice; then Mr Hall's, and after these the six white sailors, and they were willing to dig like heroes.

They divided the work of the day into two parts. One was spent at the gold mines, the other in fishing for pearls. They were remarkably successful with the latter, but for nine months at least the gold came but slowly in, and this was disheartening. Nevertheless, they continued to dig and dig, assisted by native labour. The savages often found nuggets among the débris that had been overlooked by the white men, and these they dutifully presented to the owners of the claims.

It must be admitted that the men were most energetic, for while their officers were always at the Queen's palace by five o'clock, and ready for dinner, the men often worked by moonlight, or even by the glimmer of lanterns. They were slowly accumulating wealth.

Success crowned Reginald's efforts at last, though. For, to his extreme wonderment and delight, he struck a splendid pocket.

It was deep down at the far end of the cave, and the mould was of a sandy nature, much of it apparently powdered quartz, broken, perhaps, by the awful pressure of the mountain above. But the very first nugget he pulled from here was as large as a pineapple, and many more followed, though none so large.

No wonder his heart palpitated with joy and excitement, or that his comrades crowded round to shake his hand and congratulate him. But that cave had already made Reginald a fairly wealthy man. His success, moreover, encouraged the others to dig all the harder, and not without excellent results. It seemed, indeed, that not only was this island a flowery land, but an isle of gold. And the further they dug into the hill the more gold did they find. The men were very happy.

"Oh, Bill," said one to his pal one night at supper, "if ever we does get a ship home from this blessed isle, won't my Polly be glad to see me just!"

"Ay, Jack, she will; but I ain't in any particular hurry to go yet, you know."

“Well, it’s two years come Monday since we sailed away from the beautiful Clyde. Heigho! I shouldn’t wonder if Polly has given me up for good and all, and married some counter-jumping land-lubber of a draper or grocer.”

“Never mind, Jack; there’s as good fish in the sea as ever came out of it yet. Pass the rum. This is Saturday night, and it was just real good of Captain Dickson to send us an extra drop of the rosy. Fill your glasses, gentlemen, for a toast and a song. That digging has made me a mighty deal too tired to think of dancing to the sweetest jig e’er a fiddler could scrape out.”

“Well, give us your toast, Bill. We’re all primed and waiting.”

“My toast ain’t a very short one, but here it goes: ‘May the next year be our very last in this ’ere blessed island; may we all go home with bags of gold, and find our sweethearts true and faithful.’”

“Hear, hear!” And every glass was drained to the bottom. “Now for the song.”

“Oh, only an old ditty o’ Dibdin’s, and I’d rather be on the heavin’ ocean when I sings it. There is no accompaniment to a song so fetching as that which the boom and the wash of the waves make. Them’s my sentiments, boys.

“Wives and Sweethearts.

“’Tis said we ve’t’rous diehards, when we leave the shore,
Our friends should mourn,
Lest we return
To bless their sight no more;
But this is all a notion
Bold Jack can’t understand,
Some die upon the ocean,
And some die on the land.
Then since ’tis clear,
Howe’er we steer,
No man’s life’s under his command;
Let tempests howl
And billows roll,
And dangers press;
In spite of these there are some joys

Us jolly tars to bless,
For Saturday night still comes, my boys,
To drink to Poll and Bess.

“Hurrah!” But just at this moment a strange and ominous sound, like distant thunder, put a sudden stop to the sailors’ Saturday night. All started to their feet to listen.

Annie o' the Banks o' Dee by William Gordon Stables

Chapter Twenty.

"Oh, awful! What can it be?" cried Reginald.

I do not hesitate to say that the possession of unprotected wealth maketh cowards of most people. The anxiety connected therewith may keep one awake at night, and bring on a state of nervousness that shall end in a break-up of the general health. But no thought of ever losing the precious nuggets and pearls that had cost him so much hard work came into the mind of Reginald Grahame, until an event took place which proved that gold may tempt even those we trust the most.

Harry Jenkins was a bright little sailor, the pet of his mess. He was always singing when at work in the diggings, and he generally managed to keep his comrades in excellent humour, and laughing all the time. In their messroom of an evening they were all frank and free, and hid nothing one from the other. For each believed in his pal's honesty.

"I have a thousand pounds' worth of nuggets at least!" said Harry one evening.

"And I," said Bill Johnson, "have half as much again."

They showed each other their gold, comparing nuggets, their very eyes glittering with joy as they thought of how happy they should be when they returned once more to their own country. Then they each stowed away their wealth of nuggets and pearls, placed in tiny canvas bags inside their small sea-chests.

This was about a week after that pleasant Saturday night which was so suddenly broken up by the muttering of subterranean thunder and the trembling of the earth.

But earthquakes were frequent in the island, though as yet not severe. The Queen was by no means alarmed, but Ilda was—terribly so.

"Oh," she cried, "I wish I were away and away from this terrible island!"

The Queen comforted her all she could.

"I have a presentiment," replied the poor girl, "that this is not the last nor the worst."

But when days and days passed away, and there were no more signs of earth-tremor, she regained courage, and was once more the same happy girl she had been before.

Then the occurrence took place that made Reginald suspicious of the honesty of some of those British sailors.

One morning Harry was missing. They sought him high, they sought him low, but all in vain. Then it occurred to Johnson to look into his box. The box, with all his gold and pearls, was gone!

Harry's box had been left open, and it was found to be empty. No one else had lost anything. However, this was a clue, and the officers set themselves to unravel the mystery at once. Nor was it long before they did so. Not only was one of the largest canoes missing, with a sail that had been rigged on her, but two of the strongest natives and best boatmen.

It was sadly evident that Harry was a thief, and that he had bribed these two savages to set out to sea with him.

There was a favouring breeze for the west, and Harry no doubt hoped that, after probably a week's sailing, he would reach some of the more civilised of the Polynesian islands, and find his way in a ship back to Britain. Whether he did so may never be known, but the fact that the breeze increased to over half a gale about three days after he had fled, makes it rather more than probable that the big canoe was swamped, and that she foundered, going down with the crew and the ill-gotten gold as well. Only a proof that the wicked do not always prosper in this world.

Poor Johnson's grief was sad to witness.

"On my little store," he told his messmates, wringing his hands, and with the tears flowing over his cheeks, "I placed all my future happiness. I care not now what happens. One thing alone I know: life to me has no more charms, and I can never face poor Mary again."

He went to the diggings again in a halfhearted kind of way, and for a day or two was fairly successful; but it was evident that his heart was almost broken, and that if something were not done he might some evening throw himself over a cliff, and so end a life that had become distasteful to him.

So one morning Reginald had an interview with his messmates.

“I myself,” he said, “must have already collected over twenty thousand pounds in nuggets and pearls, and will willingly give of this my store five hundred pounds worth of gold by weight, if you, Captain Dickson, and you, Hall, will do the same. Thus shall we restore reason and happiness to a fellow-creature, and one of the best-hearted sailors that ever lived and sailed the salt, salt seas.”

Both Dickson and Hall must need shake hands with Reginald, and, while the tears stood in his eyes, the former said:

“That will we, my dear boy, and God will bless your riches, and restore you all your desires whenever we reach our British shores again.”

And so that very night there was no more happy man than Johnson.

Another Saturday night in the men’s mess. Dickson willingly spliced the main-brace twice over, and the night passed pleasantly on with yarn and song till midnight. But the thief Harry was never mentioned. It was better thus. Already, perhaps, the man had met his doom, and so they forgave him. Yet somehow this incident rankled in Reginald’s bosom, and made him very uneasy.

“I say,” he said to Dickson one day, “I confess that the flight of Harry Jenkins with poor Johnson’s gold has made me suspicious.”

“And me so as well,” said Dickson.

“I mean,” said Reginald, “to bury my treasure, and I have already selected a spot.”

“You have? Then I shall bury mine near yours. I have ever liked you, doctor, since first we met, and we have been as brothers.”

They shook hands.

Appealed to, Mr Hall said straight:

“I am a wealthy man, and, if ever I reach America, I shall have more than I can spend. I shall leave mine in the box where it is. I admit,” he added, “that if there be one thief among six men, there may be two, and gold is a great temptation. But I’ll go with you at the dead of night, and help to carry, and help you to bury your treasure.”

They thanked him heartily, and accepted his kindly assistance.

The spot at which Reginald had chosen to hide his gold and treasure was called Lone Tree Hill. It was on a bare, bluff mountain side. Here stood one huge eucalyptus tree, that might have been used as a landmark for ships at sea had it been in the track of vessels. But this island, as I have already said, was not so.

Strangely enough, all around this tree the hill was supposed to be haunted by an evil spirit, and there was not a native who would go anywhere near it, even in broad daylight. The spirit took many forms, sometimes rushing down in the shape of a fox, or even wild pig, and scaring the natives into convulsions, but more often, and always before an earthquake, the spirit was seen in the shape of a round ball of flame on the very top of the tree.

This was likely enough. I myself have seen a mysterious flame of this kind on the truck or highest portion of a ship's mast, and we sailors call it Saint Elmo's fire. I have known sailors, who would not have been afraid to bear the brunt of battle in a man-o'-war, tremble with superstitious dread as they beheld that mysterious quivering flame at the mast-head. Some evil, they would tell you, was sure to happen. A storm invariably followed. Well, generally a gale wind did, owing to the electric conditions of the atmosphere.

A bright scimitar of moon was shining at midnight when Dickson and Reginald, assisted by Hall, stole silently out and away to the hills to bury their treasure.

There were few sounds to be heard to-night on the island. Far out in the bay there was at times the splash of a shark or the strange cooing of a porpoise, and in the valley the yapping of foxes in pursuit of their prey. The mournful hooting of great owls sounded from the woods, with now and then the cry of a night bird, or shriek of wounded bird.

It was a long and stiff walk to Lone Tree Hill; but arrived there, they set to work at once to dig at the eucalyptus root. The holes made—Dickson's to the east, Reginald's to the west—the nuggets, enclosed in strong tarpaulin bags, were laid in, and next the pearls, in small cash-boxes, were placed above these. The earth was now filled in, and the sods replaced so carefully and neatly that no one could have told that the earth had ever been broken or the sods upturned.

Then, breathing a prayer for the safety of their treasure, on which so much might depend in future, they walked silently down the hill and back to the camp.

But that very night—or rather towards morning—an event took place that alarmed all hands.

