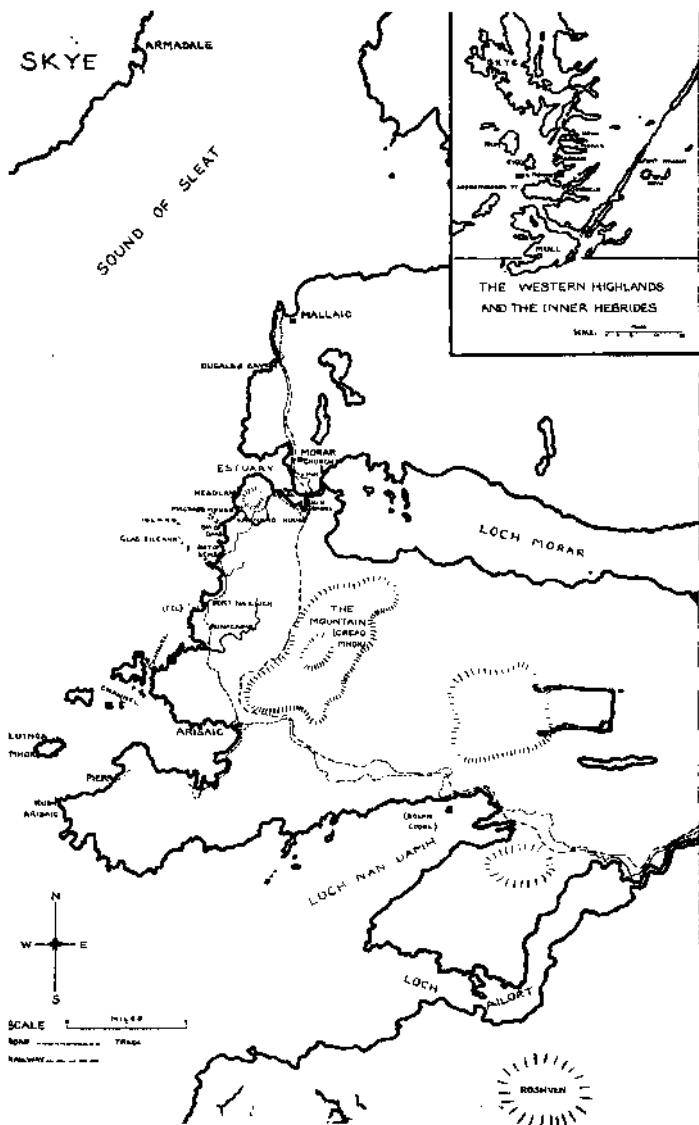


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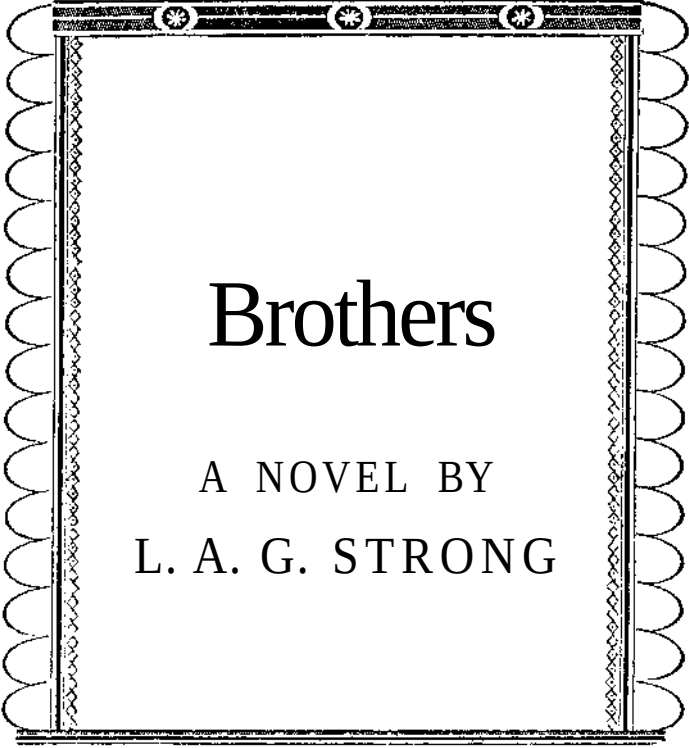
SELECTED POEMS

These are Borzoi Books published by Alfred A. Knopf

BROTHERS



FERGUS



Brothers

A NOVEL BY
L. A. G. STRONG



ALFRED-A-KNOPF

NEW YORK

1932

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BOOK I



Brothers

CHAPTER I

THE ROAD FROM THE VILLAGE, AFTER KEEPING LOW by the white sands of the river, climbed a steep ridge, and ran for some distance on the top of it. Behind the ridge, two miles away, rose a wall of mountain. The road was rocky and uneven; it twisted its way stubbornly among boulders and bracken. Now, as the sun came out unexpectedly and the great rain clouds retreated inland, the road and the ridge glistened in brilliant relief against the lowering wall of cloud and mountain.

So gloriously did the ridge stand out, that when presently a man climbed the road, he looked larger than life size. He was an old man, dressed in fisherman's jersey, trousers, and sealskin cap. His moustache and beard gleamed white in the sun; his lean, beaked face was screwed into a mask of wrinkles. Walking strongly on the ridge, silhouetted against the inland darkness, he looked patriarchal, superhuman. As he walked, he clawed stiffly at the air with his right arm, as if it helped him on his way. Coming to a place from which he could see the estuary and the open sea, he screwed up his eyes till his lips were drawn back from his teeth, shaded his horny brow, and looked at the weather. The wind had gone

up to the North West, and would go still further. The sea was pale, uneasy gold. The horizon was clear. The headland opposite, which in the first splash of sunlight had stood up livid and unearthly, grew every minute gentler. Inland, the clouds on the mountains began softly to be stained with sunlight. Looking round, weighing the evidence with the skill of seventy years, Peter Macrae decided that the evening and the morrow would be fine. One of a series of necessary tasks rose at once in his mind. He grunted, set off again, and disappeared round a bend in the road.

Eight minutes afterwards the figure of a second man rose to sight upon the road. He was dressed like the first, save that in place of the sealskin cap he wore an old peaked yachting cap. The second man walked differently. His shoulders stooped; his head was bowed upon his chest; his long ape-like arms swung loose. His step was longer, slower, and less purposeful. His beard was short, and had still more brown hairs than grey. His face, seamed and furrowed, showed yellow in the wet, slanting light. It was rock-like, melancholy, and inscrutable. Fergus Macrae looked older than his brother, yet not so old: stronger, yet not so strong. Peter, stiffer, white-bearded, red-cheeked, seemed animated by an energy of purpose which Fergus lacked: yet the loose joints, the easy, tired shamle hinted that the second figure was younger by several years. Coming to a place from which he could command the open sea, Fergus screwed up his face like a monkey's, sniffed the wind, and knew without thought that the evening and the morrow would be fine. He knew also what Peter would wish to do. Wearily bowing his head, till his

beard lay on his rough woollen jersey, he too shambled round the corner out of sight.

It was a mile from the ridge to the Macraes' home, but Peter turned off short of the track leading to the little point, and, without varying his pace, crossed two wide sandy bays that faced the north. Beyond them was a small rocky headland, and a smaller bay, the Bay of the Seals. Here, well above high water mark, one of Peter's boats lay beached. He hardly looked at her, but went on to the cave upon the headland where he kept his tackle. This was his headquarters. According to the weather, he used as a harbour either of the two bays it parted.

He was some time getting what he wanted. The two brothers always walked apart, Peter in front, Fergus behind. If Fergus came too close behind him, Peter would snarl like an animal, and fling a stone. There was eight minutes between them on the road, and when, after some ten minutes' groping in the cave, Peter returned to the boat with what he wanted, he found Fergus sitting on a rock near the boat, waiting.

Peter did not speak. He put down the tackle and the pot of paint carefully on the rocks; and, as he made for the boat, Fergus got up and went with him.

The boat was lying on her side. Peter wanted her bottom upwards. The two old men went round, stooped, and caught hold. Peter waited, foxing. A few years ago, last year even, Fergus would have heaved her over single-handed, and made nothing of the job. Last autumn, however, the years of drinking had taken toll of him at last. The whisky had worn away the lining of his stomach. Fergus could not digest his food: he grew sick and weak, he vomited,

and clutched his stomach in pain. Dazed and bewildered, he was hurried off to Glasgow, where the hospital doctors found an ulcer in his stomach. Now he was better, but half his marvellous strength was gone: the strength that was a legend still along the coast. Moreover, he had been warned that whisky would certainly kill him, if he took more of it.

So Peter waited, foxing, and only pretended to heave. He heard Fergus groan. From the corner of his eye he saw his brother's face, a mask of anguish and animal effort. Then, as the boat began to rise, he heaved too, and held it, balanced on its gunwale on the sand, while Fergus shambled round to the far side to ease it down. Another moment, and the two straightened up, facing each other across the up-turned keel. Fergus turned to his brother a look almost piteous in its bewilderment. Despite his illness, it was a perpetual surprise to him to find his strength had gone. "I'm weak, I'm weak," said his close-set blue eyes: but Peter averted his look, and went across to the tackle. Fergus did not suspect that he had been foxing. Fergus thought that, whereas last year he could have lifted the boat unaided, this year he could hardly do it even with Peter to help him. Peter was still strong for his years: he had foxed not from pain or laziness, but because it gave him satisfaction that Fergus should feel his strength was gone.

The boat needed repair. She had eighteen inches ripped off her keel. She had a loose rib near the stern, and her bottom needed painting. With barely a word, the two old men set methodically about her. The Western heaven grew clearer as they worked: the

wind stiffened, and great rollers came bounding up the beach, arching their crests of gold. The sun, sinking lower, outlined the old men and their boat in splendour, till Fergus seemed to be dipping his paintbrush in liquid gold. Pouring inland, the radiance lit up the wild countryside, catching into relief each peak, each salient curve, flinging a score of miles into one swift, furious panorama: much as the events of the two old men's lives stretched out behind them, caught one after another into significance by the backward gleam of memory.



CHAPTER II

1 HE MACRAES HAD LIVED IN THE HOUSE ON THE POINT for over a hundred years. Though only a croft, it was strongly built. When repairs were needed, the Macraes carried them out themselves, giving two or three months to re-roofing or to primitive masonry. The house nestled in a hollow near the rocks, protected on two sides by the hump of the small headland, and on the South by the high sandhills across the burn. Only along the path that led up to it could a cold wind come, and to protect it from this quarter also the father of Peter and Fergus had built a stout hedge, which for seven months of the year was a mass of fuchsia blossom. So well was the house enclosed that in hot weather it did not get a breath of air: but such weather came seldom, and in June the family were out of doors till close on midnight, fishing, catching lobsters, or cutting peats and ranging them to dry upon the hillside.

There was six years between the brothers, so that they did not play together: but each child in turn spent happy days on the sandy shores of the burn, dodging in and out of the broom, hiding behind rocks, ambushing the ducks, or catching little trout when the rains had swollen the burn and muddied its shallow waters.

Then came school. To walk two and a half miles

in all weathers, to sit in the great, bleak schoolroom with its high walls, to bow his head in the effort to enter a foreign world, did not suit Fergus. Peter, in all his time at the school, was only beaten once. Fergus was beaten three times a week, sometimes every day. He did not hate the master: he looked on him as a force of nature, impersonally hostile, like the hail that stung his ears as he trudged up the last hill to the school.

"Rise," the master would say to his class, in sad, ecstatic exhortation, which none dared to ridicule. "Rise, try to rise, to rise above your lot: to improve your future. Here and now is the key which shall unlock the world. The key of learning: knowledge is power. Learn now, while you may: grasp the key, acquire the power, and you shall go out into the world and become its masters."

He would get up from his desk, and walk about the room, humming to himself, pausing every now and then to speak to one of his pupils.

"O Fergus," he would say, laying a hand, half scornful, half affectionate, on the boy's shoulder. "O Fergus: can you not try? Can you not rouse yourself, and take your opportunity? Do you not want to go out into the world and make a name for yourself?"

And Fergus would bow his head, for this was his secret, that he did not want to go out into the world. He wanted to stay where he was. Though not at all afraid of the schoolmaster, he dared not confess this.

"Ah, Fergus," the schoolmaster would say, standing back and looking at him, with a sigh. "Ah, Fergus. You are a great trial to me, boy."

The schoolmaster was extra scornful, because Peter

had been his favourite pupil, the cleverest for years. He had wanted to continue Peter's education further, and send him to the city. Fergus could remember the Sunday he had called in to see their father, on the way back from Mass. It was a hot, fine day. Huge towers of cloud, great billows, vast curved battlements, swelled above the mountains: the sun shone hot and steady, the dew was drying from the clover and the sea-pinks; the ducks were cackling and quacking over some discovery under the bank of the burn. Fergus could see the two men talking by the gate, against the fuchsia blossom and the deep, shadowed blue of the mountain. He could hear the rumble of their voices, subdued to the still air: he could see his father slowly shaking his handsome head.

"Ah well." The schoolmaster bent down, latched the little gate after him, and held out his hand. Hector Macrae shook it. They respected each other's opinions.

So Fergus sat in the high, chill schoolroom, into which, despite its smells of humanity and soap, the summer breeze came in across the tangle and the clover, bringing cool, sweet scents of freedom: sat and suffered, and bore his blows, till the day his father took him away to help with the fishing, and with the other business.

Fergus was very strong. When he was twelve he was as strong as Peter, who was eighteen. At fourteen, he could row tirelessly, easily, even though the oar was still too big for him, and he had to sit crooked on the thwart. Three weeks after he had left school, when the weals on his hands were sound, he rowed on a calm night with his father all the way to Skye.