The earth shook and trembled, and finally heaved; and it felt as if the house were a ship in the doldrums crossing the Line. Everyone was dashed on to the floor, and for a time lay there almost stunned, giddy, and even sick. It passed off. But in an hour's time a worse shock followed, and all hands rushed into the open air to seek for safety.

Outside it was not only hot and stifling—for not a breath of wind was blowing—but the air had a strange and almost suffocating sulphurous odour. And this was soon accounted for. Now, not far from Lone Tree Mountain was a high and conical hill.

From this, to the great astonishment of all, smoke and flames were now seen issuing. The flames leapt in marvellous tongues high up through the smoke. There was the whitest of steam mingling with the smoke, and anon showers of dust, scorai, and stones began to fall.

For a minute or two the sight quite demoralised the trio. But the men, too, had run out, and all had thrown themselves face down on the ground while the heaving of the earth continued. It was a new experience, and a terrible one. Dickson went towards them now.

"I do not think, boys, that the danger is very extreme," he said. "But I advise you to keep out of doors as much as possible, in case of a greater shock, which may bring down our humble dwelling. And now, Hall, and you, Reginald," he added, "the ladies at the palace will, I fear, be in great terror. It is our duty to go to them. Our presence may help to cheer them up."

Daylight was beginning to dawn, though from rolling clouds of smoke in the far east the sun could only be seen like a red-hot iron shot. It was evident enough to our heroes when they had climbed the highest intervening hill, that the island from which the Armada had come was far more severely stricken than this Isle of Flowers was.

But as they still gazed eastward at the three or four blazing mountains on that island, they started and clung together with something akin to terror in every heart.

"Oh, awful! What can it be?" cried Reginald.

Annie o' the Banks o' Dee by William Gordon Stables

Chapter Twenty One.

A Terrible Time.

Never until the crack of doom might they hear such another report as that which now fell upon their ears. At almost the same moment, in a comminglement of smoke and fire, a huge dark object was seen to be carried high into the air, probably even a mile high. It then took a westerly direction, and came towards the Isle of Flowers, getting larger every second, till it descended into the sea, end on, and not two miles away. It was seen to be a gigantic rock, perhaps many, many acres in extent.

The waters now rose on every side, the noise was deafening; then in, landwards, sped a huge bore, breaker, or wave, call it what you please, but darkness almost enveloped it, and from this thunders roared and zigzag lightning flashed as it dashed onwards to the island shore. The men they had left behind had speedily climbed the rocks behind the camp, for although the wave did not reach so high, the spray itself would have suffocated them, had they not looked out for safety.

It was an awful moment. But the wave receded at last, and the sea was once more calm. Only a new island had been formed by the fall of the rock into the ocean's coral depths, and for a time the thunder and lightning ceased. Not the volcanic eruptions, however. And but for the blaze and lurid light of these the enemy's isle, as it was called, must have been in total darkness. Truly a terrible sight! But our heroes hurried on.

Just as they had expected, when they reached the Queen's palace they found poor Miss Hall, and even little Matty—with all her innocent courage—in a state of great terror. The Queen alone was self-possessed. She had seen a volcanic eruption before. Ilda was lying on the couch with her arms round Matty's waist Matty standing by her side. The child was now seven years of age, and could talk and think better. Reginald, after kissing Ilda's brow, sat down beside them, and Matty clambered on his knee.

Meanwhile, the darkness had increased so much that the Queen called upon her dusky attendants to light the great oil lamp that swung from the roof. The Queen continued self-possessed, and tried to comfort her guests.

"It will soon be over," she said. "I am assured of that. My experience is great."

But Matty refused all consolation.

“I’se never been a very great sinner, has I?” she innocently asked Reginald, as she clung round his neck.

“Oh, no, darling,” he said; “you are too young to be much of a sinner.”

“You think God won’t be angry, and will take you and me and Ilda and Queen Bertha straight up to Heaven, clothes and all?”

“My child,” said Reginald, “what has put all this into your head?”

“Oh,” she answered, “because I know the Day of Judgment has come.”

Well, there was some excuse for the little innocent thinking so.

Without the thickest darkness reigned. Dickson and Hall went to the door, but did not venture out. Scoria was falling, and destroying all the shrubs and flowers in the beautiful valley. The river was mixed with boiling lava, and the noise therefrom was like a thousand engines blowing off steam at one and the same time. Surely never was such loud and terrible thunder heard before; and the lightning was so vivid and so incessant that not only did the island itself seem all ablaze, but even the distant sea. Crimson and blue fire appeared to lick its surface in all directions.

But the burning mountain itself was the most wondrous sight eyes of man could look upon. The smoke and steam rose and rolled amidst the play of lightning miles high apparently. The peak of the mountain itself shot up a continuous stream of orange-yellow flame, in which here and there small black spots could be seen—rocks and stones, without a doubt.

But the cone of the great hill itself was marvellously beautiful. For rivers of lava—Dickson counted nine in all—were rushing down its sides in a straight course, and these were streams of coloured fire, almost every one a different hue—deep crimson, green, and blue, and even orange.

Were it not for the terror of the sight, our heroes would have enjoyed it. Reginald carried Matty to the door to see the beauty of the burning mountain. She took one brief glance, then shudderingly held closer to Reginald’s neck.

“Take me back, take me back!” she cried in an agony of fear. “That is the bad place! Oh, when will God come and take us away?”

All that fearful day and all the following night scoria and ashes continued to fall, the thunder never ceased, and the lightning was still incessant. There was no chance now of getting back to camp, and they trembled to think of what might have taken place.

Towards morning, however, a wondrous change took place. The sky got clearer, a star or two shone through the rifts of heavy, overhanging clouds. The fire no longer rose from the mountain, only a thick balloon-shaped white cloud lay over it. Then the rain began to fall, and, strangely enough, mingled with the rain, which felt warm, were gigantic hailstones and pieces of ice as large as six-pound shells. Then up rose the glorious sun. Like a red ball of fire he certainly was; but oh, what a welcome sight!

That forenoon, all being now peace and quiet, Dickson and his comrades determined to march back to camp and ease their minds. After a long and toilsome journey over the hills, many of which were covered with ashes, they reached camp, and were glad to find the men alive, and the house intact. A rampart had been built around the barracks, as Hall called it, and inside was a large drill-yard.

Dickson served out rum to the men, and they soon were cheerful enough once more. The guns had been mounted on the walls, and all rifles were stowed away inside. This was at a suggestion from Hall.

“You never can trust those niggers,” he said quietly, shaking his head.

And well it was, as it turned out, that Dickson had taken Mr Hall’s advice.

That same afternoon, about two o’clock, the same savages who had fought with rifles from the bush against the invaders came hurriedly and somewhat excitedly into camp. The spokesman, a tall and splendid-looking native, gesticulated wildly, as he almost shouted in the officers’ ears:

“To-mollow molning dey come! All dis island rise! Dey come to kill and eat!”

The officers were astonished. What had they done to deserve so terrible a fate?

“Dey blame you for all. Oh, be plepared to fight. Gib us guns, and we too will fight plenty much. Foh true!”

A very uneasy night was passed, but the yard and guns had been cleared of cinders and scoria, the bulwarks strengthened, and before the sun once more shone red over the sea Dickson was prepared for either battle or siege. Everyone had been assigned his quarters.

The day was still, hot, and somewhat sultry. Luckily the little garrison was well provisioned, and the water would last a week or even longer. Low muttering thunders were still heard in the direction of the volcano, and sometimes the earth shook and trembled somewhat, but it was evident that the subterranean fires had burnt themselves out, and it might be a score of years before another eruption occurred.

It was evident that the savages did not think so. For as long as the cloud hung over the peak they did not consider themselves safe. About twelve o'clock that day distant shouts and cries were heard in the nearest glen, and presently an undisciplined mob of nearly a thousand howling savages, armed with bows and spears and broad black knives, appeared on the sands, in their war-paint. It was evidently their intention to storm the position, and determinedly too. They halted, however, and seemed to have a hasty consultation. Then a chief boldly advanced to the ramparts to hold a parley. His speech was a curious one, and he himself, dressed partly in skins and leaning on a spear like a weaver's beam, was a strangely wild and romantic figure.

The officers appeared above the ramparts to look and to listen.

"Hear, O white men!" cried the savage chief, in fairly good English; "'tis you who brought dis evil on us. We now do starve. De rice and de fruit and de rats and most all wild beasts dey kill or hide demselves. In de sea all round de fish he die. We soon starve. But we not wish to fight. You and your men saved us from the foe that came in der big black war canoe. Den you try to teach us God and good. But we all same as before now. We must fight, eat and live, if you do not leave the island. Plenty big canoe take you off. Den de grass and trees and fruit will grow again, and we shall be happy and flee onct mo'."

"An end to this!" cried Dickson angrily. "Fight as you please, and as soon as you please. But mind, you will have a devilish hot reception, and few of you will return to your glens to tell the tale. Away!"

As soon as the chief had returned and communicated to his men the result of the interview, they shrieked and shouted and danced like demons. They brandished their spears aloft and rattled them against their shields. Then, with one continuous maddened howl, they dashed onwards to scale the ramparts. "Blood! blood!" was their battle cry.

Well knowing that if once they got inside the little garrison would soon be butchered, Dickson immediately had both guns trained on them. He himself did so.

“Bang! bang!” they went, and the grape made fearful havoc in the close and serried ranks of the cannibals. The rifles kept up a withering fire. Again, and quickly too, the guns were loaded and run out, and just as the enemy had scaled the brae they were once more met by the terrible fire, and positively hewn down before it.

Not even savages could stand this. They became demoralised, and fled incontinently. And they soon disappeared, carrying many of their dead with them. Far along the beach went they, and as stakes were placed in the ground, large fires built around them, and one or more of the dead thrown on each, it was evident that they had made up their minds not to starve.

One of the blacks was now sent out from the fort to make a circuit round the hills, and then, mingling with the savages, to find out out what was their intention.

He returned in a few hours, and while the awful feast was still going on. A night attack was determined on, and they believed they would inherit strength and bravery by eating their dead comrades. That was the scout’s report.

Annie o' the Banks o' Dee by William Gordon Stables

Chapter Twenty Two.

More Fearful Fighting—Golden Gulch—"A Ship! A Ship!"

Forewarned is, or ought to be, forearmed. Nevertheless, it must be confessed that Dickson and the others greatly dreaded an attack by savages under cover of the moonless darkness of a tropical night. All was done that could be done to repel the fury of the onslaught. But come it must and would.

Just as the sun was sinking behind the western mountains, amidst lurid and threatening clouds, a happy thought occurred to one of the sailors.

"Sir," he said to Dickson, "the darkness will be our greatest foe, will it not?"

"Certainly. If these demon cannibals would but show front in daylight we could easily disperse them, as we did before. Have you any plans, McGregor?"

"I'm only a humble sailor," said McGregor, "but my advice is this. We can trust the honest blacks we have here within the fort?"

"Yes."

"Well, let them throw up a bit of sand cover for themselves down here on the beach and by the sea. Each man should wear a bit of white cotton around his arm, that we may be able to distinguish friend from foe. Do you follow me, sir?"

"Good, McGregor. Go on."

"Well, captain, the cannibals are certain to make direct for the barracks and attempt to scale as they did before. I will go in command of our twenty black soldiers, and just as you pour in your withering grape and rifle bullets we shall attack from the rear, or flank, rather, and thus I do not doubt we shall once more beat them off."

"Good again, my lad; but remember we cannot aim in the darkness."

"That can be provided against. We have plenty of tarry wood here, and we can cut down the still standing brush, and making two huge bonfires, deluge the whole with kerosene when we hear the beggars coming and near at hand. Thus shall you have light to fight."

“McGregor, my lad, I think you have saved the fort and our lives. Get ready your men and proceed to duty. Or, stay. While they still are at their terrible feast and dancing round the fires, you may remain inside.”

“Thanks, sir, thanks.”

The men had supper at eleven o’clock and a modicum of rum each. The British sailor needs no Dutch courage on the day of battle.

The distant fires burnt on till midnight. Then, by means of his night-glass, Dickson could see the tall chieftain was mustering his men for the charge.

Half an hour later they came on with fiendish shouts and howling. Then brave McGregor and his men left the barracks and hid in the darkling to the left and low down on the sands.

The enemy advanced from the right. Their chief was evidently a poor soldier, or he would have caused them to steal as silently as panthers upon the fort. When within a hundred yards, Dickson at one side and Reginald at the other, each accompanied by a man carrying a keg of kerosene, issued forth at the back door.

In three minutes more the flames sprang up as if by magic. They leaped in great white tongues of fire up the rock sides, from which the rays were reflected, so that all round the camp was as bright as day.

The astonished savages, however, came on like a whirlwind, till within twenty yards of the brae on which stood the fort. Then Mr Hall, the brave and imperturbable Yankee, “gave them fits,” as he termed it. He trained a gun on them and fired it point-blank. The yells and awful howlings of rage and pain told how well the grape had done its deadly work, and that many had fallen never to rise again.

The tall, skin-clad chief now waved his spear aloft, and shouted to his men, pointing at the fort. That dark cloud was a mass of frenzied savages now. They leaped quickly over their dead and wounded, and rushed for the hill. But they were an easy mark, and once again both guns riddled their ranks. They would not be denied even yet.

But lo! while still but half-way up the hill, to their astonishment and general demoralisation, they were attacked by a terrible rifle fire from the flank. Again and again those rifles cracked, and at so close a range that the attacking party fell dead in twos and threes.

But not until two more shots were fired from the fort, not until the giant chief was seen to throw up his arms and fall dead in his tracks, did they hurriedly rush back helter-skelter, and seek safety in flight.

The black riflemen had no mercy on their brother-islanders. Their blood was up. So was McGregor's, and they pursued the enemy, pouring in volley after volley until the darkness swallowed them up.

The slaughter had been immense. The camp was molested no more. But at daybreak it was observed that no cloud hung any longer on the volcanic peak. The savages were still grouped in hundreds around their now relighted fires, and it was evident a new feast was in preparation.

But something still more strange now happened. Accompanied by two gigantic spear-armed men of the guard, the Queen herself was seen to issue from the glen, and boldly approach the rebels. What she said may never be known. But, while her guard stood like two statues, she was seen to be haranguing the cannibals, sometimes striking her sceptre-pole against the hard white sand, sometimes pointing with it towards the volcanic mountain.

But see! another chief approaches her, and is apparently defying her. Next moment there is a little puff of white smoke, and the man falls, shot through the head.

And now the brave and romantic Queen nods to her guards, and with their spears far and near the fires are dispersed and put out.

This was all very interesting, as well as wonderful, to the onlookers at the fort, but when the Queen was seen approaching the little garrison, a little white flag waving from her pole, and followed by all the natives, astonishment was at its height.

Humbly enough they approached now, for the Queen in their eyes was a goddess. With a wave of her sceptre she stopped them under the brae, or hill, and Dickson and Reginald hurried down to meet her floral majesty.

"Had I only known sooner," she said sympathisingly, "that my people had rebelled and attempted to murder you, I should have been here long, long before now. These, however, are but the black sheep of my island, and now at my command they have come to sue for pardon."

"And they will lay down their arms?"

“Yes, every spear and bow and crease.”

“Then,” said Dickson, “let them go in single file and heap them on the still smouldering fire up yonder.”

Queen Bertha said something to them in their own language, and she was instantly obeyed. The fire so strangely replenished took heart and blazed up once more, and soon the arms were reduced to ashes, and the very knives bent or melted with the fierce heat.

“Go home now to your wives and children,” she cried imperiously. “For a time you shall remain in disgrace. But if you behave well I will gladly receive you once more into my favour. Disperse! Be off!”

All now quietly dispersed, thankfully enough, too, for they had expected decapitation. But ten were retained to dig deep graves near the sea and bury the dead. There were no wounded. This done, peace was restored once more on the Island of Flowers.

Three weeks of incessant rain followed. It fell in torrents, and the river itself overflowed its banks, the fords being no longer of any use, so that the men were confined to their barracks.

It was a long and a dreary time. Very much indeed Reginald would have liked to visit the palace, to romp with little Matty, and listen to the music of Ilda’s sweet voice.

“As for Annie—she must have given me up for dead long ere now,” he said to himself. “Why, it is two years and nine months since I left home. Yes, something tells me that Annie is married, and married to—to—my old rival the Laird. Do I love Ilda? I dare not ask myself the question. Bar Annie herself, with sweet, baby, innocent face, I have never known a girl that so endeared herself to me as Ilda has done. And—well, yes, why deny it?—I long to see her.”

One day the rain ceased, and the sun shone out bright and clear once more. The torrents from the mountains were dried up, and the river rapidly went down. This was an island of surprises, and when, three days after this, Reginald, accompanied by Hall and Dickson, went over the mountains, they marvelled to find that the incessant downpour of rain had entirely washed the ashes from the valley, and that it was once more smiling green with bud and bourgeon. In a week’s time the flowers would burst forth in all their glory.

The ford was now easily negotiable, and soon they were at the Queen's palace. Need I say that they received a hearty welcome from her Majesty and Ilda? Nor did it take Matty a minute to ensconce herself on Reginald's knee.

"Oh," she whispered, "I'se so glad you's come back again! Me and Ilda cried ourselves to sleep every, every night, 'cause we think the bad black men kill you."

Ilda crying for him! Probably praying for him! The thought gave him joy. Then, indeed, she loved him. No wonder that he once again asked himself how it would all end.

The weather now grew charming. Even the hills grew green again, for the ashes and débris from the fire-hill, as the natives called it, had fertilised the ground. And now, accompanied by Ilda and Matty, who would not be left behind, an expedition started for the valley of gold. The road would be rough, and so a hammock had been sent for from the camp, and two sturdy natives attached it to a long bamboo pole. Matty, laughing with delight, was thus borne along, and she averred that it was just like flying.

Alas! the earthquake had been very destructive in Golden Gulch. Our heroes hardly knew it. Indeed, it was a glen no longer, but filled entirely up with fallen rocks, lava, and scoria.

They sighed, and commenced the return journey. But first a visit must be paid to Lone Tree Mountain. For Reginald's heart lay there.

"From that elevation," said Reginald, "we shall be able to see the beautiful ocean far and near."

The tree at last! It was with joy indeed they beheld it. Though damaged by the falling scoria, it was once more green; but the grave in which the gold and pearls lay was covered three feet deep in lava and small stones. The treasure, then, was safe!

They were about to return, when Ilda suddenly grasped Reginald's arm convulsively.

"Look! look!" she cried, pointing seawards. "The ship! the ship! We are saved! We are saved!"

Annie o' the Banks o' Dee by William Gordon Stables

Chapter Twenty Three.

"She Threw Herself on the Sofa in an Agony of Grief."

Nearer and nearer drew that ship, and bigger and bigger she seemed to grow, evidently with the intention of landing on the island.

Even with the naked eye they soon could see that her bulwarks were badly battered, and that her fore-topmast had been carried away.

Back they now hurried to leave Ilda and Matty at the palace. Then camp-wards with all speed; and just as they reached the barracks they could hear the rattling of the chains as both anchors were being let go in the bay.

A boat now left the vessel's side, and our three heroes hurried down to meet it.

The captain was a red-faced, white-haired, hale old man, and one's very beau-idéal of a sailor. He was invited at once up to the barracks, and rum and ship biscuits placed before him. Then yarns were interchanged, Captain Cleaver being the first to tell the story of his adventures. Very briefly, though, as seafarers mostly do talk.

"Left Rio three months ago, bound for San Francisco. Fine weather for a time, and until we had cleared the Straits. Then—oh, man! may I never see the like again! I've been to sea off and on for forty years and five, but never before have I met with such storms. One after another, too; and here we are at last. In the quiet of your bay, I hope to make good some repairs, then hurry on our voyage. And you?" he added.

"Ah," said Dickson, "we came infinitely worse off than you. Wrecked, and nearly all our brave crew drowned. Six men only saved, with us three, Mr Hall's daughter and a child. The latter are now with the white Queen of this island. We managed to save our guns and provisions from our unhappy yacht and that was all."

"Well, you shall all sail to California with me. I'll make room, for I am but lightly loaded. But I have not yet heard the name of your craft, nor have you introduced me to your companions."

"A sailor's mistake," laughed Dickson; "but this is Mr Hall, who was a passenger; and this is Dr Reginald Grahame. Our vessel's name was the Wolverine."

“And she sailed from Glasgow nearly three years ago?”

Captain Cleaver bent eagerly over towards Dickson as he put the question.

“That is so, sir.”