He kept the boat off the dark, still rocks while his father discharged his business; and they were back again before daylight. Hector Macrae's fishing was done by day, but his boat was often out on a misty or a rainy night. Up and down the coast it went: and always, now, it was Fergus who kept it waiting, a safe distance from the shore, till he heard his father's heel grate against a rock, or heard that cry of the eider duck which only he could distinguish from the real cry. Fergus loved to sit thus, resting on the long oars, in the misty stillness: hearing nothing but the vague sighing of the tide among the rocks, the soft living stir of the weed, or the indescribable, sibilant tingle of rain upon calm water. The sense of peril, too—though it seemed impossible that anything should threaten his father—added for the boy the final excitement, to make his labours perfect. For Hector Macrae had a still, hidden cunningly not half a mile from his home: and it was the produce they were secretly taking from place to place by night. Six or seven of the gentry, a magistrate, a priest, an inn-keeper at Armadale: Hector Macrae had good customers, but served them at his peril. If he were caught, they could not aid him. He knew that.

Peter never helped his father with the boat. His share in the business was even more secret: so secret that even Fergus did not know what it was. Well content, the younger brother helped his father, obeying without a murmur when he was sent to rest in the afternoon, and turning out gladly into the cold, grey rain or the winter darkness. So he grew, and his strength grew with each month. He was a man now, in his own estimation: and he felt a kind of scorn **for**

Peter, who coughed in winter, and was always left behind by the fire.

Once, after a stiff pull home against a wind that had risen suddenly, he spoke of this to his father. The answer he got was never forgotten.

"You are a foolish boy," said his father. "Do you not know that I could get ten strong fellows to help pull my boat, as you do? But where could I get a scholar to do for me what Peter does?"

"Be content, Fergus," he added, after a silence. "You have your work, and you do it well. I have no fault to find with you. But do not get puffed up with pride, because I allow you to help me. Your brother is far more help to me than you could ever be: but he does not envy you your task. He respects it: and you must respect his."

These words, with their weight of certainty, pressed heavily upon Fergus' spirit. Indeed, they weighed it down for ever. Henceforward, he regarded his brother with an almost superstitious awe. One who could help his father in so secret, so wonderful a way, must indeed be worthy of respect. For years he did not attempt to find out what Peter's share was. It was only by accident that he learned, much later, that Peter had a lucky hand in distilling, tried new and successful recipes, and kept the accounts of the trade.

Even when he grew stronger, and his cough left him, Peter never came out at night with them in the boat.

There were many stills up and down the coast. Hector Macrae enjoyed the pick of the trade, but others besides the gentry had mouths on them, and mouths less particular. The excise regulations tightened: the patrol boat made a great show of activity.

Hector and Fergus one night landed a gallon not a hundred yards from where the patrol boat lay. The patrolmen had somehow heard that whisky was being landed in the estuary, and they anchored opposite the one obvious landing-place. After waiting two hours, they grew tired, and played a concertina. Under cover of the music, Hector and Fergus, who had been drifting close by, shot in with deep, soundless strokes, and landed their keg in the weed where the buyer could fetch it next day.

Then the excisemen offered rewards. Many men had close shaves. Two were caught. An informer was suspected; and one Sunday, at a conference of men in the business, Dugald Macleod declared he knew who the man was.

Dugald Macleod was a strange, superstitious man, very hairy, with wild blue eyes and a habit of laughing to himself when he was alone. He was reputed to see visions, and to have spoken with the little people. He dreamed catastrophes, which invariably came to pass: and he often found lost goods and money, leading the perplexed owner straight to where they lay hidden. He did a good trade in whisky, single-handed, largely because he was what the gentry called "a character," and because the poorer people thought him lucky to deal with. He kept his still far off, in a cave above the high water mark.

"Aye," Dugald Macleod was saying. "I have the name of the informer."

Hector Macrae leaned forward.

"Tell us," he commanded gravely.

"I was in my cave the other day, it was a week ago on Tuesday, two days before the storm. O-o-oh—"

Dugald began to look up in the air, his mouth forming in a round O of rapture as he recalled to his mind the fury of the waves and the wind.

"Before the storm. Yes." Hector reminded him gently. His eyes came down again, startled: he gabbled for a moment. Dugald's beard sprouted away from his face, like a long frill. It was soft, and blew about as he spoke. He was pale, and rather dirty, but he wore his smart Sunday clothes, and they were well brushed and cared for.

"Yes. It was before the storm. I was in my cave, one fine evening: and you know, it cannot be seen from outside. No one passing outside would know I was in my cave."

He looked round appealingly at the ring of men.

"No one would know," they assented. "No one at all."

"Well, there was I, where no one could see me. Suddenly I heard a voice calling my name. It was a man's voice. I did not know it. The second time it called, I answered.

"'Have you a cup of water inside, that you could give me?' said the strange voice.

"'I have what's better,' I answered. 'Won't you step in, and stretch your legs, and take a dram with me?'

"'Ah,' he said, 'I won't do that, Dugald: for you have business in your cave that no stranger ought to be seeing.'

"'Step in, and welcome,' I said, ⁶*I trust you.*'

"'Ah no,' he said, 'I won't step in, for I have to go to Africa to-night. But pass me out a cupful round the rocky door of your cave, and I will drink to your good fortune; and my blessing stay with you.'

"So I filled a cup, and put my hand round the rocky door. I held my hand low to the ground": Dugald leaned forward, his eyes rapt, his mouth opening wide as he got out the words: "and low to the ground was the thin brown hand that took it."

A shiver ran round the circle, and the men began to cross themselves. Even Hector, who did not speak, made the sign of the cross on his breast.

"'Thank you, Dugald,' said the voice, and the cup was handed back. 'And now I will give you an information. To-morrow night, men will come looking in your cave for what they shall not find there. You understand me?'

"Yes, I understand," I said. "They shall find nothing."

"That is good. In the morning, when you are in your house, a neighbour will come in. He will speak very friendly. He will hope the men found nothing. He will be anxious to know in what place you so cleverly hid your goods, and deceived the men. Do not tell him where you have hidden your goods.'

"No, no," I said. "I will tell him nothing."

"'Good again,' said the voice. 'And now I must leave you. But I tell you one thing more. This is the last brew that will ever leave your cave, and the last time a man will come to it for what you make here.'

"I sat still in my cave for five minutes then: and, when I peeped out at last, he was gone."

The circle of men stirred in relief. They shifted their feet: they spat: their voices rumbled out in a fire of questions.

"Who was the man?"

"What about the informer?"

"Did he say . . . ?"

"Did the excisemen . . . ?"

"I took away all my gear." Suddenly Dugald was speaking again, in the midst of a silence. "I did as the stranger bid me. I took everything out of my cave, barring only an old lobster pot, two lines, and my old hammer I use for chipping mussels off the rocks. On the evening of which the man spoke, I went to my cave early, and sat, mending my line."

"And did they come?"

Angus McFarish leaned forward fiercely, scowling. It was his brother who had been caught.

"The excisemen came to my cave," said Dugald, smiling placidly. "They stayed a long time, poking about in the rocks. They were angry with me. Then they went off, cursing among themselves.

"The next morning, a neighbour came into my house. He was full of sympathy and questions. He wanted to know where my gear was hidden. I would not tell him."

"His name!" Angus McFarish struck his great hairy fist on his knee. "His name, man. What was his name?"

Dugald blinked mildly around him.

"Oh, yes, I can tell you his name," he said. "But the third thing the stranger spoke to me has also been fulfilled. When I went to my cave, after the storm, I found that a great rock had fallen down from above, and blocked up the mouth of it. So I cannot use it any more."

"Tehee."

"There, you see, now."

There was a silence, during which the men looked at one another. At last one took courage and spoke.

"What sort of a man would the stranger be?" he asked. "Would he be—perhaps—one of the good people?"

"Oh, most certainly he was," said Dugald. "What mortal man would be able to foretell those three happenings? And what mortal man could go to Africa in the one evening?"

Then, as if his strength broke down, and he were conscious for the first time of the enormity of speaking with one who had such powers, Dugald began to hug his knees, and shake, and weep, and chatter like a monkey. Hector picked him up, laid him on the sand, and loosed his collar. Presently Dugald was able to sit up, and sit blinking at them with watery blue eyes, smiling weakly at anyone who would look at him.

Hector went, sat beside him, and learned the name of the neighbour. It confirmed his own suspicion. He went back to the group. They drew off and held a short conclave. Hector addressed them, and his words expressed the sense of them all. It would not be right to condemn the informer upon immortal testimony. Besides, Dugald might have been mistaken, or dreamed it. He lived alone, and his wits were uncertain, as all could see. But they could take the information as a hint, and keep particular watch upon the man whom they suspected.

On this, they broke up.

Peter had attended the conclave: and Fergus, though some of the men looked askance at his youth, had also been permitted to sit and listen.



CHAPTER III

IT WAS THREE WEEKS BEFORE THEY GOT CERTAIN Evidence against the informer. Five men, who had followed him to an early morning rendezvous by the river mouth, took him on his way back with the money in his pocket.

The informer did not struggle or cry out. He knew there was no one to hear him. He went quietly with his captors. They took him to the croft that lay nearest, roped him securely, and left him in a cowbyre, until such time as the others could be assembled and draw lots.

Fergus and his father were coming back to the midday meal from setting their long-line, when they saw Peter hurrying across the sands to meet them. He gesticulated excitedly, and called out twice before they could hear what he was saying.

"We have him," they heard at last. "We have him."

Hector stopped short.

"You know?"

"Yes." Peter was about to call out details, when Hector held up an imperious hand. Peter looked apprehensively to right and left, and obeyed. He came scrambling up the rocks, breathless, to meet them.

"They got him this morning . . with the money

in his pocket . . . coming back from the river mouth. They have him . . . in the byre at Port na Lugh."

Hector drew in his lower lip, and nodded his head slowly three or four times. To Fergus, he seemed like some great Israelitish judge, handsome, grave, and noble.

"It is, of course . . . ?"

"Eoghan. Yes."

Again Hector nodded.

"They want you to come and . . . and decide," said his elder son eagerly.

"We will go," replied Hector; and the three walked back, Peter voluble with detail, the other two silent.

It was an hour before the community of the whisky-runners could be assembled. Dugald could not be found, but they were content to act without him. They loosed the informer, all but his arms, gave him a dram, and set him up in the midst of them. They heard the evidence. They asked him if he had anything to say. The informer shivered slightly. He looked round the byre with quick, flickering eyelids, and breathed out loudly twice, as if the air were too close for him: but he would not speak a word. His pale face, thin and goat-like, covered with sandy freckles, revealed no emotion.

"Tie his feet again."

They tied him, and laid him down once more on his side upon the floor of dried bracken. Then they withdrew, to consult together. The wind blew fresh outside: the bright sunlight made them blink. Gathered once more in a circle, the whisky-runners looked at one another. Somehow, the pale, silent, freckled prisoner, with his ever-moving eyes, and the

occasional uncanny shiver that rippled over his thin shoulders, had intimidated them. None of them relished the job of doing justice upon him. Normally it would be a simple matter. They would take him out in a boat at night, weight him with stones, and drop him overboard in the deep waters of the sound. But there was something uncanny about this man. No one had ever liked him; it was a plain case; yet none of them wanted his blood upon their head.

Suddenly, across their unhappy, apprehensive silence, Peter Macrae lifted up his voice.

"I have a plan," he said, "by which his blood shall be on no man's head."

Angus McFarish bent his black brows till they met, and stared at the young man.

"Tell us," he growled: and Peter spoke. When he had finished, there was a silence of astonishment, which quickly warmed to approval.

"Aye," said one, and "Aye," another. Their voices grew stronger, till all were agreeing, and praising Peter for his thought. Only Hector Macrae sat silent, gazing incredulously at his son.

Half an hour later, two boats set out, rowing southwards. In the bottom of one of them lay the informer, roped hand and foot. He lay silent. Every now and then his eyelids blinked rapidly a dozen times or more. Steadily the boats rowed on, till, six miles down the coast, they came to a wild and desolate sea loch. Up this they headed.

The evening was clear and still. The sun was hidden, but floods of light lay like beaten silver along the level sea. Narrower grew the sea loch, steeper and darker the mountains that towered above it, as the

two boats went on, dark specks on the shining water,
filled with steady, unhurrying purpose.

At last the first boat stopped, and let the other come up. For a minute the two were together. Then the second boat rowed inshore, and its crew landed on the rocks.

The men in the first boat hoisted the informer up, and sat him on a thwart. Round his neck they tied a grotesque necklace of cork floats, wedging his head stiffly between his shoulders, so that he could not move it. They loosened his arms, and tied a float under each of them, lashing the arm over it. Finally, they set upon his head a yachting cap, to the flat top of which was fixed a fresh, silvery herring. Then, carefully, they lifted him over the side, and rowed in to the shore.

As they expected, the informer floated upright in the water, with only his head showing. He was not far out. The little group of men, sitting in silence on the shore, could see his face, and the gleam of the fish on his cap, as the current slowly swung him round.

The sky grew dark and still. The great towering peak of Roshven seemed to draw near and overhang them, as if some unseen force were about to slide it across the pale band of water. The air was motionless. Nothing stirred, save the faint markings of the current and the slowly moving head of the doomed man. Fergus began to breathe loudly. The stillness, the shadow of the mountain, fell like a chill upon his spirit.

Suddenly the floating man began to sing. The sound of his voice, high, meaningless, disembodied,

was uncanny in the stillness. Like the rest of his behaviour, it was incomprehensible to the group of men. Higher his voice rose, in a cracked ecstasy. The current was spinning him faster now. Already it had taken him some distance. They could only make out the white of his face as he spun.

Angus McFarish swore to himself, took off his hat, and wiped his forehead with the back of his hand. Before he could put his hat on again, his son caught his arm, and pointed upward.

High above the loch, heading in from the sea, flew a solan goose. Its long neck stretched out, its wings beating rapidly, it was travelling at a great pace, making for Loch Ailort. Simultaneously, as they saw it, the group of men caught their breath. Five seconds—ten—fifteen—and it was almost above the place where the informer spun in the grip of the current.

The hearts of the watchers began to beat painfully against their ribs. Shading their eyes, they gazed upward. Then a gasp, a sort of inarticulate cry, broke from them. Far below, a gleam of silver had caught the eye of the goose. He checked in his flight, hesitated, then dropped like a stone upon his prey.