“Why, you are long since supposed to have foundered with all hands, and the insurance has been paid to your owners.”

“Well, that is right; the ship is gone, but we are alive, and our adventures have been very strange and terrible indeed. After dinner I will tell you all. But now,” he added, with a smile, “if you will only take us as far as ’Frisco, we shall find our way to our homes.”

Captain Cleaver’s face was very pale now, and he bit his lips, as he replied:

“I can take you, Captain Dickson, your six men, Mr Hall and the ladies, but I cannot sail with this young fellow.” He pointed to Reginald. “It may be mere superstition on my part,” he continued, “but I am an old sailor, you know, and old sailors have whims.”

“I cannot see why I should be debarred from a passage home,” said Reginald.

“I am a plain man,” said Cleaver, “and I shall certainly speak out, if you pretend you do not know.”

“I do not know, and I command you to speak out.”

“Then I will. In Britain there is a price set upon your head, sir, and you are branded as a murderer!”

Dickson and Hall almost started from their seats, but Reginald was quiet, though deathly white.

“And—and,” he said, in a husky voice, “whom am I accused of murdering?”

“Your quondam friend, sir, and rival in love, the farmer Craig Nicol.”

“I deny it in toto!” cried Reginald.

“Young man, I am not your judge. I can only state facts, and tell you that your knife was found bloodstained and black by the murdered man’s side. The odds are all against you.”

“This is truly terrible!” said Reginald, getting red and white by turns, as he rapidly paced the floor. “What can it mean?”

“Captain Dickson,” he said at last, “do you believe, judging from all you have seen of me, that I could be guilty of so dastardly a deed, or that I could play and romp with the innocent child Matty with, figuratively speaking, blood between my fingers, and darkest guilt at my heart? Can you believe it?”

Dickson held out his hand, and Reginald grasped it, almost in despair.

“Things look black against you,” he said, “but I do not believe you guilty.”

“Nor do I,” said Hall; “but I must take the opportunity of sailing with Captain Cleaver, I and my daughter and little Matty.”

Reginald clasped his hand to his heart.

“My heart will break!” he said bitterly.

In a few days’ time Cleaver’s ship was repaired, and ready for sea. So was Hall, and just two of the men. The other four, as well as Dickson himself, elected to stay. There was still water to be laid in, however, and so the ship was detained for forty-eight hours.

One morning his messmates missed Reginald from his bed. It was cold, and evidently had not been slept in for many hours.

“Well, well,” said Dickson, “perhaps it is best thus, but I doubt not that the poor unhappy fellow has thrown himself over a cliff, and by this time all his sorrows are ended for ay.”

But Reginald had had no such intention. While the stars were yet shining, and the beautiful Southern Cross mirrored in the river’s depth, he found himself by the ford, and soon after sunrise he was at the palace.

Ilda was an early riser and so, too, was wee Matty. Both were surprised but happy to see him. He took the child in his arms, and as he kissed her the tears rose to his eyes, and all was a mist.

“Dear Matty,” he said, “run out, now; I would speak with Ilda alone.”

Half-crying herself, and wondering all the while, Matty retired obediently enough.

“Oh,” cried Ilda earnestly, and drawing her chair close to his, “you are in grief. What can have happened?”

“Do not sit near me, Ilda. Oh, would that the grief would but kill me! The captain of the ship which now lies in the bay has brought me terrible news. I am branded with murder! Accused of slaying my quondam friend and rival in the affections of her about whom I have often spoken to you—Annie Lane.”

Ilda was stricken dumb. She sat dazed and mute, gazing on the face of him she loved above all men on earth.

“But—oh, you are not—could not—be guilty! Reginald—my own Reginald!” she cried.

“Things are terribly black against me, but I will say no more now. Only the body was not found until two days after I sailed, and it is believed that I was a fugitive from justice. That makes matters worse. Ilda, I could have loved you, but, ah! I fear this will be our last interview on earth. Your father is sailing by this ship, and taking you and my little love Matty with him.”

She threw herself in his arms now, and wept till it verily seemed her heart would break. Then he kissed her tenderly, and led her back to her seat.

“Brighter times may come,” he said. “There is ever sunshine behind the clouds. Good-bye, darling, good-bye—and may every blessing fall on your life and make you happy. Say good-bye to the child for me; I dare not see her again.”

She half rose and held out her arms towards him, but he was gone. The door was closed, and she threw herself now on the sofa in an agony of grief.

The ship sailed next day. Reginald could not see her depart. He and one man had gone to the distant hill. They had taken luncheon with them, and the sun had almost set before they returned to camp.

“Have they gone?” was the first question when he entered the barrack-hall.

“They have gone.”

That was all that Dickson said.

“But come, my friend, cheer up. No one here believes you guilty. All are friends around you, and if, as I believe you to be, you are innocent, my advice is this: Pray to the Father; pray without ceasing, and He will bend down His ear and take you out of your troubles. Remember those beautiful lines you have oftentimes heard me sing:

“‘God is our comfort and our strength,
In straits a present aid;
Therefore although the earth remove,
We will not be afraid.’

“And these:

“‘He took me from a fearful pit,
And from the miry clay;
And on a rock he set my feet,
Establishing my way.’”

“God bless you for your consolation. But at present my grief is all so fresh, and it came upon me like a bolt from the blue. In a few days I may recover. I do not know. I may fail and die. It may be better if I do.”

Dickson tried to smile.

“Nonsense, lad. I tell you all will yet come right, and you will see.”

The men who acted as servants now came in to lay the supper. The table was a rough one indeed, and tablecloth there was none. Yet many a hearty meal they had made off the bare boards.

“I have no appetite, Dickson.”

“Perhaps not; but inasmuch as life is worth living, and especially a young life like yours, eat you must, and we must endeavour to coax it.”

As he spoke he placed a bottle of old rum on the table. He took a little himself, as if to encourage his patient, and then filled out half a tumblerful and pushed it towards Reginald. Reginald took a sip or two, and finally finished it by degrees, but reluctantly. Dickson filled him out more.

“Nay, nay,” Reginald remonstrated.

“Do you see that couch yonder?” said his companion, smiling.

“Yes.”

“Well, as soon as you have had supper, on that you must go to bed, and I will cover you with a light rug. Sleep will revive you, and things to-morrow morning will not look quite so dark and gloomy.”

“I shall do all you tell me.”

“Good boy! but mind, I have even Solomon’s authority for asking you to drink a little. ‘Give,’ he says, ‘strong drink to him Who is ready to perish… Let him drink… and remember his misery no more.’ And our irrepressible bard Burns must needs paraphrase these words in verse:

“‘Give him strong drink, until he wink,
That’s sinking in despair;
And liquor good to fire his blood,
That’s pressed wi’ grief and care.
There let him bouse and deep carouse
Wi’ bumpers flowing o’er;
Till he forgets his loves or debts,
An’ minds his griefs no more.’”

Annie o' the Banks o' Dee by William Gordon Stables

Chapter Twenty Four.

"Oh, Merciful Father! They are here."

Well, it seemed there was very little chance of poor Reginald (if we dare extend pity to him) forgetting either his loves or the terrible incubus that pressed like a millstone on heart and brain.

Captain Dickson was now doctor instead of Grahame, and the latter was his patient. Two things he knew right well: first, that in three or four months at the least a ship of some kind would arrive, and Reginald be taken prisoner back to England; secondly, that if he could not get him to work, and thus keep his thoughts away from the awful grief, he might sink and die. He determined, therefore, to institute a fresh prospecting party. Perhaps, he told the men, the gold was not so much buried but that they might find their way to it.

"That is just what we think, sir, and that is why we stayed in the island with you and Dr Grahame instead of going home in the Erebus. Now, sir," continued the man, "why not employ native labour? We have plenty of tools, and those twenty stalwart blacks that fought so well for us would do anything to help us. Shall I speak to them, captain?"

"Very well, McGregor; you seem to have the knack of giving good advice. It shall be as you say."

After a visit to the Queen, who received them both with great cordiality, and endeavoured all she could to keep up poor Reginald's heart, they took their departure, and bore up for the hills, accompanied by their black labourers, who were as merry as crickets. Much of the lava, or ashes, had been washed away from the Golden Mount, as they termed it, and they could thus prospect with more ease in the gulch below.

In the most likely part, a place where crushed or powdered quartz abound, work was commenced in downright earnest.

"Here alone have we any chance, men," said Captain Dickson cheerily.

"Ah, sir," said McGregor, "you have been at the diggings before, and so have I."

“You are right, my good fellow; I made my pile in California when little more than a boy. I thought that this fortune was going to last me for ever, and there was no extravagance in New York I did not go in for. Well, my pile just vanished like mist before the morning sun, and I had to take a situation as a man before the mast, and so worked myself up to what I am now, a British master mariner.”

“Well, sir,” said Mac, “you have seen the world, anyhow, and gained experience, and no doubt that your having been yourself a common sailor accounts for much of your kindness to and sympathy for us poor Jacks.”

“Perhaps.”

Mining work was now carried on all day long, and a shaft bored into the mountain side. This was their only chance. Timber was cut down and sawn into beams and supports, and for many weeks everything went on with the regularity of clock-work; but it was not till after a month that fortune favoured the brave. Then small nuggets began to be found, and to these succeeded larger ones; and it was evident to all that a well-lined pocket was found. In this case both the officers and men worked together, and the gold was equally divided between them. They were indeed a little Republic, but right well the men deserved their share, for well and faithfully did they work.

Two months had passed away since the departure of the Erebus, and soon the detectives must come. Reginald’s heart gave a painful throb of anxiety when he thought of it. Another month and he should be a prisoner, and perhaps confined in a hot and stuffy cell on board ship. Oh! it was terrible to think of! But work had kept him up. Soon, however, the mine gave out, and was reluctantly deserted. Every night now, however, both Dickson and Reginald dined and slept at the palace of Queen Bertha. With her Reginald left his nuggets.

“If I should be condemned to death,” he said,—“and Fate points to that probability—the gold and all the rest is yours, Dickson.”

“Come, sir, come,” said the Queen, “keep up your heart. You say you are not guilty.”

They were sitting at table enjoying wine and fruit, though the latter felt like sawdust in Reginald’s hot and nerve-fevered mouth.

“I do not myself believe I am guilty, my dear lady,” he answered.

“You do not believe?”

“Listen, and I will tell you. The knife found—it was mine—by the side of poor Craig Nicol is damning evidence against me, and this is my greatest fear. Listen again. All my life I have been a sleep-walker or somnambulist.”