Maybe the informer heard in the air the whizz of that white thunderbolt, for his song broke off an instant before it struck him. The crash of the impact could be heard for half a mile. For some seconds there was nothing to be seen on the troubled surface: then an indeterminate mass rose slowly, and floated lopsided, with wide ripples spreading from it over the still water.

Very quietly, the men who had been in the first boat got aboard her and rowed out. The rest sat

where they were, watching, till the boat hid from them the object for which it was making.

The men in the first boat were busy for quite a time. They could not separate the goose from the informer. The iron beak had split his head as a wedge splits a piece of wood, and was buried deep down in his gullet. With difficulty, they detached the floats, and substituted heavy stones. Then they let go, and goose and informer sank together in a whirl of bubbles to the weedy bottom of the loch.

As the boats turned back together, the high ridge of Roshven darkened, and a grey chill rain began to fall, blurring all outlines, washing all colour from the world.



CHAPTER IV

STRENGTH CAME TO PETER SLOWLY, AFTER HIS DELICATE boyhood. His face was ruddy and handsome, but it had a kind of sharpness which robbed it of serenity. He was like his father, far more like him than Fergus was: but his face had not his father's nobility. It was restless, almost peevish. He knew this, and knew that something of it was due to his illness: but he resented it. He wanted everything.

In the same way, to be clever and earn his father's praises did not satisfy him. It irked him that there were things he could not do. He could not be as strong as Fergus, that went without saying: but he wished to be able to do the things Fergus did. He wished to be skilful with a boat, to use his intelligence with her so that his own moderate strength should produce results as successful as Fergus' great strength. To this end, he often took out one of the boats in calm weather, rowed her somewhere out of sight, and there, among rocks and channels, practised over and over again the evolutions necessary to bring her here and moor her there. He set himself problems: to execute a manoeuvre in the fewest strokes, to back through a channel allowing him only six inches on either side, to turn the boat in her own length. He explored the passages and soundings. Once, near low

tide, he ran aground on a sandbank, and was kept three hours.

"Was it you were stuck below the sound, last Friday afternoon?" Willie McFarish asked him: and Peter, at first about to deny it, invented a story which did not impress the other.

"It's a bad way to go until you know it," said Willie, grinning. "You should get Fergus to show you."

He walked on, and Peter ground his teeth. Every hundred yards, he stopped still, and turned, looking back at Willie, hating him. For a long time, when he turned, he could hear Willie's nailed boots on the loose surface of the road, till Willie gained the top of the brae and disappeared behind three thatched cottages. Then Peter went on. He was taking a basket of fish to the house of one of the gentry. When he came near the cottage of Martin McLelland, he was at pains to get off the road, and walk softly on the grass margin, in the hope to get by before Martin's dogs should rush out and bark at him. He hated and feared Martin's dogs. Sometimes the ruse succeeded. At others, the dogs, surprised to find someone near the cottage of whose approach they had received no warning, rushed out with extra fury. This happened to-day. Peter hastily picked up a stone and threatened them. The mutual defiance was long and bitter. Martin, hoeing potatoes in his field, turned and watched it with good-humoured amusement.

Peter was quite a competent fisherman, and able to help his father in the boat: but he worked hard, with observation and practice, to do what his father and Fergus did as if by instinct. One ambition above

all others fired his heart: to kill a seal. Already Fergus had five to his credit. He had even overtaken and clubbed one on the weedy rocks at low tide. Peter, seeing the helpless look of seals, thought little of this feat till he tried to overtake one himself, and learned ruefully the speed with which those ungainly bodies can move, even on land. He longed to kill a seal, and it struck him that the best way to effect this was by shooting. He wondered why no one else shot seals, and determined, without revealing his ambition, to sound Fergus.

"What would happen if a person were to shoot a seal, instead of clubbing it?"

"Lose the seal," replied Fergus. He did not speak much, and, if the answer of a question was, to him, obvious, he hardly troubled to reply at all. Fergus' world was so full of certainties that he never realised they might need description to others.

"Lose the seal," repeated Peter cautiously. "But, now, might there not be a way to get the seal, even with a gun?"

Fergus frowned. The theme appeared to him fanciful and displeasing.

"Lose the seal," he said firmly. "Except, maybe, close in shore, at high tide."

Peter, to whom this reply conveyed little, had to be content with it. At last, after turning it over again and again in his mind, he concluded that it was valueless, and set about perfecting his own plan.

One calm evening he set off by himself, heading his boat for the confusion of islets and channels that makes the southward approach to Arisaig. In the stern, unusual implements, lay an old rifle and a

mouth organ. Peter rowed easily, threading his way through the channels, keeping a lookout. The water was clear and still. Below him, over the side, he could see dark articulate weed and patches of lucent sand. The tide was low. The brown weed, gleaming here and there as the light caught it, hung in heavy tresses over the uncovered rocks. A shower of rain, motionless, far off, hovered like a smudge over the Isle of Eigg, its pearl-soft edge fluffed out at one side.

Presently, taking a bearing, Peter shipped his oars. He was on the breast of a tiderun which would take him for half a mile, down a channel, across a wide lagoon, to another channel, where the run would quicken, and he would need to use the oars again. Levering himself forward with his arms, he kneeled up in the stern, with his elbows on the seat, and watched the water.

Slowly, but in response to a living force, the boat floated down the channel. The weed on the rocks popped and whispered: the water sucked and sighed under the long flat tangle. Sometimes a mass of weed heaved and creaked, lifted from underneath by the stir of the tide. Down the channel the boat went, and, when she got to the other end, she seemed to waver, as if undecided where to go next. Her nose went first this way, then that. Peter gave an impatient wriggle of his haunches, which shook her from her hesitation. She accepted once more the guidance of the current, and began to drift across the lagoon.

Ah! There, close behind him, a dark head had broken the water, and was swimming after the boat. Peter's muscles tightened. His lower lip became wet with excitement. He crouched low, and one hand

went slowly out for the mouth organ. Fiercely, intently, he watched the seal.

For a few seconds it came after the boat. Then, when perhaps thirty yards away, it seemed to lose interest. It turned its long dog-like head first to one side, then to the other: it leaned back, till its nose pointed to the sky: and disappeared.

With sudden agility, Peter took advantage of its disappearance. Feverishly he seized the rifle, brought it to his shoulder, and pointed it stiffly at the water. With his left hand he put the mouth organ to his lips. Half a minute passed: the boat ceased its slight rocking, and the seal did not reappear. Then, so suddenly Peter did not know how long it had been there, he saw its head, appreciably closer, away on his left. At once he began to play upon the mouth organ. The position was not a good one in which to exhibit his skill, but he played well, filling the rocks with unaccustomed melody.

The seal paused. It raised its head higher above the water, and gazed at the boat. Then, very slowly, it began to swim towards the music. Peter, watching it, could hardly detect its motion: he only knew that it was approaching because its head grew bigger. Wriggling stiffly round, in an agony of caution and cramped muscles, he worked his shoulder over to the right so as to train his rifle on the seal. He slipped a little in doing so, rattling his boot upon the boards, and at once the seal disappeared. Cursing, he waited, continuing his music. A fly settled on his face. He endured its exploration, but his patience was giving way, and he was just about to spring to his feet in final exasperation at the whole venture, when with

a soft sound like a sigh, the seal rose, almost unbelievably close. He could see the grey hairs upon its muzzle, its queer little oval nostrils, its whiskers that trailed in the water, its mild intelligent eyes, looking up at the boat in beatitude and wonder.

Peter dared not move. All he could hope to do was to wriggle the boat's head with his haunches, in such a way as to bring the stiff projecting rifle into line with the big swimming head. But the current perversely held the boat, and his furious wriggles imparted a jerky tone to the music. The seal, offended, stopped still, and let the boat recede. Fearful of losing him altogether, Peter played his softest and most seductive melody. Reassured, the gentle beast uttered a second sigh, and drew near again, abandoning himself to his enjoyment.

A little—a little more—an inch—Jesus, he was so near! Flinging away disguise, jerking his rifle that last inch, Peter pulled the trigger, and sprang to his feet with a yell. The seal recoiled: it reared up in the water, showing its long grey belly: then it turned over in a flurry of foam. Leaping to the oars, Peter tugged frantically to get the boat's head round and grapple his prey. By the time he got her round, the seal was not to be seen: but the water boiled and swirled, as if in a place where currents meet. It broke, and the head of the seal appeared again, with the blood streaming from one eye and temple. For a moment it reached upward, straining, and a gasping cry came from it, as if in pain and bewilderment it had forgotten the foe. Then, with its last movement, it evaded its betrayer, plunging like a stone to the bottom, a bare ten feet below.

Gazing down, defeated, Peter saw the dark shape stir feebly once or twice, and roll over on its side. A stain, leaving its head, began to lean away like smoke in the pull of the current. The tide would soon turn. The body was too heavy to pull up, even if he succeeded in hooking it. He might fetch help to-morrow, but by then crabs and congers would have ruined the skin. Besides, he could never face Fergus. Now, too late, he understood what Fergus had meant about keeping in by the shore, at high tide. Why couldn't the fool have explained that seals always sank if one shot them?

Rowing home in the twilight, Peter felt no love for his brother.



CHAPTER V

1 HERE WAS IN GLASGOW A HOME FOR WAIFS, WHO were brought up in the Catholic faith, and sent when they were old enough to good Catholic homes, as apprentices, dairymaids, general workers, or whatever might be needed. After a good season, the priest persuaded Hector Macrae to take one, a girl of fourteen or thereabouts. Mary was grave, broad-browed, with straight grey eyes and long, coltish bones. She was good with the chickens and with Hector Macrae's three cows: from the first day, the creatures trusted her. She was shy, had gentle manners, and was nicely spoken. The Macraes were pleased, in their grim way: but it was a turn of ill fortune that a very bad season followed the good one, and that Mary, in spite of eating well, remained thin, and must, the doctor said, be given cod liver oil.

Hector bore this expense without a murmur, but it wrought a change upon the family, for Fergus was given leave to earn money independently, outside of the family concerns: a thing which had happened to no Macrae for two generations. Only the bad season, the ceaseless rough seas, coupled with the added expense of the child, could have justified such a step. These, and an opportunity for work, close at hand.

The opportunity arose thus. For the past four or five years the country had been visited in summer by

a retired sea-captain of the name of Aeneas M'Grath. He was an elderly man, stout, bland, and rubicund, with an abundance of red hair about his face and chin. He had made money, people said, by buying up old paddle boats, refitting them, and putting them into commission in out-of-the-way places. A lolloping old tub, which plied to certain of the outer islands, was reputed to belong to him. Anyway, he had money, from whatever source; and the country held a strange fascination for him. He put up at the inn by the estuary, hired a boat and a man to row it, and was out all day fishing the river or the open sea. Other days, he went with the trawlers, and afterwards bade his hosts to the inn, free with his drinks, his stories, and his inexhaustible laughter. Hector, who heard him in the bar one night, came home shaking his head. Yet, if Aeneas were wicked, there was no doubt he flourished like the green bay tree. He had money, health, good spirits, and enjoyed all three.

Suddenly, one spring, a rumour spread that Aeneas had bought a large strip of land, stretching from the further bank of the Macraes' burn half a mile inland and a mile down the coast. Nothing certain was heard for a week or ten days, and then a surveyor, brought round by boat from Arisaig, confirmed the report. Captain M'Grath, he said, had assuredly purchased the land, and had sent him up to report on the best place for building a house.

The surveyor did not impress the village people. A little, anxious man with glasses, he shivered in the late March winds, peeping about, red-nosed, in a long Inverness cape. When they saw the site he had chosen, however, they unwillingly admitted that he

knew his business. He made plans for a long, low house of stone, pointing West by North West, with one set of windows protected by a high bank, and the other, while open for light, protected by the row of sandhills a hundred and fifty yards to the North. On the Western and South Western parts of the bank the surveyor recommended that Captain M'Grath should plant pine trees. There was a brae to the East, which would cut off the worst furies of the wind: but only a narrow end of the house would lie exposed to this, and there the surveyor recommended building the kitchen.

Aeneas came up early in May, and watched the preparations zealously. When they heard the house was to be of stone, the people shook their heads. Stone was not to be had locally, and the cost of shipping it round by Ardnamurchan must surely be prohibitive, even for Captain M'Grath. But the Captain showed his quality, purchasing from the laird three stone cottages a mile outside Arisaig, which were uninhabited because they had no constant water supply. These were to be demolished and carted stone by stone to the site of the new house.

Aeneas' only difficulty was to get men to do the work. There were not many in the countryside who had a knowledge of building, and, when he had found these and persuaded them to overcome their natural indolence, it was harder still to find others for the navvy work. Most of the men had their own occupation, which provided enough for their needs, and did not wish for more. Indeed, but for the bad season, Aeneas, popular though he was, must have been hard put to it. As it was, by dint of blarney and free drinks,

he got a promise from almost every available man in the neighbourhood.

Fergus was one of the last to be enrolled. He did not go much to the inn. TJnreasoningly, he resented the building of a house almost within sight of his own. At the same time, having a wholesome respect for Aeneas M'Grath, he did not at all wish for an encounter, and kept to his own side of the estuary. It was with consternation, therefore, that he heard his father tell him one evening to take the Captain out on the sea for the whole of the next day.

"He is wanting a day's fishing," said Hector, "and he has been told that none can find him such sport as ourselves. He will pay generously: and, though I do not in all ways approve of the man, it may do you advantage to stand well with him."

Fergus listened amazed, and even Peter looked up quickly from his work by the fireside. It was evident that their father's attitude towards the Captain had somehow been modified. Questions buzzed in Peter's mind like bees, but he said nothing. Mrs. Macrae blinked, and went on with her knitting. Like her husband, she rarely spoke. She had too much else to do. No one took much notice of her about the house. She had the meals ready, and no more was necessary.

So, the next morning, Fergus rowed round to the landing-place below the inn, where the stout figure of the Captain stood waiting for him. Over one arm the Captain carried an oilskin: in his other hand he held a large basket.

"Stow that away snug, Macrae lad," said the Captain, handing it over, before he stepped on board.

"There's diet for the two of us in that: and some of it's breakable."

He gave a wink of such good will that Fergus responded with an awkward smile.

"Now—give the old man a hand. Nicely does it. There we are, now. That's grand."

Fergus, as soon as he saw the Captain settled, took a few strokes down the river. The Captain, beaming around upon the scenery, eyed him shrewdly.

"Where is it you would be wishing to go first?" Fergus got out at length, without looking at his employer.

"Well, Macrae lad, it's this way. They've been telling me that there's no man along the coast can show me such a day's sport as Fergus Macrae. They all admitted it, in the bar the other night. Even those two flue-brush McFarishes did not gainsay it, though they looked sour in the jaw. I asked your father, point-blank, if it was true what they all said. He's a good man, and a godly, straight man. That anyone can see. Now I don't pretend to godliness, but I'm trustable to my friends, and I know a straight man when I see him. So I asked your father, knowing I'd get a straight answer."

The Captain nodded impressively.

"He told me, in the open bar, like a modest man and true, that though you were his own son, he didn't know a better fisherman than yourself. So there, you see. Now—I give you no directions. I've been tired, and overbusy. I want a day's recreation; and I put myself in the hands of the best fisherman on the coast."

A great surge of feeling rose in Fergus as he heard

these words. The praise of his father woke a pang of joy and pride so keen that tears came into his eyes. When he heard what his father had said about himself, he felt stunned, as a swimmer does when a great wave breaks about him: he gasps, then realises that he is alive and full of delight. So, after a moment of amazement, Fergus' heart rose up in a rush, almost of love, towards the round smiling man who thus trusted him. Looking up, he beheld the Captain swimming through a prismatic mist of tears.

"I — I — " He swallowed, and set his jaws grimly. "I will show you," he said: and then, to hide his feeling, he tightened his great muscles, and the boat flew outwards to the sea, with the ripples laughing behind her.

It was just before eleven in the morning when Fergus picked up his fare. It was ten minutes to midnight when he and the Captain came singing up the estuary in the long June twilight. The Captain was not very steady on his feet: Fergus helped him across the rocks. Once planted on the causeway, he stood firm enough, and remained for some time waving, the empty basket on his arm, while Fergus, with exultant, unwearied strokes, sent the boat leaping homewards. They had had a day of days.

As if by magic, in response to Fergus' mood, the sea put forth her best. Fergus took the Captain first of all to his own private haddock bank. It was early for haddock, but the haddock were there. While the Captain caught them, Fergus baited a section of his long-line, just seventy hooks, and soon, the Captain taking a short turn at the oars, he cunningly laid it. Next, before the turning tide had time to rise far, he

rowed a furious mile and a quarter to Glas Eileann. There was a lochan in the little rocky island, and Fergus initiated the delighted Aeneas into the sport of hunting out lobsters with a piece of wire. One magnificent lobster retreated to a safe place in two feet of water. Fergus pulled off his trousers, rolled up his sleeve, and against all probability captured the clicking, indignant creature with his bare hand. Then, seated triumphantly on a rock, the Captain opened his basket. Fergus eyed its contents in astonishment. Never had he seen such delicacies: but the Captain bade him eat and drink, and, when he would have pulled his mug away, held him forcibly by the wrist and poured the deep golden whisky to the brim.

An hour later, they were the best friends in the world. Every now and then the Captain opened his mouth and let a resonant belch, affirming, "That does me good, Macrae lad": and Fergus lost all fear of him. He told stories, half of which Fergus did not understand. They seemed to be about women. Fergus smiled vaguely. The rocks rose and fell: the sea glittered unsteadily: the Islands were not always where a man would expect to find them. Concentrating his gaze with an effort, he fixed it upon the shore. Everything stood out sharp in the sunlight, with a portentous, preternatural clearness. Fergus gave an unexpected bark of laughter. He decided that life was very good.

The Captain began to sing. He sang songs he had learned in the merchant service, years ago. They were not like the songs Fergus knew, but he thought them very wonderful. One in particular caught his ear. It seemed to him full of meaning and sadness,

fit commentary on the sorrows of life as strong men saw them.

"I thought I heard the old man say . . ." sang the Captain, in a full, clear tenor: and Fergus shook his head, the empty mug dangling from his hand, his eyes glazing over with emotion.

"Come. Another dram."

He roused himself to find the Captain staring earnestly at him, and making to pour him out a third mugful. Smiling, Fergus shook his head.

"No, no," he replied almost lovingly. "Not yet, Captain. We have much more to do, and, if we drink again, we shall be too sleepy to do it."

The Captain paused, stone bottle uplifted. The logic of Fergus' remark appealed to him, and he began very solemnly to nod his head. Nodding yet more vigorously, he replaced the cork.

"By God, Macrae lad," he said, "but you are a man of sense. Real sense. I like you. You are right. We *have* more to do: *much* more to do."

He gazed into Fergus' face with great earnestness: leaned back: and resumed his song.

Fergus stood up. The sun went black for a minute, and his head ached. He pressed the back of his hand across his brow, and everything came back to normal. Ah! that was better. He looked about him, and saw a long grey shape on the nearby rocks, a bare fifty yards away.

"Seal, Captain, seal!" he cried; and in an instant the two, whooping, slipping, slithering, shouting with laughter, were in full pursuit. The seal won by ten good yards of weed, and Fergus, looking back, his gums naked with laughter, turned just in time to see

the Captain disappear. No harm was done, however: the mariner had slipped, and sat in a pool. He scrambled corpulently up, breathless, still heaving with amusement.

"Oh, by God, Macrae lad," he gasped, "that was good, that was good. That's the sharpest run I got this ten years."

"Do you feel well?" queried Fergus anxiously.

"I feel well, I'm sober, and I've a wet arse."

They looked at one another in silence, then each burst into a roar of laughter. The Captain laughed so much he could not keep his feet. He slipped and sat down again on the weed. Together, arm in arm, they made their way back to the boat, weak with happiness.

Next, Fergus rowed the Captain to a hole where there might be a big conger eel. There was an eel in the hole. They baited him for half an hour, but could not get him out. Aeneas had heard great legends of the strength of eels, but did not believe them. Fergus got a broken piece of planking from the bottom of the boat, thrust it in till it was gripped, and bade the Captain take it from the eel if he could. The Captain tugged and swore.

"You're tricking me, Macrae lad," he cried. "It is wedged in the rock."

He pulled again, till the eel gave a wicked jerk which almost overset him, and was rowed away, believing.

Fergus took him to another private place, and trolled till the Captain had caught two fine gurnet. Then they went back to pull up the long-line. Twenty-seven fish, there were on the line, and the heads of

five others. When he saw the heads, Fergus began to curse. Feeling a heavy strain on the line, he grunted revengefully, and pulled aboard a dogfish. Whether or not he was the culprit, he bore the blame for the five heads. Swinging the fish in his great hands, Fergus ripped off its dorsal fin with his teeth, and flung it overboard. The wounded brute, unable to steer itself, wobbled erratically downwards. Aeneas, leaning over to watch, called insults after it.

There was a crab on one of the last hooks.

"By God, Macrae lad," cried the Captain, "is there any creature in the sea that won't come to your bidding?"

And Fergus, though crabs were common on the long-line, smiled with foolish pleasure.

As evening came on, he rowed the Captain to a sunken rock which was another of his secrets, and trolled up and down with a bait of red eel, till seven great golden lithe lay gasping in the bottom of the boat. Then, a last diversion, he thrust into the Captain's hands two short rods, unjointed, to the end of which was tied their own length of line, a hook, and a small white feather. Sunset, protracted, glorious, filled the world with saffron fires. A great shimmering path lay across the waters. It dazzled the Captain's eyes: and when the foolish cuddy fish, rising to the feathers, came simultaneously on each rod, and the Captain swung them clumsily into the air, they glittered and wriggled in burnished gold, till he was all confused, and could not see which was which, or what he was at at all: and Fergus leaned on the oars, laughing at his happy oaths as he strove to disentangle himself from the lines and the struggling fish.

"Well, Macrae lad," said the Captain, as they headed at last for home. "If anyone had told me there was such a day to be had, I would not have believed him."

Fergus showed his teeth in delight.

"We had sport," he said, half in question.

"Sport!" the Captain sat bolt upright. "Pull up, lad. Easy. We want a drink on this. I insist."

He fetched the bottle from under the thwart, and the two mugs.

"Now," he said, when he had filled them both. "A toast, Macrae lad. To the best fisherman on the West Coast!"

A great wave of pride and happiness bore Fergus to unwonted eloquence. He raised his mug, and a smile of rare beauty lit up his eyes.

"To his Captain," he said simply, and drank.

"There is but one thing lacking from the blessed day," averred the Captain, a minute later. "This is a day to end in music: and I have not my concertina. Still, let us do what we can."

So they sang their way home: and Fergus had to tip all their captures into a rock pool, and-weight them down with stones, where an emissary of the Captain could fetch them in the morning. They were too heavy to carry up to the inn.



CHAPTER VI

AFTER THIS, IT WAS ONLY NATURAL THAT FERGUS should find himself working at the Captain's new house. He never knew when the bargain was made. He just appeared, and was given work to do. Under the guidance of the foreman, he learned a great deal. There were few men on the job. They reckoned to take eighteen months at least, for, in the winter, the hours of work would be very short. Actually, they took a month over the two years.

His employment made a further difference to the life of the Macraes. Hector formally gave up distilling. The excisemen had grown much more vigilant: some of his best customers had taken fright: and the risks of the business now outweighed the gains. With Fergus no longer by, it was impossible to carry on. Yet Hector could not bring himself to renounce the trade for ever. Saying that they must obey the turn of circumstance, he and Fergus buried the still one moonless night deep in the white sand, until they should want it again. Fergus was sorry. They had had grand nights together: but the new work on the house now filled his mind, and he thought less of the abandonment than his father.

It was in the early stages of the new work that Fergus realised for the first time how much his

strength exceeded other men's. He knew he was powerful in a boat, but so, for instance, was Willie McFarish. Willie, though a short man, had shoulders of enormous breadth, and long arms. The two had never competed, but Fergus, noting how obediently the McFarishes' tub of a boat responded to Willie's oar, recognised at once a power comparable to his own. Now, however, he learned the facts. Willie had the name of being a fighter, and a bad man to cross, as his father had been before him: but, in sheer strength, Fergus far excelled him.

Aeneas, one morning, presiding as usual over the work, was watching the efforts of two men to move a heavy coping-stone. They sweated, they grunted, they heaved: but they could not lift it into place. Laughing indulgently, Aeneas beckoned Willie McFarish to help them.

Willie cocked his dark, broad head at the stone.

"You want four men for that," he said. "One to each corner."

"Four fiddlesticks," said Aeneas severely. "Why, McFarish lad, you could lift it yourself."

"Lift it, no."

"Yes. A strong, broad lad like you."

Willie eyed the stone.

"I might lift it," he allowed. "But I couldn't put it in place."

"Lift it, then."

Willie scowled at Aeneas for a moment, then stooped, and grasped the edges of the stone. Fergus, passing slowly by with a bucket of mortar, paused to look on.

Willie, his broad bottom tightly bent, snuggled

down over the stone. His long arms, covered with thick, black hairs, seemed to settle themselves snake-like round the rough-hewn edges. His iron fingers drove their way under the two opposite corners. He fidgeted, getting a purchase with his feet. Then all his muscles swelled and hardened. The watchers saw his face blacken, his round black nostrils distend, as, shaking from shoulder to foot, he slowly leaned back, raising the stone. Up came one end, tilting, tilting: for an instant he had it all clear, a half inch from the ground: then, as if a pin had been stuck into him, he collapsed on top of it. One of his mates started forward in dismay: but Willie was not hurt. He looked up, grinned, scowled, and brushed the sweat from his forehead.

"It is too big," he said. "Four men."

"Ah, McFarish," said Aeneas banteringly. "I'm disappointed in you. You're not the man I thought."

Willie took the banter ill. His face darkened.

"No man here could lift that stone," he said.

For answer, Aeneas raised an eyebrow at Fergus, who put down his bucket, and shambled forward.

"Macrae lad—do you hear what he says? "

Suddenly, Fergus knew, in a quiet illumination, that he was able to lift the stone. He looked at it with a faint interest. Ordinarily, it would not have occurred to him to lift it: he would simply have borne his part with the rest, taking a corner, and helping place it in position. He saw, however, now the question arose, that he had turned over stones far bigger than this when hunting lobsters by himself in the lochans at low tide.

Realising that a question had been addressed to

him, and that he had not answered, he looked mildly upon the Captain.

"Did you hear what he said—that no man here could lift the stone?"

"I heard," said Fergus.

"Is it true?"

Fergus knitted his brow. This variant on the theme confused him.

"Can you lift the stone?" persisted Aeneas.

Fergus' brow cleared. He eyed the stone again, and smiled back at Aeneas, almost sardonically.

"I think so," he replied.

"He thinks so," sneered Willie McFarish to the man beside him.

"Let's see you, then."

Fergus looked again at the Captain, and saw a bland, gentle smile. There was no private, personal gleam in the Captain's eye: yet he knew that the Captain was relying on him, here and now, to show what manner of man he was, and to justify his choice of him as favourite.

"Very good," said Fergus, and shambled over to the stone.

As he stood above it, his arms dangling loosely from his shoulders, he let his mind go blank, and every muscle of his body relax, asking the stone a question; waiting to receive the inspiration, the sympathy with inanimate things which comes to men who handle them. Strength flowed up through his feet from the ground: his feet and legs were the roots of a tree, his body the strong, supple trunk. Shutting his eyes, he waited for the moment. He heard a derisive snort behind him, and knew it came from the broad

nostrils of Willie McFarish: but it touched only the surface of his consciousness. His mind waited, in a timeless dream.