The Queen was interested now, and leaned more towards him as he spoke.

“You couldn’t surely—” she began.

“All I remember of that night is this—and I feel the cold sweat of terror on my brow as I relate it—I had been to Aberdeen. I dined with friends—dined, not wisely, perhaps, but too well. I remember feeling dazed when I left the train at — Station. I had many miles still to walk, but before I had gone there a stupor seemed to come over me, and I laid me down on the sward thinking a little sleep would perfectly refresh me. I remember but little more, only that I fell asleep, thinking how much I would give only to have Craig Nicol once more as my friend. Strange, was it not? I seemed to awake in the same place where I had lain down, but cannot recollect that I had any dreams which might have led to somnambulism. But, oh, Queen Bertha, my stocking knife was gone! I looked at my hands. ‘Good God!’ I cried, for they were smeared with blood! And I fainted away. I have no more to say,” he added, “no more to tell. I will tell the same story to my solicitor alone, and will be guided by all he advises. If I have done this deed, even in my sleep, I deserve my fate, whate’er it may be, and, oh, Queen Bertha, the suspense and my present terrible anxiety is worse to bear than death itself could be.”

“From my very inmost heart I pity you,” said the Queen.

“And I too,” said Dickson.

It was now well-nigh three months since the Erebus had left, and no other vessel had yet arrived or appeared in sight.

But one evening the Queen, with Reginald and Dickson, sat out of doors in the verandah. They were drinking little cups of black coffee and smoking native cigarettes, rolled round with withered palm leaves in lieu of paper. It was so still to-night that the slightest sound could be heard: even leaves rustling in the distant woods, even the whisk of the bats’ wings as they flew hither and thither moth-hunting. It was, too, as bright as day almost, for a round moon rode high in the clear sky, and even the brilliant Southern Cross looked pale in her dazzling rays. There had been a lull in the conversation for a few minutes, but suddenly the silence was broken in a most unexpected way. From seaward, over the hills, came the long-drawn and mournful shriek of a steamer’s whistle.

“O, Merciful Father!” cried Reginald, half-rising from his seat, but sinking helplessly back again—“they are here!”

Alas! it was only too true.

When the Erebus left the island, with, as passengers, Mr Hall and poor, grief-stricken Ilda, she had a good passage as far as the Line, and here was becalmed only a week, and made a quick voyage afterwards to the Golden Horn. Here Mr Hall determined to stay for many months, to recruit his daughter’s health. All the remedies of San Francisco were at her command. She went wherever her father pleased, but every pleasure appeared to pall upon her. Doctors were consulted, and pronounced the poor girl in a rapid decline. There was a complete collapse of the whole nervous system, they said, and she must have received some terrible shock. Mr Hall admitted it, asking at the same time if the case were hopeless, and what he could do.

“It is the last thing a medical man should do,” replied the physician, “to take hope away. I do not say she may not recover with care, but—I am bound to tell you, sir—the chances of her living a year are somewhat remote.”

Poor Mr Hall was silent and sad. He would soon be a lonely man indeed, with none to comfort him save little Matty, and she would grow up and leave him too.

Shortly after the arrival of the Erebus at California, a sensational heading to a Scotch newspaper caught the eye of the old Laird McLeod, as he sat with his daughter one morning at breakfast:

“Remarkable Discovery.
The Supposed Murderer of Craig Nicol
Found on a Cannibal Island.”

The rest of the paragraph was but brief, and detailed only what we already know. But Annie too had seen it, and almost fainted. And this very forenoon, too, Laird Fletcher was coming to McLeod Cottage to ask her hand formally from her father.

Already, as I have previously stated, she had given a half-willing consent. But now her mind was made up. She would tell Fletcher everything, and trust to his generosity. She mentioned to Jeannie, her maid, what her intentions were.

“I would not utterly throw over Fletcher,” said Jeannie. “You never know what may happen.”

Jeannie was nothing if not canny. Well, Fletcher did call that forenoon, and she saw him before he could speak to her old uncle—saw him alone. She showed him the paper and telegram. Then she boldly told him that while her betrothed, whom she believed entirely innocent of the crime laid at his door, was in grief and trouble, all thoughts of marriage were out of the question entirely.

“And you love this young man still?”

“Ay, Fletcher,” she said, “and will love him till all the seas run dry.”

The Laird gave her his hand, and with tears running down her cheeks, she took it.

“We still shall be friends,” he said.

“Yes,” she cried; “and, oh, forgive me if I have caused you grief. I am a poor, unhappy girl!”

“Every cloud,” said Fletcher, “has a silver lining.”

Then he touched her hand lightly with his lips, and next moment he was gone.

Annie o' the Banks o' Dee by William Gordon Stables

Chapter Twenty Five.

The Cruise of the “Vulcan.”

The next news concerning what was called the terrible Deeside murder was that a detective and two policemen had started for New York, that thence they would journey overland to San Francisco, and there interview the captain of the Erebus in order to get the latitude and longitude of the Isle of Flowers. They would then charter a small steamer and bring the accused home for trial—and for justice.

It is a long and somewhat weary journey, this crossing America by train, but the detective and his companions were excited by the adventure they were engaged on, and did not mind the length of the way.

The Vulcan, which they finally chartered at ’Frisco, was a small, but clean and pretty steamer, that was used for taking passengers (a few select ones only) to view the beauties of the Fiji Islands.

Many a voyage had she made, but was as sturdy and strong as ever.

It must be confessed, however, that Master Mariner Neaves did not half-like his present commission, but the liberality of the pay prevailed, and so he gave in. His wife and her maid, who acted also as stewardess, had always accompanied him to sea, and she refused to be left on this expedition.

So away they sailed at last, and soon were far off in the blue Pacific, steering southwards with a little west in it.

And now a very strange discovery was brought to light. They had been about a day and a half at sea, when, thinking he heard a slight noise in the store-room, Captain Neaves opened it. To his intense surprise, out walked a beautiful little girl of about seven. She carried in her hand a grip-sack, and as she looked up innocently in Neaves’s face, she said naïvely:

“Oh, dear, I is so glad we are off at last. I’se been so very lonely.”

“But, my charming little stowaway, who on earth are you, and how did you come here?”

“Oh,” she answered, “I am Matty. I just runned away, and I’se goin’ south with you to see poor Regie Grahame. That’s all, you know.”

“Well, well, well!” said Neaves wonderingly. “A stranger thing than this surely never happened on board the saucy Vulcan, from the day she first was launched!” Then he took Matty by the hand, and laughing in spite of himself, gave her into the charge of his wife. “We can’t turn back,” he explained; “that would be unlucky. She must go with us.”

“Of course,” said Matty, nodding her wise wee head. “You mustn’t go back.”

And so it was settled. But Matty became the sunshine and life of all on board. Even the detective caught the infection, and the somewhat solemn-looking and important policeman as well. All were in love with Matty in less than a week. If Neaves was master of the Vulcan, Matty was mistress.

Well, when that ominous whistle was heard in the bay of Flower Island, although utterly shaken and demoralised for a time, Reginald soon recovered. Poor Oscar, the Newfoundland, had laid his great head on his master’s knees and was gazing up wonderingly but pityingly into his face.

“Oh, Queen Bertha,” said Reginald sadly, as he placed a hand on the dog’s great head, “will—will you keep my faithful friend till all is over?”

“That I shall, and willingly. Nothing shall ever come over him; and mind,” she said, “I feel certain you will return to bring him away.”

Next morning broke sunny and delightful. All the earth in the valley was carpeted with flowers; the trees were in their glory. Reginald alone was unhappy. At eight o’clock, guided by two natives, the detectives and policemen were seen fording the river, on their way to the palace. Reginald had already said good-bye to the Queen and his beautiful brown-eyed dog.

“Be good, dear boy, and love your mistress. I will come back again in spirit if not in body. Good-bye, my pet, good-bye.”

Then he and Dickson went quietly down to meet the police. The detective stopped and said “Good-morning” in a kindly, sympathetic tone.

“Good-morning,” said Reginald sadly. “I am your prisoner.”

The policeman now pulled out the handcuffs. The detective held up his hand.

“If you, Grahame,” he said, “will assure me on your oath that you will make no attempt to escape or to commit suicide, you shall have freedom on board—no irons, no chains.”

The prisoner held up his hand, and turned his eyes heavenwards.

“As God is my last Judge, sir,” he said, “I swear before Him I shall give you not the slightest trouble. I know my fate, and can now face it.”

“Amen,” said the detective. “And now we shall go on board.”

Reginald took one last longing, lingering look back at the palace; the Queen was there, and waved him farewell; then, though the tears were silently coursing down his cheeks, he strode on bravely by Dickson’s side.

Arrived on board, to his intense surprise, Matty was the first to greet him. She fairly rushed into his arms, and he kissed her over and over again. Then she told him all her own little story.

Now the men came off with their boxes, and Dickson with his traps. The Vulcan stayed not two hours altogether after all were on board. Steam was got up, and away she headed back once more for ’Frisco, under full steam. I think that Reginald was happier now than he had been for months. The bitterness of death seemed to be already past, and all he longed for was rest, even should that rest be in the grave. Moreover, he was to all intents and purposes on parole. Though he took his meals in his own cabin, and though a sentry was placed at the door every night, he was permitted to walk the deck by day, and go wherever he liked, and even to play with Matty.

“I cannot believe that the poor young fellow is guilty of the terrible crime laid to his charge,” said Mrs Neaves to her husband one day.

“Nor I either, my dear; but we must go by the evidence against him, and I do not believe he has the slightest chance of life.”

“Terrible!”

Yet Mrs Neaves talked kindly to him for all that when she met him on the quarter-deck; but she never alluded to the dark cloud that hung so threateningly over his life. The more she talked to him, the more she believed in his innocence, and the more she liked him, although she tried hard not to.

Matty was Reginald's almost constant companion, and many an otherwise lonely hour she helped to cheer and shorten.

He had another companion, however—his Bible. All hope for this world had fled, and he endeavoured now to make his peace with the God whom he had so often offended and sinned against.

Captain Dickson and he often sat together amidships or on the quarter-deck, and the good skipper of the unfortunate Wolverine used to talk about all they should do together when the cloud dissolved into thin air, and Reginald was once more free.

"But, ah, Dickson," said the prisoner, "that cloud will not dissolve. It is closed aboard of me now, but it will come lower and lower, and then—it will burst, and I shall be no more. No, no, dear friend, I appreciate the kindness of your motives in trying to cheer me, but my hopes of happiness are now centred in the Far Beyond."

If a man in his terrible position could ever be said to experience pleasure at all, Reginald did when the four honest sailors came to see him, as they never failed to do, daily. Theirs was heart-felt pity. Their remarks might have been a little rough, but they were kindly meant, and the consolation they tried to give was from the heart.

"How is it with you by this time?" McGregor said one day. "You mustn't mope, ye know."

"Dear Mac," replied Reginald, "there is no change, except that the voyage will soon be at an end, just as my voyage of life will."

"Now, sir, I won't have that at all. Me and my mates here have made up our minds, and we believe you ain't guilty at all, and that they dursn't string you up on the evidence that will go before the jury."

"I fear not death, anyhow, Mac. Indeed, I am not sure that I might not say with Job of old, 'I prefer strangling rather than life.'"

"Keep up your pecker, sir; never say die; and don't you think about it. We'll come and see you to-morrow again. Adoo."

Yes, the voyage was coming to a close, and a very uneventful one it had been. When the mountains of California at last hove in sight, and Skipper Neaves informed Reginald that they would get in to-morrow night, he was rather pleased than otherwise. But Matty was now in deepest grief. This strange child clung around his neck and cried at the thoughts of it.

“Oh, I shall miss you, I shall miss you!” she said. “And you can’t take poor Matty with you?”

And now, to console her, he was obliged to tell her what might have been called a white lie, for which he hoped to be forgiven.

“But Matty must not mourn; we shall meet again,” he said. “And perhaps I may take Matty with me on a long cruise, and we shall see the Queen of the Isle of Flowers once more, and you and dear Oscar, your beautiful Newfoundland, shall play together, and romp just as in the happy days of yore. Won’t it be delightful, dear?”

Matty smiled through her tears, only drawing closer to Reginald’s breast as she did.

“Poor dear doggy Oscar?” she said. “He will miss you so much?”

“Yes, darling; his wistful, half-wondering glance I never can forget. He seemed to refuse to believe that I could possibly leave him, and the glance of love and sorrow in the depths of his soft brown eyes I shall remember as long as I live.”

The first to come on board when the vessel got in was Mr Hall himself and Ilda. The girl was changed in features, somewhat thinner, paler, and infinitely more sad-looking. But with loving abandon she threw herself into Reginald’s arms and wept.

“Oh, dear,” she cried, “how sadly it has all ended!” Then she brightened up a little. “We—that is, father and I—are going to Italy for the winter, and I may get well, and we may meet again. God in Heaven bless you, Reginald!”

Then the sad partings. I refuse to describe them. I would rather my story were joyful than otherwise, and so I refrain.

It was a long, weary journey that to New York, but it ended at last, and Reginald found himself a prisoner on board the B— Castle bound for Britain’s far-off shores.

Annie o' the Banks o' Dee by William Gordon Stables

Chapter Twenty Six.

Meeting and Parting.

Reginald was infinitely more lonely now and altogether more of a prisoner too. Neither Captain Dickson nor the four sailors returned by the same ship, so, with the exception of the detective, who really was a kind-hearted and feeling man, he had no one to converse with.

He was permitted to come up twice a day and walk the deck forward by way of exercise, but a policeman always hovered near. If the truth must be told, he would have preferred staying below. The passengers were chiefly Yankees on their way to London Paris, and the Riviera, but as soon as he appeared there was an eager rush forward as far as midships, and as he rapidly paced the deck, the prisoner was as cruelly criticised as if he had been some show animal or wild beast. It hurt Reginald not a little, and more than once during his exercise hour his cheeks would burn and tingle with shame.

When he walked forward as far as the winch, he turned and walked aft again, and it almost broke his heart—for he dearly loved children—to see those on the quarter-deck clutch their mothers' skirts, or hide behind them screaming.

"Oh, ma, he's coming—the awful man is coming?"

"He isn't so terrible-looking, is he, auntie?" said a beautiful young girl one day, quite aloud, too.

"Ah, child, but remember what he has done. Even a tiger can look soft and pleasant and beautiful at times."

"Well," said another lady, "he will hang as high as Haman, anyhow!"

"And richly deserves it," exclaimed a sour-looking, scraggy old maid. "I'm sure I should dearly like to see him strung. He won't walk so boldly along the scaffold, I know, and his face will be a trifle whiter then!"

"Woman!" cried an old white-haired gentleman, "you ought to be downright ashamed of yourself, talking in that manner in the hearing of that unfortunate man; a person of your age might know just a little better!" The old maid tossed her yellow face. "And let me

add, madam, that but for God's grace and mercy you might occupy a position similar to his. Good-day, miss!"

There was a barrier about the spot where the quarter-deck and midships joined. Thus far might steerage passengers walk aft, but no farther. To this barrier Reginald now walked boldly up, and, while the ladies for the most part backed away, as if he had been a python, and the children rushed screaming away, the old gentleman kept where he was.

"God bless you, sir," said Reginald, loud enough for all to hear, "for defending me. The remarks those unfeeling women make in my hearing pierce me to the core."

"And God bless you, young man, and have mercy on your soul." He held out his hand, and Reginald shook it heartily. "I advise you, Mr Grahame, to make your peace with God, for I cannot see a chance for you. I am myself a New York solicitor, and have studied your case over and over again."

"I care not how soon death comes. My hopes are yonder," said Reginald.

He pointed skywards as he spoke.

"That's good. And remember:

"'While the lamp holds out to burn,
The greatest sinner may return.'

"I'll come and see you to-morrow."

"A thousand thanks, sir. Good-day."

Mr Scratchley, the old solicitor, was as good as his word, and the two sat down together to smoke a couple of beautiful Havana cigars, very large and odorous. The tobacco seemed to soothe the young man, and he told Scratchley his story from beginning to end, and especially did he enlarge on the theory of somnambulism. This, he believed, was his only hope. But Scratchley cut him short.

"See here, young man; take the advice of one who has spent his life at the Bar. Mind, I myself am a believer in spiritualism, but keep that somnambulism story to yourself. I must speak plainly. It will be looked upon by judge and jury as cock-and-bull, and it will assuredly do you more harm than good. Heigho!" he continued. "From the bottom of my

heart I pity you. So young, so handsome. Might have been so happy and hopeful, too! Well, good-bye. I'll come again."

Mr Scratchley was really a comfort to Reginald. But now the voyage was drawing near its close. They had passed the isles of Bute and Arran, and had entered on the wild, romantic beauties of the Clyde.

It was with a feeling of utter sadness and gloom, however, that the prisoner beheld them. Time was when they would have delighted his heart. Those days were gone, and the darkness was all ahead. The glad sunshine sparkled in the wavelets, and, wheeling hither and thither, with half-hysterical screams of joy, were the white-winged, free, and happy gulls; but in his present condition of mind things the most beautiful saddened him the most.

Two days are past and gone, and Reginald is now immured in gaol to await his trial. It was lightsome and comfortable, and he had books to read, and a small, cheerful fire. He had exercise also in the yard, and even the gaolers talked kindly enough to him; but all the same he was a prisoner.

His greatest trial had yet to come—the meeting with—ah! yes, and the parting from—Annie—his Annie—Annie o' the Banks o' Dee.

One day came a letter from her, which, though it had been opened and read by the authorities, was indeed a sweet boon to him. He read it over and over again, lover-like. It burned with affection and love, a love that time and absence had failed to quench. But she was coming to see him, "she and her maid, Jeannie Lee," she continued. Her uncle was well and hearty, but they were no longer owners of the dear old house and lands of Bilberry. She would tell him all her story when she saw him. And the letter ended: "With unalterable love, your own Annie."

The ordeal of such a meeting was one from which Reginald naturally shrank; but this over, he would devote himself entirely to communion with Heaven. Only Heavenly hopes could now keep up his heart.

The day came, and Annie, with Jeannie, her maid, arrived at the prison.

He held Annie at arms' length for a few seconds. Not one whit altered was she. Her childlike and innocent beauty was as fresh now, and her smile as sweet, though somewhat more chastened, as when he had parted with her in sorrow and tears more than three years ago. He folded her in his arms. At this moment, after a preliminary knock at the door, the gaoler entered.

“The doctor says,” he explained, “that your interview may last an hour, and that, fearing it may be too much for you, he sends you this. And a kindly-hearted gent he is.”

He placed a large glass of brandy and water before Reginald as he spoke.

“What! Must I drink all this?”

“Yes—and right off, too. It is the doctor’s orders.”

The prisoner obeyed, though somewhat reluctantly. Even now he needed no Dutch courage. Then, while Jeannie took a book and seated herself at some little distance, the lovers had it all to themselves, and after a time Annie felt strong enough to tell her story. We already know it.

“Yes, dear, innocent Reginald, we were indeed sorry to leave bonnie Bilberry Hall, and live in so small a cottage. And though he has kept up wonderfully well, still, I know he longs at times for a sight of the heather. He is not young now, darling, and yet he may live for very many years. But you were reported as lost, dear, and even the figurehead of the Wolverine and a boat was found far away in the Pacific. Then after that, dearest, all hope fled. I could never love another. The new heir of Bilberry Hall and land proposed to me. My uncle could not like him, and I had no love to spare. My heart was in Heaven with you, for I firmly believed you drowned and gone before. Then came Laird Fletcher. Oh, he was very, very kind to us, and often took uncle and myself away in his carriage to see once more the bonnie Highland hills. And I used to notice the tears standing in dear uncle’s eyes when he beheld the glory and romance of his own dear land, and the heather. And then I used to pity poor uncle, for often after he came home from a little trip like this he used to look so forlornly at all his humble surroundings. Well, dear, from kindness of every kind Fletcher’s feelings for me seemed to merge into love. Yes, true love, Reginald. But I could not love him in return. My uncle even pleaded a little for Fletcher. His place is in the centre of the Deeside Highlands, and, oh, the hills are high, and the purple heather and crimson heath, surrounded by dark pine forests, are a sight to see in autumn. Well, you were dead, Reginald, and uncle seemed pining away; and so when one day Fletcher pleaded more earnestly than ever, crying pathetically as he tried to take my hand, ‘Oh, Annie, my love, my life, I am unworthy of even your regard, but for sake of your dear old uncle won’t you marry me?’ then, Reginald, I gave a half-consent, but a wholly unwilling one. Can you forgive me?”