Then, with an easy, sinuous movement, he stooped, lightly grasped the stone, and swung it from the ground to the level of his knees. Easily again, almost as if collapsing, his right leg bent inwards, and he went down on one knee, swinging the stone upward as he did so. There he remained for a moment, quivering, and the onlookers saw with astonishment that he had got both his elbows below the stone. Waiting till the burden was perfectly poised, Fergus rose steadily, slowly to his feet. Now came the personal effort. Hitherto, he was not conscious of using his own strength at all. It was as if the earth had inspired him. But now, setting his jaw, summoning up the great steel muscles of his belly, chest, and arms, he raised the stone up, and up, level with his breast, his chin—and then, warned by his body's genius, flung it away, before it could strain or hurt him.

There was a silence.

"There you are, McFarish lad," said the Captain quietly; and Fergus, well content, for he understood the Captain, shambled back to his bucket, picked it up, and went about his business.



CHAPTER VII

THERE WAS A LITTLE PROMONTORY, HARDLY MORE than a knoll, dividing the Bay of the Seals from its larger neighbour, the Bay of the Oaks: and upon this knoll, one fine morning, Peter Macrae sat with his father, sorting the long-line. A sudden storm had arisen, preventing them from pulling it up the day they set it. When they recovered it, it was in a terrible state. There was nothing to do but go over it from end to end, disentangling, unravelling, replacing the broken snoods, fixing new hooks. The labour was monotonous and wearisome, but the two addressed it calmly. All time was theirs.

Every now and then, Peter would glance up from his work, and warily eye his father. Peter had improved in looks. He was healthier. His nose was not so beaky, his skin was browner, he had not so much the look of an animal on the alert for danger. Now, as he eyed his father, something of that look returned: but there was more confidence in it. It was, rather, the look of a wrestler who respects but does not dread his adversary, and approaches cunningly, watching for the swiftest grip.

It was not Hector's way to talk when he worked, or to talk much at all. He and Fergus could spend whole days together without a word. Peter was more

prone to talk, for, in his mind, ideas expressed themselves in words: but he had early learnt to keep silence when with his father, and talking to Fergus was generally a waste of time. Hector, frowning, laboured methodically at the line. His noble head had aged: there were deep furrows in the face, clean, decisive, as if they had been cut by a plough. The edges of his beard were white, and the hair was white by his ears. He moved a little more deliberately, and sometimes, after a long wet spell in the boat, he rose stiffly, and was slow on the path up to his home. A man of much significance, simple, stern, without humour, curbing his spirit with an iron power of control. A noble savage; fearless; devout without wonder; loyal where he acknowledged obligation; passionate, and proud. He had one weakness only, an inability to combat the expressed goodwill of cleverer men. Let a man, who had no obvious end to gain, approach Hector Macrae, and speak him fair, and his instinctive suspicion would thaw, giving place to an awkward, embarrassed goodwill. In Hector's world, friends were friends, and foes were foes: and, despite the generations behind him, he was slow to suspect treachery.

Such was the man his son watched warily, balancing his mind on the edge of its own daring, fearful, yet committed in imagination to the words he was about to speak.

"Father."

The word, so loud, so unexpected, seemed to Peter to go off like a shot, to echo back from the rocks, to volley along the coast from bay to bay in a series of small thunderclaps.

Hector Macrae did not move. He was deep in a

tangle, a hideous clotted mass of line, dead bait, and weeds with small shells hanging from them. His frown gathered. In a minute, Peter knew that, startling though the word was, he would forget it. No use waiting for that tangle to be undone. He spoke again.

"Father."

Hector frowned thunderously, and looked up. With steady eyes, Peter met his stare of angry enquiry.

"Father, there is a matter on which I have been wishing to speak to you: a matter of much importance."

Hector gazed at him without speaking, and Peter, lowering his eyes, went on loosening the line. For some seconds, the gaze rested on him: then he felt it slowly turn away.

"Well," grunted Hector at last.

"The matter is not, strictly speaking, my concern."

"Why speak of it, then?"

Peter's eyelids flickered. Things were going the way he wanted.

"It concerns the family."

Hector put down the tangle on his knees, and stared at his elder son.

"What," he said. "You say that a matter which concerns the family is no concern of yours?"

"You will understand better when I tell you what it is. I meant only that it did not concern me as myself, Peter: but as Peter Macrae."

Hector brooded over this speech, like a sulky bull. Then he looked at Peter suspiciously.

"Well," he said at last. "Speak."

Peter, in turn, laid down his coil, looked at his father, and then looked quickly away inland.

"Father—what is your opinion of Captain Aeneas M'Grath?"

Hector heard this question with amazement. That a son of his, a mere boy, should dare to ask him his opinion concerning a man of his own age . . . ! He opened his mouth, speechless with anger.

"I mean, as a companion for Fergus. As you know, he has made Fergus a kind of favourite. He invites Fergus, almost every evening. Do you think his influence is for the good?"

This question angered Hector still more, for it voiced a secret misgiving of his own. He could not approve of Aeneas, but the man professed himself his friend, used him well, and had notably advanced the name of the Macraes in sight of all. Moreover, it was he, Hector, who had sent Fergus to him, and had approved Fergus' taking service under him at the building. Already, Fergus had gained much valuable knowledge, which would stand them in good stead. His one doubt, born of instinct, nourished by a sly word here and there at the inn, was a sore place in his spirit. For his weakling son to lance it, with a casual question, annoyed him to his depths.

"Fergus is with him, almost every evening," pursued Peter. "He does not always come straight home. Often, it is the early morning before he returns."

Then, after a perfectly calculated pause, he delivered his final blow.

"The other night, among the sandhills, Willie McFarish fell over him."

For a full minute there was silence. Peter dared not look at his father, but he knew that the last paralyzing blow had robbed him of power to retaliate.

When at last Hector spoke, his voice was quiet and contemptuous.

"Is it for you, Fergus' own brother, to bear tales?"

"Is it for me, Fergus' own brother, to see him ruined and speak no word? Is it for me, Peter Macrae, to see my father's son make his name a reproach, and do nothing to stop it?"

There was another silence. Peter sat, dazzled by his own audacity. He had not known it was in him to utter such bold words.

"You are very glib with your tongue," said Hector presently.

"I have said all I have to say. It seemed to be my duty."

"Ruined!" burst out the older man. "A dram too many will not ruin Fergus. It might ruin *you*. Fergus is strong—"

He broke off short, having said more than he wished. A dark, secret look came over his face, and he bent angrily over his task. The loyalty that, years before, had made him champion Peter to Fergus, now resented as an outrage Peter's information against his brother: yet, his mind, turning angrily from side to side, could not pass the apparent justice of Peter's case. For the hundredth time, he cursed in his heart the schoolmaster who had given Peter the cleverness of books, who had enabled him to confront his father with this cunning riddle, this betrayal that was loyalty, this loyalty that was betrayal.

Hector abhorred drunkenness, and knew well its dangers for the man of strong constitution. He spoke not a word more on the subject, but his anger and resentment burned furiously: and they soon found an outlet.

Saturday was a half day for Aeneas' employees: and the old man had little difficulty in prevailing upon Fergus to go back with him to the village. There they caroused as usual: Aeneas played his concertina, Fergus bawled himself hoarse, and, when at last he started for home, he was too much exalted to remember his condition and to sleep it off in the sandhills. Turning in where the footpath began that led to the point, he met Mary in the field. The girl smiled with pleasure as she caught sight of him: then he saw her grey eyes open wide, and the pupils contract, as she realised how it was with him. The sight annoyed Fergus: he growled at her thickly in his throat, and made a threatening gesture. Mary stepped off the path into the long grass, and stood looking after him. She had grown tall in the last year: she was only half a child now.

Fergus kept on his way for a hundred yards, still growling angrily to himself. Then the girl's consternation brought him to the knowledge that he was not in a fit state to go home. He hesitated, and plunged down the slope towards the burn, intending to find refuge in the sandhills, and return later. Hardly had he started, however, when a voice of thunder hailed him by name.

"Fergus! Fergus Macrae!"

Looking up in terror, Fergus saw his father standing on the path, a thick stick in his hand.

"Come here to me this instant. Do you hear?"

Shaking his head, Fergus pulled himself together, and began to labour up the slope. Hector stood, his face crimson, his eyes blazing, the very figure of avenging majesty.

"No, no," mumbled Fergus, at the sight of him.
"Best let me go. Best let me go."

He came to within a few yards of his father, and stood still, swaying, still shaking his head.

"Fergus Macrae, you are drunk. Low, besotted blackguard that you are, do you dare come to my house, in such a state that the poor child yonder shrinks from passing you in the path? Do you dare roll the length of the road, for all to see that the Macraes have bred a drunkard?"

Fergus gazed at him dully. There was nothing to be said. Meeting the glazed, humble eye, Hector Macrae suddenly lost control of himself.

"Blackguard! blackguard! disgrace!" he yelled, and taking a run forward, he raised the stick and hit Fergus three times across the left arm, with all his might.

The sheer pain of the blows leaped hideously to Fergus' dulled senses. He reeled away incredulously, clutching his arm.

"Ey, ey," he protested: and then, as his father followed, and struck him again, his face darkened.

"No, father. No. No!" And suddenly he had gripped the stick in his right hand, and held it fast. Hector struggled in vain to tug it free.

"That is enough, father. Let be."

And, feeling the stirrings of rage in his own breast, he let go his hold, and ran away down the slope, fearful of what he might do if the scene continued.

Safe in the corner of the sandhills, Fergus began talking, commiserating with himself: for his flicker of rage was out, and he had been severely hurt. Tenderly he felt his arm, crooning to it, comforting it,

as if it were a child. Carefully he moved it, this way and that. It was not broken. With infinite pains, he rolled back the sleeve of his jersey, and surveyed the injuries. Three great weals, darkening into bruises, glared at him from the smooth white skin. Only his splendid muscles had saved the bone. And it was his father who had done that: his own father.

A slow indignation mounted in Fergus' bosom. This was not the way to treat a grown man, a man twenty-four years of age. The Captain, now—he knew how to treat a man. He was as old as Fergus' father, and had seen far more of the world. Besides, if his father made the stuff, and sold the stuff, why, what else was it for but to be drunk, and why should not he, Fergus, enjoy it as well as another? His first sense of guilt disappeared, giving way to a dull resentment. Pulling down his sleeve, he realised that, what with the pain of his arm and the pain in his head, he could scarcely stand. He must find a place to rest. There was a nook in the sandhills looking down on the Bay of the Seals, a little hollow just the size and shape of a man. Thither, reeling from side to side, Fergus made his way: heaped up the sand into a pillow: and lay down to sleep.

Three hours later, he woke in terror. A soft grey mist was drifting in from the sea, and the bay beneath him was full of fighting men. Fergus rubbed his eyes, and gaped open-mouthed. Everywhere, down to the water's edge, and about him in the sandhills, wild shock-headed men were running and hacking and slashing, without a sound. They were clear and vivid on the white sand: he could see the flash of their teeth, the wicked glimmer of steel, the di-

shevelled brands, the snarls and grins of fury: yet he knew at once that they were not living men. They scurried about, dark and insubstantial, like the wind rushing about in a field of green corn. Gazing fascinated, he saw that their unearthliness was heightened by the fact that they were not all upon the ground. Some tore and hacked and struggled two or three feet above the sand: of others only the head and shoulders could be seen. They darted about in front of the scene, independent of it, like spots before the eyes: and, as he watched, he shrank back in affright, for a fugitive, open-mouthed, gasping, looking back over his shoulder in mortal fear, rushed at and through him, pursued by a dark short man, claymore in hand.

Everywhere he looked, the noiseless battle was raging. Fergus, his terror in abeyance, watched with a stirring of the blood. Just below him, on the sand, two men fought desperately, neither yielding ground. Suddenly the claymore of the bigger man broke off short in his hand. Grinning in triumph, the other pulled back his blade, but before the lunge went home the disarmed man dived for his legs, and brought him down. Over and over they rolled in the sand, struggling and kicking, till they disappeared. Then Fergus, craning forward, saw the bigger man slowly rise, looking down at the ground.

His gaze shifted. Close below him, on his left, a man of exceptional stature was fighting with his back to the rocks, hard beset. Six or seven of the rival clan hemmed him round, and, though two fell, there were enough to spring and pull him down. Still his struggles were terrific: the mass of men heaved—and

threshed, clinging desperately, like men holding on to a boat in the surf. Three more scurried up, and in a minute they had the powerful man spreadeagled on his back, each limb pinned down by sheer weight to the ground. Then one of the men pulled out a knife, and Fergus realised with a sick shock of horror that they were mutilating the powerful man. The great trunk writhed madly, and Fergus saw the head convulsively jerk, saw the white of the agonised eyeballs, and the yelling mouth. With a cry he sprang to his feet, then realised his solid helplessness in a war of shadows.

Then the group stood up, and drew away, laughing, exultant, from the great body that twisted slowly on the sand. The executioner wiped his knife. Fergus stood shaking: his mouth had become very dry. He covered his face with his hands, and wished to weep. When he looked next, there were hardly any figures on the beach: the fight had thinned and scattered away into the fields towards Glas na Corp, and the dark insubstantial figures raced about, scarcely visible on the green. There were many dead on the beach, and some wounded. One lay close to him in the sand-hills, trying to lift himself upon one arm, panting, with closed eyes. His red beard came to a point, and his hair, a shade darker, was matted above his brow like a thatch. Looking back unwillingly to that terrible corner by the rocks, Fergus saw the mutilated man rise, clutching his abdomen with both hands, stagger a couple of steps, and fall upon his face.

The wind blew chill, the sea thickened, the figures grew fainter, and faded from sight. Fergus turned in fresh terror, and lumbered homeward.

He knew what he had seen, for other men had seen it. Dugald McLeod had seen it three times. He had seen an age-old battle of the MacDonalds and the McLeods: he had seen the furious wraiths of men whose bodies lay hundreds of years buried in the little valley named after them, the little valley round Glas na Corp.

For weeks afterwards, despite the ridicule of Aeneas, he would not touch a drop of spirits.