He pressed her closer to his heart by way of answer.

How quickly that hour sped away lovers only know. But it ended all too soon. The parting? Ay, ay; let this too be left to the imagination of him or her who knows what true love is.

After Annie had gone, for the first time since his incarceration Reginald collapsed. He threw himself on his bed and sobbed until verily he thought his heart would break. Then the gaoler entered.

“Come, come, my dear lad,” said the man, walking up to the prisoner and laying a kindly and sympathetic hand on his shoulder. “Keep up, my boy, keep up. We have all to die. God is love, lad, and won’t forsake you.”

“Oh,” cried the prisoner, “it is not death I fear. I mourn but for those I leave behind.”

A few more weeks, and Reginald’s case came on for trial.

It was short, perhaps, but one of the most sensational ever held in the Granite City, as the next chapter will prove.

Annie o' the Banks o' Dee by William Gordon Stables

Chapter Twenty Seven.

A Sensational Murder Trial.

The good people of Aberdeen—yclept the Granite City—are as fond of display and show as even the Londoners, and the coming of the lords, who are the judges that try the principal cases, is quite an event of the year, and looked forward to with longing, especially by the young people.

Ah! little they think of or care for the poor wretches that, in charge of warders or policemen, or both, are brought up from their cells, to stand pale and trembling before the judge.

The three weeks that intervened between the departure of poor, unhappy Annie from his cell and the coming of the lords were the longest that Reginald ever spent in life—or appeared to be, for every hour was like a day, every day seemed like a month.

The gaoler was still kind to him. He had children of his own, and in his heart he pitied the poor young fellow, around whose neck the halter would apparently soon be placed. He had even—although I believe this was against the rules—given Reginald some idea as to the day his trial would commence.

“God grant,” said Reginald, “they may not keep me long. Death itself is preferable to the anxiety and awful suspense of a trial.”

But the three weeks passed away at last, and some days to that, and still the lords came not. The prisoner’s barred window was so positioned that he could see down Union Street with some craning of the neck.

One morning, shortly after he had sent away his untouched breakfast, he was startled by hearing a great commotion in the street, and the hum of many voices. The pavements were lined with a sea of human beings. Shortly after this he heard martial music, and saw men on the march with nodding plumes and fixed bayonets. Among them, guarded on each side, walked lords in their wigs and gowns. Reginald was brave, but his heart sank to zero now with terror and dread. He felt that his hour had come. Shortly the gaoler entered.

“Your case is to be the first,” he said. “Prepare yourself. It will come off almost immediately.”

He went away, and the prisoner sank on his knees and prayed as surely he never prayed before. The perspiration stood in great drops on his forehead.

Another weary hour passed by, and this time the door was opened to his advocate. His last words were these:

“All you have got to do is to plead ‘Not guilty’; then keep silent. If a question is put to you, glance at me before you answer. I will nod if you must answer, and shake my head if you need not.”

“A thousand thanks for all your kindness, sir. I’m sure you will do your best.”

“I will.”

Once more the gaoler entered.

“The doctor sends you this,” he said. “And drink it you must, or you may faint in the dock, and the case be delayed.”

At last the move was made. Dazed and dizzy, Reginald hardly knew whither he was being led, until he found himself in the dock confronting the solemn and sorrowful-looking judge. He looked just once around the court, which was crowded to excess. He half-expected, I think, to see Annie there, and was relieved to find she was not in court. But yonder was Captain Dickson and the four sailors who had remained behind to prosecute the gold digging. Dickson smiled cheerfully and nodded. Then one of the policemen whispered attention, and the unhappy prisoner at once confronted the judge.

“Reginald Grahame,” said the latter after some legal formalities were gone through, “you are accused of the wilful murder of Craig Nicol, farmer on Deeside, by stabbing him to the heart with a dirk or skean dhu. Are you guilty or not guilty?”

“Not guilty, my lord.” This in a firm voice, without shake or tremolo.

“Call the witnesses.”

The first to be examined was Craig’s old housekeeper. She shed tears profusely, and in a faint tone testified to the departure of her master for Aberdeen with the avowed

intention of drawing money to purchase stock withal. She was speedily allowed to stand down.

The little boys who had found the body beneath the dark spruce-fir in the lonely plantation were next interrogated, and answered plainly enough in their shrill treble.

Then came the police who had been called, and the detective, who all gave their evidence in succinct but straightforward sentences.

All this time there was not a sound in the court, only that sea of faces was bent eagerly forward, so that not a word might escape them. The excitement was intense.

Now came the chief witness against Reginald; and the bloodstained dirk was handed to Shufflin' Sandie.

"Look at that, and say if you have seen it before?" said the judge.

"As plain as the nose on your lordship's face!" said Sandie, smiling.

That particular nose was big, bulbous, and red. Sandie's reply, therefore, caused a titter to run through the court. The judge frowned, and the prosecution proceeded.

"Where did you last see it?"

"Stained with blood, sir; it was found beneath the dead man's body."

On being questioned, Sandie also repeated his evidence as given at the coroner's inquest, and presently was allowed to stand down.

Then the prisoner was hissed by the people. The judge lost his temper. He had not quite got over Sandie's allusion to his nose.

"If," he cried, "there is the slightest approach to a repetition of that unseemly noise, I will instantly clear the court?"

The doctor who had examined the body was examined.

"Might not the farmer have committed suicide?" he was asked.

"Everything is against that theory," the doctor replied, "for the knife belonged to Grahame; besides, the deed was done on the road, and from the appearance of the

deceased's coat, he had evidently been hauled through the gateway on his back, bleeding all the while, and so hidden under the darkling spruce pine."

"So that felo de se is quite out of the question?"

"Utterly so, my lord."

"Stand down, doctor."

I am giving the evidence only in the briefest epitome, for it occupied hours. The advocate for the prosecution made a telling speech, to which the prisoner's solicitor replied in one quite as good. He spoke almost ironically, and laughed as he did so, especially when he came to the evidence of the knife. His client at the time of the murder was lying sound asleep at a hedge-foot. What could hinder a tramp, one of the many who swarm on the Deeside road, to have stolen the knife, followed Craig Nicol, stabbed him, robbed and hidden the body, and left the knife there to turn suspicion on the sleeping man? "Is it likely," he added, "that Reginald—had he indeed murdered his quondam friend—would have been so great a fool as to have left the knife there?" He ended by saying that there was not a jot of trustworthy evidence on which the jury could bring in a verdict of guilty.

But, alas! for Reginald. The judge in his summing up—and a long and eloquent speech it was—destroyed all the good effects of the solicitor's speech. "He could not help," he said, "pointing out to the jury that guilt or suspicion could rest on no one else save Grahame. As testified by a witness, he had quarrelled with Nicol, and had made use of the remarkable expression that 'the quarrel would end in blood.' The night of the murder Grahame was not sober, but lying where he was, in the shade of the hedge, Nicol must have passed him without seeing him, and then no doubt Grahame had followed and done that awful deed which in cool blood he might not even have thought about Again, Grahame was poor, and was engaged to be married. The gold and notes would be an incentive undoubtedly to the crime, and when he sailed away in the Wolverine he was undoubtedly a fugitive from justice, and in his opinion the jury had but one course. They might now retire."

They were about to rise, and his lordship was about to withdraw, when a loud voice exclaimed:

"Hold! I desire to give evidence."

A tall, bold-looking seafarer stepped up, and was sworn.

“I have but this moment returned from a cruise around Africa,” he said. “I am bo’s’n’s mate in H.M.S. Hurricane. We have been out for three years. But, my lord, I have some of the notes here that the Bank of Scotland can prove were paid to Craig Nicol, and on the very day after the murder must have taken place I received these notes, for value given, from the hands of Sandie yonder, usually called Shufflin’ Sandie. I knew nothing about the murder then, nor until the ship was paid off; but being hurried away, I had no time to cash the paper, and here are three of them now, my lord.” They were handed to the jury. “They were smeared with blood when I got them. Sandie laughed when I pointed this out to him. He said that he had cut his finger, but that the blood would bring me luck.” (Great sensation in court.)

Sandie was at once recalled to the witness-box. His knees trembled so that he had to be supported. His voice shook, and his face was pale to ghastliness.

“Where did you obtain those notes?” said the judge sternly.

For a moment emotion choked the wretch’s utterance. But he found words at last.

“Oh, my lord my lord, I alone am the murderer! I killed one man—Craig Nicol—I cannot let another die for my crime! I wanted money, my lord, to help to pay for my new house, and set me up in life, and I dodged Nicol for miles. I found Mr Grahame asleep under a hedge, and I stole the stocking knife and left it near the man I had murdered. When I returned to the sleeping man, I had with me—oh, awful!—some of the blood of my victim that I had caught in a tiny bottle as it flowed from his side,”—murmurs of horror—“and with this I smeared Grahame’s hands.”

Here Sandie collapsed in a dead faint, and was borne from the court.

“Gentlemen of the jury,” said the judge, “this evidence and confession puts an entirely new complexion on this terrible case. The man who has just fainted is undoubtedly the murderer.” The jury agreed. “The present prisoner is discharged, but must appear to-morrow, when the wretched dwarf shall take his place in the dock.”

And so it was. Even the bloodstained clothes that Sandie had worn on the night of the murder had been found. The jury returned a verdict of guilty against him without even leaving the box. The judge assumed the black cap, and amidst a silence that could be felt, condemned him to death.

Reginald Grahame was a free man, and once more happy. The court even apologised to him, and wished him all the future joys that life could give.

But the wretched culprit forestalled justice, and managed to strangle himself in his cell. And thus the awful tragedy ended.

“I knew it, I knew it!” cried Annie, as a morning or two after his exculpation Reginald presented himself at McLeod Cottage. And the welcome he received left nothing to be desired.

Annie o' the Banks o' Dee by William Gordon Stables

Chapter Twenty Eight.

The Last Cruise to the Island of Flowers.

In quite a ship-shape form was poor Reginald's release from prison, and from the very jaws of death. Met at the door by his friends and old shipmates. Dickson was there, with his four brave sailors, and many was the fellow-student who stretched out his hands to shake Reginald's, as pale and weakly he came down the steps. Then the students formed themselves into procession—many who read these lines may remember it—and, headed by a brass band, marched with Dickson and the sailors, who bore Reginald aloft in an armchair, marched to the other end of Union Street, then back as far as a large hotel. Here, after many a ringing cheer, they dismissed themselves. But many returned at eventide and partook of a sumptuous banquet in honour of Reginald, and this feast was paid for by Dickson himself. The common sailors were there also, and not a few strange tales they had to tell, their memories being refreshed by generous wine.