BOOK II



CHAPTER VIII



THE LITTLE BLACK AND WHITE CALF RANGED RESTLESSLY at the limit of his tether that was nearest home. He had been several hours alone now, on the grassy headland above the point: the sun had been hot, the afternoon long, and for some time there had been nothing to interest him and distract his baby attention from the flies. He gazed mournfully at the roof of the house on the point, and stamped his hind leg two or three times. Surely it was time, and past time, for being unpicketed and taken home.

While he stood gazing, there was a sudden stir in the bracken to the left, and a piercing squeal rang out, followed almost at once by a savage spitting and snarling. The little calf gave a ridiculous angular jump, and landed on all four feet with his head towards the disturbance. The snarling continued, and rose to a yell. Far below in the valley, it reached the ears of Shepherd McRory's dog, who was lying idle in the sun. He raised his head, replied with a furious outburst of barking, and came racing up across the fields like a shadow.

The calf had heard such snarlings before, and knew that they meant cats. From his outpost on the headland, he had often seen them hunting in the bracken; the Macraes' cat, whom he knew well, for she often shared his byre, and many another. He was not to

know that the squeal came from a rabbit, and that the racket he heard concerned the ownership of the kill. Every nerve alert, pleasantly alarmed, he stood staring at the bracken, awaiting what should happen next.

But the cats, even in the midst of their fury, had heard the dog. Long experience of their common enemy taught them the only course to pursue, and, half a minute later, the calf saw his friend Christina travelling across the tiny field by the cottage, her belly almost touching the ground. Then a thudding sound made him look upward, and a great handsome cat with ginger fur bounded across a clearing and disappeared into the bracken beyond.

A few seconds later, the dog arrived, panting, enthusiastic. He dashed about for a while in the bracken, his tail waving gallantly like a feather: he found the dead rabbit: he dashed on excitedly, realised that the cats were gone, came back, barked once or twice at the calf, to satisfy his pride: and returned at a leisurely pace to the valley. Each time the dog barked, the calf gave a little convulsive tremor, but held his ground; and stood for some time watching where the dog had gone.

Then, once more, he became acutely conscious of his loneliness, and of the tormenting flies. He began to whimper; he ran over to the bracken, and brushed his head hard against it. It was not stiff enough. Baffled, he stood, head down, and the flies buzzed round him in a cloud.

Suddenly a low, clear call floated up to him, a call that he knew well. Bounding at once to the full length of his tether, he looked eagerly downward, and

saw a figure climbing towards him from the cottage. The little calf recognised the figure at once as the one for whom he had been waiting. He strained and tugged on his rope, uttering tiny, soft moos of delight.

Mary came swinging up easily through the bracken. She was tall and graceful, though she kept much of the coltishness which had distinguished her childhood. Health and a careless strength were evident in all her movements. She took the steep slope effortlessly as a gull, leaping lightly over obstacles, humming to herself, and every now and then giving an encouraging soft call to the baby calf.

"Oho, my darling. Oho, my little one."

She reached the top of the hill, and stretched out her arms, smiling. The little calf jumped up and down, frantic with pleasure. As soon as she came up to him, he thrust his little wet muzzle into her lap. Stooping over him, saying loving, consoling words, she rubbed his face and neck with her hands and the soft insides of her forearms, smoothing away the irritation of the flies, which rose resentfully in the air, and buzzed about her head.

As she stroked his face, Mary looked across to the sandhills on the far side of the burn. She stayed for some time in this position, longer maybe than she need, though the calf would not mind if the stroking went on for ever. She was looking to see if she might get a glimpse of Willie McFarish going home from his work. She did not really like Willie McFarish. He was bold and careless of her. He had not too good a reputation. She knew that he and Fergus were at odds. But then, Fergus never looked at her, never took any more notice of her than if she had been a

dog: and there was something in her that responded, with a chuckle of secret delight, to boldness and disorder. Once Willie McFarish had been banging at a tin can with his boot, making a fearful noise, and she had asked him to stop. For reply, he had grinned at her, and given the tin a kick that made twice as much noise as before. She had not been pleased, yet something in her leaped in answer.

Ah. There he was. The top of his head appeared, then half of him. Look, the bold bit of brass, there he was, waving at her openly, for the whole world to see. She looked round, biting her short upper lip to hide a smile: then waved quickly back.

"Come, darling. Home."

Stooping, with a swift movement she undid the tether, and ran lightly down the slope, singing, with the little calf gambolling and throwing up his bottom at her side.

When she came into the narrow path leading to the cottage, she met Peter. He hesitated, and stood aside, with an ingratiating smile: but she brushed quickly past, pulling the calf after her, and made for the byre.

Having made the calf comfortable for the night, Mary ran down past the byre to the end of the point. A little footpath, rough and uneven, wound just above the rocks. It was a mere ledge upon the slope of the headland. She followed this for some distance, pausing every now and then to shade her eyes against the westering sun, and gaze at the Islands. Rhum was half hidden under a mass of cloud, like a great swansdown billow with a crest of gold. Eigg was clear, but at many removes from reality: a remote land of

cliffs, with steep dreaming shadows. Against the slope beside her, as Mary walked, leaned her own shadow.

The girl kept on till she had well rounded the corner of the headland, and came to a break in the path. There she stopped, and began confidently to clamber down what, from the path, looked like a sheer drop into the sea. From the extreme edge, however, could be seen a series of precarious footholds. Swinging her supple body down from one to another, Mary came to a tiny inlet, a miniature nest of sand, hidden from above by the bulging rocks of the headland. This was her own private place. Even from a boat, though perfectly visible, it looked out of reach by land. She had seen it when in the boat two years before, and never rested till she had located it from above. To guarantee her first descent, she had collected, bit by bit, lengths of discarded long-line, and fitted them together until she had a rope strong enough to support her weight. She tested it, secretly, over a beam in the cow-byre, and hid it under the straw. Another morning, when the brothers and their father were away, she borrowed an axe and cut herself a sharp, stout stake. Then, after a week of waiting, she made a breathless dash off with stake and coal-hammer, and drove the stake firmly into a crevice in the rock. Next afternoon, the rope securely tied, she drew a deep breath of resolution, committed herself to the Blessed Virgin, and began to descend.

She was glad of the rope, though it was too thin and cut her fingers, for it enabled her to find footholds. It was also, by a miracle, just long enough. With a feeling of wild elation, she jumped down on to the soft, white sand: explored the tiny inlet: wrote

MARY on the sand in deep, sprawling letters: and climbed up again.

The second time, she took one end of the rope in her hand, in case she should slip, and climbed without mishap down the face of the rock. For many times after that, though able to do without it, she took the rope with her, as a safeguard, not quite daring to leave it behind. Then, one evening, she came round the corner and saw Peter gazing in astonishment at the stake. Shrinking out of sight, she flew back along the path, and reached home undetected. In her next free half hour, she got rid of the stake. It was hard work, for the damp had made it swell. She had to split it up, bit by bit. At all costs, she did not want her secret place discovered. It was her bathing-place, where she could do unobserved what she most loved to do: take off all her clothes, bathe, and sit naked on the warm, soft sand.

Reaching it now, she slipped the heavy stuff skirt and petticoat over her head, and in half a minute stood free of all restraint, with the breeze playing upon her body. There was no one to see her: but, if there had been, no man with a sense of place or beauty but would have realised how perfectly she harmonised with her surroundings. Such a man would not have thought that here stood a girl, naked. His mind, free from the meaner daily bread of thought, would only have realised that she wore no clothes when he began to wonder what gave her beauty its pure austerity. Tall and spare, the brown of her skin fading into white, she stood, bending a little forward, trying the ripples with her toe. Her arms, long, loosely jointed, with powerful forearms and brown strong

hands, hung by her sides. Her breasts were small and firm, her stomach flat, her flanks lean and slender. Below the knee, her legs were shapely, but strong, and she had the broad feet of one who seldom wears a shoe. She wore her nakedness as naturally as does any wild creature: indeed, save for the exquisite pleasure it gave her, she was like Eve before the Fall: she did not know that she was naked. Only one living creature knew her secret: Fergus, who had once surprised her. Even then, she felt no shame, only fear that he would betray her. But luck was on her side. She had been found by the one man least likely to be concerned. Fergus felt he ought to be scandalised, but he had seen and dimly understood her fitness to the place, and a not dissimilar instinct made him realise something of her need for secrecy and freedom. So, beyond warning her that "men might see her," he did nothing. Even this warning she could not take seriously. She felt so much better without her clothes, so much more truly herself, that her modesty could not occupy itself much with the question.

So, for her precious hour of freedom, Mary swam and basked and lay on the edge of the water, so that the little waves broke upon her belly and under her arms. Then, rested and purified, her spirit singing within her, she went home to help old Mrs. Macrae set out the supper.



CHAPTER IX



AENEAS' GUEST, SITTING UP LIKE A CROW IN THE bows, huddled his black coat closer about his ears, and began doubtfully to stretch out a long, thin leg. Aeneas looked at him over Fergus' broad shoulder, and winked at Fergus.

"Getting a bit stiff?"

"Well, ah, yes; since you mention it." The guest looked longingly at a small island which they were passing. "I think ... I wonder ... that is, if you don't mind ..."

"Well, what is it?"

Aeneas winked at Fergus again.

"Will you be, ah, very long taking in the line?"

"About forty minutes, Macrae lad, eh?"

"Forty-five."

"About forty-five minutes."

"Well, in that case ..."

"Wants us to land him, Macrae lad. Put about."

"Only so that I can stretch my legs," said the third man earnestly. "Just stretch my legs. Walk up and down a bit, and get warm."

"Aye, aye," said the Captain composedly, once more winking at Fergus.

Fergus brought the boat close to a rock. There was a swell, and he needed all his cunning to keep her off. The black-coated man got up, and stood,

bending ridiculously at the waist, trying to keep his balance.

"Go on, man. There's your chance. Jump!" cried the Captain; and his guest, more like a crow than ever, made an ungainly flop, claspings his hat in one hand, landed somehow on the rock, and scrambled his way to safety.

Coming to a solid wall, he held on to it, and turned to them his long melancholy face.

"Thank you," he said. "Thank you very much."

"We'll pick you up," said Aeneas. "Never fear. Now, Macrae lad."

The castaway looked doubtfully after the boat, as if the Captain's reassurance had raised new misgivings in his mind. Then he began scrabbling up the rock. Twisting cumbrously round in the stern, a minute later, Aeneas looked at him, looked back at Fergus: and both men laughed.

The melancholy man had been Aeneas' guest for some ten days. His presence was a great puzzle to Fergus, who could see nothing in common between him and the Captain, and who found him, on their fishing expeditions, less help than hindrance. Moreover, the guest did not appear to enjoy the expeditions. He frequently needed to be landed "to stretch his legs," and his general attitude was one of pious endurance. The weather had been cold and rough, and on one occasion the unfortunate man had been sick before they could land him.

"Ah, it does the man good," was all Aeneas would say: and, after asking once, it was not Fergus' way to speak again.

The Captain's house was now some six months

finished, and Fergus had taken permanent service as his fisherman. His duties were not arduous, since what the Captain chiefly needed was a companion for his various activities. Fergus, however, took his position seriously, discovering and proposing to his employer many tasks, and ways of being useful, which had not entered the easy-going Captain's head. A devil if he thought he was being cheated, Aeneas was utterly careless with what he called a trustable man. Fergus, who had grown quite fearless of him, reproached him often for his want of care, and gravely pointed out the opportunities he had of drawing his money for nothing.

"That's all right, Macrae lad," replied the Captain cheerfully, waving a glass. "I know where I am, with you, and with the next man, and the man over the hill. The man who buys Aeneas M'Grath for a fool gets a damned bad bargain."

And with this arcane saying he dismissed the subject, bidding Fergus bring him his concertina, and putting him through the bass parts which, with labour and much laughter, he had taught him, note by note, in the long winter evenings.

But the long, melancholy guest, with his black clothes, his black floppy hat, and his pale sad face, was a real problem. Aeneas had had several guests, sea captains from Oban, pilots from Fort Augustus, and a gentleman fond of shooting. In every case there had been an obvious point of contact with the Captain. Nights had paled into daylight with drink and song. Mary, half a mile away, had risen startled on her elbow in the moonlight, to hear faint bursts of fairy music that resolved themselves, on a more

careful hearing, into the voices of Aeneas' concertina. But the latest guest drank only under pressure, and did not care for the concertina. As its music swelled, and Aeneas' songs grew broader, he would withdraw, mutter to himself almost fiercely, and retire to bed. They would hear the crash of his door, away at the end of the long cold passage, shrug their shoulders, and smile at one another.

Well: it was no affair of his, thought Fergus, as he took the boat along with short strokes, head on into the abrupt, choppy sea that met them on the windward side of the island. The melancholy man was wiser than he knew, Fergus reflected. This sort of thing would not have suited him at all, especially when they stood by to take in the line. Even so, he did not envy him his vigil on the island. Fergus glanced inshore. A low bank of cloud, straight as a wall, cut off the top half of the mountain. The sky was ominously marbled and distinct, with level grey scales, like the belly of some huge, dull fish. The quickening wind had a chill to it. Ardnamurchan was gone. It was going to rain, and rain hard.

Just as Fergus was clearing his mind of the matter, the Captain spoke.

"That fellow," he said, jerking his thumb backwards at the island. "That fellow we've left behind there: do you know what he is?"

"No," replied Fergus.

"He's a holy priest," said the Captain, with a broad smile. "A holy priest, who has fallen from his high estate."

"You mean—" said Fergus slowly, "he—"

"Unfrocked." The Captain nodded. His counte-

nance was too open and ingenuous for a leer, or it might be said that he leered. "That's what they did to him. Unfroked him, Macrae lad. A young woman came to him in the confessional, and he did more than hear her sins. You wouldn't credit him with it, to look at him, would you now?"

Fergus sat silent. He was deeply shocked. That an ordinary man should sin with women did not seem to him anything out of the way, but priests were in his eyes sacred, utterly above the common run of mankind. He was horrified to hear that any of them could do wrong. There had been a drunken priest once, on one of the islands, and that was a terrible thing: but he was a man of such utter goodness and selflessness that the people loved and pitied him for his weakness. It had shaken Fergus to realise that a priest could be guilty of a failing he himself knew so well, and thought so little of; though, for fear of his father, he kept a stricter hold upon himself than when he first knew the Captain. But ... a woman!