And now our story takes a leap of many months, and we find the Highland Mary, a most beautiful yacht, somewhat of the Wolverine type, far, far at sea, considerable to nor'ard of the Line, however, but bounding on under a spread of whitest canvas, over just such a sea as the sailor loves. No big waves here, but wavelets of the darkest steel-blue, and each one wrinkled and dimpled with the warm, delightful breeze, kissed by the sunlight, and reflecting the glory in millions of broken rays, as if the sea were besprinkled with precious stones and diamonds of purest ray serene.

Let us take a look on deck. We cannot but be struck with the neatness and brightness of everything our eyes fall upon. The fires are out. There is no roaring steam, no clouds of dark, dense smoke, no grind and grind of machinery, and no fall of black and sooty hailstones from the funnel. Ill indeed would this have accorded with the ivory whiteness of the quarter-deck, with the snow-white table linen, which one can catch a glimpse of down through the open skylight. But worst of all would it accord with the dainty dresses of the ladies, or the snowy sailor garb of the officers. The ladies are but two in reality, Annie herself—now Mrs Reginald Grahame—and daft, pretty wee Matty. But there is Annie's maid, Jeannie Lee, looking as modest and sweet as she ever did. Annie is seated in a cushioned chair, and, just as of old, Matty is on Reginald's knee. If Annie is not jealous of her, she certainly is not jealous of Annie. In her simple, guileless young heart, she believes that she comes first in Reginald's affections, and that Annie has merely second place.

I daresay it is the bracing breeze and the sunshine that makes Matty feel so happy and merry to-day. Well, sad indeed would be the heart that rejoiced not on such a day as this! Why, to breathe is joy itself; the air seems to fill one with exhilaration, like gladsome, sparkling wine.

Here is Captain Dickson. He never did look jollier, with his rosy, laughing face, his gilt-bound cap and his jacket of blue, than he does now. He is half-sitting, half-standing on the edge of the skylight, and keeping up an animated conversation with Annie. Poor Annie, her troubles and trials seem over now, and she looks quietly, serenely happy; her bonnie face—set off by that tiny flower-bedecked bride's bonnet—is radiant with smiles.

But Matty wriggles down from Reginald's knee at last, and is off to have a game of romps with Sigmund, the splendid Dane. Sigmund is four-and-thirty inches high at the shoulder, shaped in body somewhat like a well-built pointer, but in head like a long-faced bull-terrier. His coat is short, and of a slatey-blue; his tail is as straight and strong as a capstan bar. At any time he has only to switch it across Matty's waist, when down she rolls on the ivory-white decks. Then Sigmund bends down, and gives her cheek just one loving lick, to show there is no bad feeling; but so tickled is he at the situation, that with lips drawn back and pearly teeth showing in a broad smile, he must set out on a wild and reckless rush round and round the decks from winch to binnacle. If a sailor happens to get in his way, he is flung right into the air by the collision, and is still on his back when Sigmund returns. But the dog bounds over the fallen man, and continues his mad gallop until, fairly exhausted, he comes back to lie down beside Matty, with panting breath, and about a yard, more or less, of a red-ribbon of tongue depending from one side of his mouth.

Matty loves Sigmund, but she loves Oscar more, and wonders if she will ever see him once again; and she wonders, too, if Sigmund and Oscar will agree, or if they will fight, which would be truly terrible to think of.

Yonder is McGregor. He is elevated to the rank of bo's'n, and the three other sailors that came home in the Vulcan are here too. With the pile in gold and pearls they made on the Isle of Flowers, they needn't have been now serving before the mast. This would probably be their last voyage, for they meant to go into business on shore. But they loved the sea, and they loved Reginald and Dickson too. So here they were, and many more tars also; and when the main-brace was spliced of a Saturday night, it would have been good for anyone to have come forward to the bows and listened to the songs sung and the tales told by honest Jack.

But how came Matty on board? The story is soon told, and it is a sad one. A few weeks after his marriage, being in London, and dropping into the Savoy Hotel on the now

beautiful Embankment, Reginald found Mr Hall standing languid and lonely by the bar with a little glass of green liquor in his hand.

“Delighted to see you! What a pleasant chance meeting to be sure!”

Then Matty ran up for her share of the pleasure, and was warmly greeted.

Ah! but Mr Hall had a sad story to tell. “I am now a lonely, childless man,” he said. “What!” cried Reginald—“is Ilda—”

“She is dead and gone. Lived but a week in Italy—just one short week. Faded like a flower, and—ah, well, her grave is very green now, and all her troubles are over. But, I say, Grahame, we have all to die, and if there is a Heaven, you know, I daresay we shall be all very happy, and there won’t be any more partings nor sad farewells.”

Reginald had to turn away his head to hide the rising tears, and there was a ball in his throat that almost choked him, and quite forbade any attempt at speaking.

The two old friends stayed long together, and it was finally arranged that Mr Hall should pay a long visit to the old Laird McLeod, and that Reginald should have the loan of his little favourite Matty in a voyage to the South Sea Island.

The cruise of the Highland Mary was a long but most pleasant and propitious one. They steamed through the Straits of Magellan, and were delighted when the yacht, under, a favouring breeze, went stretching west and away out into the blue and beautiful Pacific Ocean.

Dickson had taken his bearings well, and at last they found themselves at anchor in the bay off the Isle of Flowers, opposite the snow-white coralline beach and the barracks and fort where they had not so long ago seen so much fighting and bloodshed.

Was there anyone happier, I wonder, at seeing her guests, her dear old friends, than Queen Bertha? Well, if there was, it was honest Oscar on meeting his long-lost master.

Indeed, the poor dog hardly knew what to do with joy. He whined, he cried, he kissed and caressed his master, and scolded him in turns. Then he stood a little way off and barked at him. “How could you have left your poor Oscar so long?” he seemed to say. Then advancing more quietly, he once more placed a paw on each of his master’s shoulders and licked his ear. “I love you still,” he said.

After this he welcomed Matty, but in a manner far more gentle, for he ever looked upon her as a baby—his own baby, as it were. And there she was, her arms around his massive neck, kissing his bonnie broad brow—just a baby still.

The Isle of Flowers was very lovely now, and the valley—

"Oh?" cried Annie, in raptures, as she gazed down the verdant strath. "Surely this is fairyland itself!"

The ladies, and Jeannie as well, were the guests of the Queen during the long, happy month they stayed on the island.

There was no more gold-seeking or pearl-fishing to any great extent. Only one day they all went up the valley and had a delightful picnic by the winding river and under the shade of the magnolia trees. Reginald and Dickson both waded into the river, and were lucky enough, when they came out with their bags full of oysters, to find some rare and beautiful pearls. They were as pure as any Scotch ever taken from the Tay, and had a pretty pinkish hue.

But now Jeannie Lee herself must bare her shapely legs and feet and try her luck. She wanted one big pearl for her dear mistress, she said, and three wee ones for a ring for somebody. Yes, and she was most successful, and Annie is wearing that large pearl now as I write. And the three smaller? Well, I may as well tell it here and be done with it. McGregor, the handsome, bold sailor, had asked Jeannie to be his wife, and she had consented. The ring was for Mac.

On Lone Tree Mountain, assisted by the men, Dickson and Reginald soon set to digging, and found all their gold and pearls safe and sound.

And now parting time came, and farewells were said, the Queen saying she should live in hopes of seeing them back again.

"God bless you all, my children."

"And God bless you, Queen Bertha."

With ringing British cheers, the little band playing "Good-bye, Sweetheart, Good-bye," the Highland Mary sailed slowly, and, it appeared, reluctantly, away from the Isle of Flowers. At sunset it was seen but as a little blue cloud low down on the western horizon.

To Matty's surprise the two great dogs made friends with each other at once, and every day during that long voyage homewards they romped and played together, with merry Matty as their constant companion, and never quarrelled even once.

British shores and the snow-white steeples and spires of bonnie Aberdeen at last! The first thing that Reginald did was to hire a carriage, and, accompanied by Annie and the honest dog Oscar, drive straight to McLeod's cottage.

To their surprise and alarm they found the house empty and the windows boarded up.

"Oh, Annie!" cried Reginald. "I fear the worst. Your poor uncle has gone."

Annie had already placed her handkerchief to her eyes.

"Beg pardon," said the jarvey, "but is it Laird McLeod you're a-talking about? Oh, yes; he's gone this six months! Man! I knew the old man well. Used to drive him most every day of his life. But haven't you heard, sir?"

"No, my good fellow; we have not been on shore two hours. Tell us."

"There isn't much to tell, sir, though it was sad enough. For the young Laird o' Bilberry Hall shot himself one morning by accident while out after birds. Well, of course, that dear soul, the old Laird, is gone back to his estate, and such rejoicings as there was you never did see."

"And he is not dead, then?"

"Dead! He is just as lively as a five-year-old!"

This was indeed good news. They were driven back to the ship, and that same afternoon, accompanied by Matty, after telegraphing for the carriage to meet them, they started by train up Deeside.

Yes, the carriage was there, and not only the Laird, but Mr Hall as well.

I leave anyone who reads these lines to imagine what that happy reunion was like, and how pleasantly spent was that first evening, with so much to say, so much to tell.

But a house was built for Mr Hall on the estate, and beautiful gardens surrounded it, and here he meant to settle down.

Jeannie was married in due course, but she and McGregor took a small farm near to Bilberry Hall, and on the estate, while Reginald and his wife lived in the mansion itself.

Many years have passed away since the events I have related in this “ower-true” tale. Matty is a tall girl now, and her uncle’s constant companion. Reginald and Annie are lovers still—“happy, though married.” The heather still blooms bonnie on the hills; dark wave the pine trees in the forests around; the purring of the dove is heard mournfully sounding from the thickets of spruce, and the wildflowers grow on every bank and brae; but—the auld Laird has worn away. His home is under the long green grass and the daisies; yet even when the snow-clads that grave in a white cocoon, Annie never forgets to visit it, and rich and rare are the flowers that lie at its head.

And so my story ends, so drops the curtain down.

The End


Freeditorial