Aeneas, watching him narrowly, saw that he had turned quite pale.

"God judge me, if I can find it in my heart to blame the poor fellow," he said. "It must be a terrible thing to have young handsome girls coming in to tell you their fornications and their carnal desires, and you to have no hand in such matters at all."

Fergus was, if anything, more shocked than before.

"But his vows," he protested. "The priest makes holy vows."

"Aye," said Aeneas tolerantly. "So he does. But we're all human. I made vows myself once, to love a

woman for ever. But she was mean, and dirty, and she nagged the soul out of my body. At least, she would have."

"You broke your vows?" Fergus' forehead was knitted, as he adjusted his mind to this new aspect of the Captain.

"Lord bless you, no, Macrae lad," said the Captain cheerfully. "They broke themselves. I woke up one day, and found I didn't love the woman a damn. In fact, once I came to think of it, I hated her like hell. / was keeping the bargain all right: only suddenly there wasn't any bargain to keep. I don't say it was like that with our fiddle-faced friend, but the poor man acted under a human impulse, and we can all of us understand that."

There was a silence, broken only by the noise of the rowlocks.

"God, you should see him," chuckled Aeneas. "He's a terror for eloquence, once he gets started. Given me the shivers down my back, many's the time—and I take a bit of preaching at."

"Eloquent!" cried Fergus. "That one? Why, he never lets a word out of him, except ask to be put ashore."

"He has to be drunk," said Aeneas calmly. "You wait till we get home. I'll make him drunk."

This pious project was accomplished some two hours later, not without opposition from the victim. He was a forlorn object when, in sheets of slanting, grey rain, they fetched him from his rock: and he had to sit in a puddle all the way home.

"Come, now," cried Aeneas heartily, as they came into the long, warm, low-ceilinged parlour. "A dram

for us **all**, and a strong dram, to keep out the cold. Come, Father John: you too."

The guest started violently.

"Don't call me that name, I beg of you," he said, and a strange light came into his eyes.

"Well, name or no name, here's a dram for you."

"No. No. Take it away. You know I will not have it."

"Come on, you fool," cried Aeneas roughly. "You've been out in the rain, you're wet and cold. You'll get a chill on that precious belly of yours, and we'll have you on our hands, moaning and retching for a week. Drink it up, and let's have no more nonsense."

The man hesitated, moistened his lips, then stretched out a shivering hand.

"How you degrade me," he said in a low passionate voice.

"Have it your own way." Aeneas, indomitably cheerful, turned and winked at Fergus. He poured out a liberal supply for the two of them, and bade Fergus draw up three of the big armchairs to the fire.

Covertly, Fergus watched the unfrocked priest. He sat for a few moments looking at his glass despondently. Twice he made a movement, as if he were going to fling its contents on the fire: and sighed heavily. Then, as if a pin had been stuck into him, he jerked back his head, and tossed the raw spirits down at a gulp.

"There's a sensible man," cried the Captain approvingly. "Go up now, put yourself on a dry shirt, and come down to the fire. You'll take no harm, man, **you'll** take no harm at all."

The spirits had worked an astonishing change over the man. He blinked a few times, swallowed, coughed thinly: and then all the melancholy went from his face, as if a sponge had wiped it. It became weak, amiable, almost ingratiating. With an uncertain smile, he rose to his feet.

"Yes," he said. "Yes. I will go and change my clothes. Then I will come back again. Yes. Very well."

And, as he went, his eyes glanced once furtively at the sideboard.

"You see," said Aeneas quietly, as the footsteps receded along the empty passage: and the two sat silent, staring at the fire. The Captain's shadow, vast and spherical, kept leaping away from him across the wall; contracting; leaping again, as if it longed to be free. Fergus' sprawled on the floor behind him, and was lost. The Captain stole a look at him. His face, with its soft golden beard, had even in early manhood the rugged marks of character. There was about it an animal nobility, a dignity Aeneas had once noted in a lion: something rare in man, but, when it is seen, the mark of an adjustment, however improbable, between the forces of the body and the spirit. What was there in this Fergus Macrae, after all? Character, but the man was not aware of it. Loyalty, courage, truth: but their opposites had never occurred to him. Understanding of character? Very little, save an instinctive recognition of his own qualities in others; the qualities he did not realise that he himself possessed. For all his natural shrewdness, the fellow was a simpleton, and he had scarcely a word to say. Yet Aeneas preferred his company to almost any other. Indeed, he almost loved **him**. **With**

a half smile, Aeneas abandoned these reflections, which were more serious than his wont, and poured himself out a second glass.

Presently a shuffling of feet sounded outside, and a knock. The old man rose, and went to let in his guests. Fisher folk in thick blue jerseys, they came blinking and grinning into the firelight. A large circle was made, and chairs dragged from the dark recesses of the room.

"Keep the pew in the corner for his Reverence," said Aeneas. "He's going to preach to us, and I'm glad you lads will be here to hear him."

"What's he going to preach about?" queried one of the newcomers, with a smile.

"WOMEN, my lad," cried the Captain, and there was a roar of laughter, in which the victim joined, his tanned, firelit face taking on an even deeper tinge. His hair was black as tar: he had a thick black moustache, and large white teeth, set wide apart.

"'Twill do you a power of good to hear him," went on Aeneas. "He'd slap salvation into an Oban excise-man. By the time he's been at you ten minutes, you won't be able to look a wench in the face."

"Ho-ho-ho," laughed the dark young man happily. "Ho-ho-ho."

"You'll ho-ho-ho on the other side of your arse, in half an hour's time," said Aeneas, winking at the others. "He put a spell on a chap once, as strong a virgin-breaker as ever I saw: he put a spell on him, so that though the spirit was willing, the flesh was weak, and the poor devil lived virtuous against his will to the day of his death."

The smile left the young man's broad face. He

looked alarmed, and made as if to rise from his chair.

"No, no, sit down," cried his host. "Damn it, a man has to stand up for his beliefs. You're a stag for wenching. Be a man, and stand by your guns."

A babel of laughter and voices broke out, in the middle of which Aeneas cried, "Hush. He's coming."

All fell silent, and turned expectantly to the door. The handle rattled nervously, and it opened. The ex-priest, surprised by the company, blinked at them uncertainly, a smile quivering about his loosened mouth.

"Come in, come in, and welcome. We've kept a place for you. Come on, man. Over there on the right. Macrae lad—fill him his glass."

Silently, peering in the shadows, Fergus found bottle and glass. Holding it up in the firelight, he filled it half full. All relish for the evening's entertainment had left him. He felt it a sacrilege.

"Why man, that's only a thimbleful. D'you want to starve the man? Don't you know he has a delicate stomach, and we have to guard him against a chill? Fill it up."

With a private grimace, Fergus filled it, and handed it to the ex-priest, who took it in a swift, nervous grasp.

"Thank you. Thank you."

He gulped it down, and sat, stretching out his long thin hands to the blaze. Gradually his shivering ceased. Aeneas made a sign, and the man next the priest surreptitiously passed back the glass. Fergus rose, and Aeneas beckoned for the bottle, which, having filled the glass, he set beside the chair.

The ex-priest pretended to be absorbed in the crackling logs, until the glass reached his side. He gave a start of mock surprise, and drank its contents swiftly, as if he were afraid they had been intended for someone else.

To divert attention, Aeneas demanded his concertina, and offered a song, which, he declared, he had learnt from a mulatto with only one arm.

"One arm from birth," he declared. "Not a bite of a shark, or any other accident. But a handicap from birth."

"There are no accidents," said the ex-priest suddenly.

Fergus jumped. The whole tone of the man's voice had changed. It was challenging, authoritative.

By way of answer, Aeneas made signs for the glass, and refilled it. It was passed back.

"Well, accident or no accident, he had one arm, and was like it from birth: and this was his song:

*" 'Twas down the river, boys, the river Kwongobooloo,
I met a dusky girl, which her name was Lousy Lulu—"*

"Be silent, Aeneas M'Grath!" The ex-priest sat up suddenly in his chair, his lean chin jutting out, the flickering shadows deep in his scraggy neck. "Be silent. I will not have those godless songs sung in my presence."

Aeneas gave the company a large, bland wink, like the sudden pulling down of a blind over a window.

"Why not, Reverend Father?" he asked innocently. "It's a good song, that gives pleasure to simple sailor men all the world over."

"Pleasure!"

The word shot out, and the ex-priest collapsed stiffly into his chair, leaning his chin on his hand. He muttered to himself; found the glass, half emptied it, sighed, and drank the rest, lying back loosely in his chair, with closed eyes. His arm hung over the side of the chair, the empty glass in his fingers. Then the fingers relaxed, and the glass dropped to the carpet. The fisherman sitting next him looked enquiringly at Aeneas, who pursed up his lips and shook his head.

Profoundly unhappy, Fergus watched the ex-priest. He lay back in the chair, very pale. Slight tremors ran through him, and every now and then his lips moved and muttered. Aeneas, eyeing him mischievously, began to play soft snatches of church music on his concertina, counterfeiting an organ with uncanny skill.

Suddenly the ex-priest opened his eyes.

"I know you, Aeneas M'Grath," he cried, pulling himself up in the chair, and pointing a long, shaking finger. "I know you, you devil out of hell. I know you, I know what you're at, God's curse upon you."

Aeneas' eyebrows rose. He gazed back, the picture of injured astonishment.

"That's queer doctrine, Father, upon my soul," he protested. "To curse the man by whose hearth you're sitting, and whose drink is warming your belly."

"You are accursed of God," said the ex-priest, his solemn eyes blazing in the firelight. "You go everywhere, setting snares, luring His creatures to destruction with smiles and false words." His voice

sharpened suddenly to a scream. "You are accursed of God!"

The fishermen stirred, and looked at one another uneasily. Aeneas smiled.

"God is love," he said, in a voice as smooth as oil.

"Love!" The ex-priest covered his face with his hands. Half consciously, Fergus noted their unusual length. They reached from his chin almost to the top of his head. "Love," he groaned. "The infinite Love forfeited, and thrown away . . . My sin, my sin . . ."

He rocked himself to and fro, muttering in an agony of grief and remorse. Then he sprang to his feet.

"But I will save them," he yelled. "I will save these men, whom you wish to snare, these men whom you would make boon companions of the devil. I will snatch them out of your hand. O my children, my brothers—" He swayed, and the light went out of his eyes. He clutched the mantelpiece, and his face thickened and dulled as a spasm of nausea shook him.

"God," said Aeneas anxiously. "I hope I haven't given him too much."

But the ex-priest recovered. Pulling himself together, he sank down into the chair, and again covered his eyes with his hand. For a minute he murmured brokenly: then his voice came out clear and strong.

"Infinite, immeasurable, unbounded is the Love of God. His breast is softer than the little clouds at evening, softer than the bosom of the bird against her nestlings, softer than the lips of the mother upon the cheek of her sleeping child. More tender than

the mountain moss to the hare that has outrun the hunter, it receives the penitent soul. Lovelier than dawn upon the waters of a quiet lake, it steals over the souls of men at peace. More excellent in delight than the salmon that leaps in the sun, it makes glad the hearts of men whose sins are forgiven. Who can be happy without the Love of God? Who can walk unrebuked by the beauty of the hills, that has not Love in his heart? Who can sing, without the Love of God?"

"I can," said Aeneas, *sotto voce*.

The other heard him. The hand jerked from his brow: he sat up, and his face contracted into a peevish scorn.

"You! and what do you sing of? Drunkenness, chambering, and wantonness. Songs of gluttony, and the beastly lust of women."

"Oh, come, come. God made women, didn't He?"

The ex-priest glared at Aeneas. His knuckles stood out unnaturally in the firelight, as he gripped the arms of his chair.

"Even you can't deny that," pursued Aeneas, in a reasonable tone. "He made 'em a certain way, too, didn't He? Woman was His gift to man, in a manner of speaking. Well, I mean to say, what did He make 'em *for*? You can't very well go flinging His gift back in His face, now, can you?"

"You will know, in good time, what He made them for," said the ex-priest, in a tense, vibrating tone. "You will know, in the Last Day, whether you have done well to degrade and misuse God's holy gift to man. God gave you drink for your comfort, and you use it to degrade yourself below the beasts.

He gave you woman for your companion, and you make her a harlot, a butt for your vile appetites."

"That comes unhandsome from you, I must say," said Aeneas. "I ask the company—who's carrying his drink better at this minute; me or you? And, talking of women—who foreswore 'em, and then thought better of it?"

The ex-priest did not answer. Clutching the edge of the mantelpiece, he pulled himself to his feet, and towered above the company, like a dark tree unsteady in the wind.

"Look! Look there!" he cried, with such vehemence that they turned appalled, and stared into the depths of the room behind them. "I see, in a ring, the cindery mountains of hell. They are steep and sharp and pointed. They glow with dull red ashes. The hot wind blows grit in clouds about them, and the wailings of damned souls. There, in a pit, in the midst of that dread ring, lies a lake, and in that lake floats the monstrous obscene swollen body of a woman. Hers is the body of all harlots since time began: she is a mile in length, two miles, gigantic, for what do measures matter in hell, where all is measureless, and all eternal? There, there, she lies, seething, boiling in the grease and sweat of her own lusts and the lusts of them that sought her; monstrous, swollen, obscene, loathsome, a hissing, a vomit, a fat and pestilent abomination!"

He was yelling now, the saliva glistened on his chin.

"Round, round, for ever on the hideous mountains, walks the long file of lechers, the lechers of all nations and all time, round and round, and can never avert their burning eyeballs from that sight, nor

their nostrils from the sweaty stench of that abomination. Round and round they trudge, for ever, without rest, compelled for all eternity to live in the foetor of that they sought, in the retching of their own disgust, in the unquenchable torment of their desecrated loins. Grind your teeth, lechers! Howl, whoremongers! Whimper, ye that sought after fornication and adultery! There, there, *THERE* is your woman! Gaze upon her, gaze upon her for ever! Feast your eyes! Lick your besotted lips, and then hear the devil, sniggering in your ears, *Oho, oho. Is she not beautiful? Is she not fair?*"

White and shaking, the dark broad-faced fisherman tried to rise from his chair, but was held down.

"Aaaah!" screamed the ex-priest, stiffening up, and throwing back his head, till they could see the firelight on his palate as he screamed. "I see hell's damnable beach, where the damned lie coupling like cut worms, and get no satisfaction, no rest from their tormenting lust. See, yelling and howling, they beat one another in frenzy with their fists, they tear one another with their teeth, for their lust consumes them; their worm dieth not, their fire is not quenched.

"And you, Aeneas M'Grath, you, blowing up sin's bladder, you—"

He made a leap forward, and sprawled over the fisherman. The chairs were flung back, the men leapt to their feet in confusion.

"He's done," said Aeneas. "Take him out, lay him in the back lobby—and stretch a rug over him," he called after the couple, who obeyed. "He'll be all right there. Macrae and I will put him to bed later, when he's finished."

There was an awkward silence as the bearers shuffled down the passage with their burden.

"He's a terror to preach, certainly," said one of the men presently, with a sickly smile.

"It's his stomach," said Aeneas calmly. "It poisons his mind for him. I gave him too much to-night, and too quickly. I forgot he was fasting. Generally, he's good for an hour or more, once he's started. Now," he went on, as the bearers came sheepishly back, "draw close, my hearties. Fill your glasses, and we'll make a merry night of it."

But merriment had somehow left the party, and the guests left early, excusing themselves in unconvincing terms.

"Damn the fellow," said Aeneas. "He's spoilt our evening: him, and these squeamish chaps. I've a good mind to leave him where he is. No: it's not his fault. On second thoughts, we'd better put him to bed. Come on, Macrae lad."

"There," he grunted, as they negotiated a corner of the stairs. "You never put a holy priest to bed before, Macrae lad, I'll be bound."



CHAPTER X



FOR THREE WHOLE DAYS AND NIGHTS, THE WESTERN Highlands weltered under a storm of rain. Nothing like it, Hector Macrae averred, had been seen during his lifetime. Heavy rain was common enough, even eight hours of such rain as now was falling. Three days and nights of showers, or soft rain, could often be expected. But not three days of torrent.

A wind blew the rain up from the South—though where it came from was more than a mystery, for the South knew nothing of it. In the lulls, the rain fell quickly and steadily, as with a purpose. The wind, pressing sideways against the soft weight of falling water, could hardly move it: continuous showers drifted like mats of rushes across the dishevelled landscape. Then a fresh storm, bursting with wicked energy, rushed in from the sea. Travelling very low, and at great speed, the grey masses of cloud hit the land, and were instantly ripped open, discharging their contents in sheets of solid water. The rain fell sideways upon the shore like the swathes from a scythe: it tumbled upon the headland in a series of long, irregular waves.

By noon on the first day, the yard about Hector Macrae's house was ankle deep in water, and the three men had to go out and hack emergency drains to carry it down the slope to the burn. By four

o'clock, the roof had started to leak in two places. One was not serious: the other was stayed by the herculean efforts of Fergus, who stood upon a table and forced an old oilskin under the beams. Luckily, though the rain continued, even increased, in fury, these were the only places that gave way.

None of the Macraes had a dry skin for these three days, nor for a whole night. So terrific was the rain that the boats had to be baled out morning and evening. A shelter had to be extemporised for the fowls, higher up on the slope. The cattle needed constant attention. It was a nightmare time, made worse for Peter by his terror of catching a cold on his chest. Happily, despite every opportunity for his old weakness to return and claim him, he took no harm at all.

On the fourth morning, the rain had ceased. The hills were covered with soft clouds of vapour, and every valley was loud with running water. Soon after ten, the vapours began to glow, and parted presently, like wool, to reveal the sun. Birds sang from every bush: cocks crowed valorously, strutting on the mud; smoke went up blue in the air from every cottage, and steam from the thatches and the sodden earth mingled with the disappearing vapours.

The burn below the Macraes' had risen to an incredible height, and was already shrinking. Off their heads with excitement, the ducks sailed madly, twelve feet above their usual level. A drowned lamb floated down among the eddies, almost bumping against the hindermost brown duck, which made a sudden spurt to avoid it.

By evening, the burn had sunk to four feet above

normal. Next day, it was ordinarily full, and nothing but the bent grasses, and a thin line of weed and old corks high up on the slope, remained to show where it had been.

At the midday meal, Peter told his father that the stepping stones below the cottage had been carried away. While the burn was high, they had all had to go round by the road, and across Aeneas' territory, to reach their boats.

Fergus looked up.

"I will repair them," he said, "this evening, when I have finished in the byre."

Hector nodded, chewing slowly. Mrs. Macrae looked up at him, and each of her sons, then down at her plate. She was a nonentity, except for the work she did in the house. Mary ate gravely, seldom looking up. Her hair, parted in the middle, was drawn down severely on both sides of her splendid brow. Her grey eyes, far apart, were nobly set, and fringed with dark, curling lashes. The bridge of her nose was of remarkable width, and the nose itself was thick down to the tip, with finely modelled nostrils. Her upper lip was very short, and covered with fine down. Her chin was firm, the line of her jaws clean and strong, and she carried her head proudly on a slender neck. She ate like a man, tearing the food in her strong, even teeth.

Fergus, busy that afternoon about the byre, looked forward to the time when he could get down to the burn. He planned how he should make the new stepping stones. His muscles felt a positive desire for the big, heavy weights. Ever since his feat of some two years before, he had welcomed any chance of

putting forth his strength: and here was a chance after his own heart.

It was half-past five by the time his malodorous labours were finished. He came out, blinking, into the sweet air. There was a cloud over the sun, but the sea dazzled, and the green curled breakers were falling on the beach in musical thunder. The sea smelt alive, and full of fish. Fergus pulled a tuft of bracken and wiped his hands, standing with his chin sunk on his chest, drawing in the breeze through distended nostrils, letting three hours of muck and sweat be blown away. Then, with a rumble of satisfaction, he went, tacking from side to side down the steepest part of the slope.

Peter had certainly been right. The stones were all scattered. Two of the biggest lay close by, but the rest were dotted about many yards downstream, and three had disappeared. Fergus spent twenty minutes collecting the most serviceable, then set off to prospect for bigger ones.

He located a beauty, some distance off, a piece broken off the solid rock which cropped out here and there among the sandhills. It was long, with flat surfaces, perfect for his purpose. He was just stooping to move it, when he heard a sound that made him look up in bewilderment.

There it was again, a woman's cry, followed by a stream of furious, terrified words, and a man's oath. Before he could do anything, Mary burst through a gap in the sandhills, clutching at her torn dress, followed by Willie McFarish.

Mary was running, but her garments hampered her. Willie McFarish, crimson with anger, dashed

after her, his short thick legs scampering over the loose sand. He was up with her in a moment, flung his gorilla-like arms around her from behind, swung her off her feet, and threw her on her back in the sand.

An inarticulate roar broke from Fergus, and he rushed forward. Even in the tumult of his senses, Willie McFarish heard him, rolled clear, and sprang to his feet like an animal. Panting, with bared teeth, he faced Fergus. Mary, clasping her dress over her bosom, sat up, and stared at Fergus. Her hair was loose. With her high, angry colour, and her lips parted, she looked amazingly beautiful.

But Fergus had eyes only for his enemy. Slowly, hunching his shoulders, opening his enormous hands, he advanced. A growling noise rose in his chest: his lips were pulled back in a snarl.

When Fergus was almost within reach of him, Willie McFarish ducked wildly to the left, feinting, and then was at Fergus' throat, clinging and pummelling, his legs wrapped around those of Fergus.

The shock of the attack bore Fergus several steps backward. He leaned his head out of Willie's reach, his beard jutting upwards to the sky, and smiled grimly as he felt Willie's vicious blows go home. Then, without haste, bracing himself firmly on both legs he gripped Willie's shoulder in his right hand, and wrenched it with all his power. The pain made Willie give for an instant, and, in that instant, Fergus released his left arm, and wedged his clenched fist under Willie's chin. At the same time he flung his right arm round Willie's waist, clamping the thick-set body against his own.

Well knowing the menace of that fist under **his**

jaw, Willie locked the iron muscles of his neck. Inexorably, Fergus thrust. For a couple of seconds the tension held: then Willie swiftly released one of his legs, and kicked Fergus on the shin.

Fergus roared at the sudden pain, and thrust harder. Inch by inch, Willie's head went back. Grinning with agony, his muscles cracking, the sweat bursting out from his forehead, he suffered to have his chin thrust back and back. His face blackened: a gurgling rose in the sides of his throat. The sky spun round his eyes. Then, just as it seemed that Willie's neck must break, Fergus turned his hand over, clutched his throat, whipped round his right hand from Willie's back, and crashed it into the distorted countenance.

It took a lot to beat Willie McFarish. Even the man's face was hard. Before Fergus could repeat the blow, Willie jerked his body to the right, all but upsetting Fergus, and clutched him in an embrace like a bear's, pressing his face close against Fergus' chest. Gripping Fergus' left leg in his right, he kicked him again with his free foot.

Rage rose in Fergus. His eyes gleamed pale and green. Shortening his arm, he clubbed Willie savagely over the ear. Then, a better thought striking him, he grasped Willie's bull neck, wedging his great thumbs in on either side; joined his fingertips at the nape; and proceeded to close his hands. For perhaps three seconds Willie stood it: then, as the great thumbs drove their way pitilessly into either side of his throat, he uttered a choking scream, and loosed his hold. Instantly Fergus was upon him, seizing his shoulders, shaking him to and fro in a fury, and finally, before

the man could at all recover, crashing his great fist once more into Willie's face and knocking him yards away upon the sand.

But Willie was hardly down before he was up. Tough as oak, sinewy as an eel, he scrambled desperately to his feet, fearing that Fergus had knocked him down only to fall upon him and kill him on the ground. Dazed and giddy as he was, he managed to run several yards to a stunted pine that grew upon the sandhills. Claspings the trunk, steadying himself, he looked round, and, though the world was reeling round him, he saw that Fergus was making no move to follow. He stood for a minute, panting, his bruised mouth open like a beast's, blood dripping down upon his chest. Then, his faculties clearing, he saw Fergus standing, hands on hips, regarding him with grim amusement.

The sight sent Willie wild with rage. Still holding on to the tree, he shook his fist, and began to shriek curses and obscenities. For some seconds Fergus listened with equanimity, till an especially virulent insult to the entire family of Macrae roused him to remember that all this was happening in front of Mary. He looked round, ran, stooped, picked up a stone bigger than Willie's head, and made to pursue him with it.

Uttering a yell, Willie fled, and Fergus, dropping the stone, bent down and hugged his knees, doubled up with laughter. Willie did not even look back. He scuttled away as fast as his thick short legs could carry him, and disappeared among the broom.

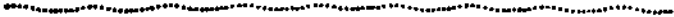
Fergus straightened up, wiped his eyes with the back of his hand, realised that his knuckle was

bleeding, and frowned at it. He must have cut it on Willie's teeth. He eyed it, brushed his forehead with the other hand, in case he had rubbed blood upon it, and went slowly back to Mary.

She was kneeling on the sand, fastening up her bosom. She looked up at Fergus with a strange, beseeching expression, her lips parted, her wide eyes troubled. But Fergus evidently was not considering her. Half way across to her, he paused again, frowned, sucked his injured knuckle, and spat out the blood. Then he came on slowly, and stood a couple of yards away, waiting for her to get up. A great weariness came over Mary. She wanted to weep, to lay her face against his knees, and hold on to him for a long, long time. Then, as he stood there, frowning, muttering to himself, she realised that she was nothing to him, that he had not so much romantically delivered her as rescued one of his animals from the attack of a strange dog. A flush rose to her face and neck. Angry and embarrassed, she sprang to her feet, and ran away in front of him, making for home with long, light steps.



CHAPTER XI



THAT SAME EVENING, HECTOR MACRAE SAT IN JUDGMENT. On his way home from visiting Dugald McLeod, whom the rains had left in a poor way, Hector met Willie McFarish in the road, gibbering with rage, holding a handkerchief to his face. He had no love for any of the McFarishes, but surprise, no less than courtesy, bade him stand and enquire of Willie what had happened. To his indignation, he was assailed in return by a string of curses, and objurgation on the whole family of Macraes, and an envenomed wish that they might burn in hell.

"And when I meet that hulking great bastard of yours again," screamed Willie, in conclusion, "tell him I'll slit his belly for him, and strangle him in his own guts."

Hector stood in the road, speechless, staring till Willie turned a corner and disappeared. Never had such outrageous words been addressed to him—let alone by a man a generation younger. They should be paid. Indeed, and assuredly, they should be paid.

Snorting, and with kindled eye, he made the rest of his way home. Peter, looking up as he came in, with an enquiry for the health of Dugald McLeod, broke off short at sight of his father's face. Hector spoke two words.

"Fetch Fergus."

Rising as if he feared a blow, Peter hurried out. Mrs. Macrae, sitting by the hearth, mending a stocking, made as if to rise, hesitated, and sat down again. Then she got up, and went off softly to the inner room.

In less than a minute, Fergus came. There was a bandage on his right hand. He eyed his father with the slow contentment of a bull who has had his fill.

Hector, who supposed Fergus to have committed a drunken assault, had been minded to break out into a string of furious reproaches: but he saw manhood in his son's eyes, and the reproaches died upon his tongue. For a moment they regarded one another.

"Tell me," commanded Hector at last.

Before replying, Fergus shambled to a chair opposite his father, sat down, and crossed his legs. He had become aware that he was tired.

"I was working at the stones," he said peacefully. "I heard a scream. Willie McFarish was ravishing Mary in the sandhills. Mary is strong. She broke away, and ran. Willie McFarish ran after her, and threw her down. I came to him."

The growl rose again in Fergus' throat. He leaned forward in the chair, and his beard bristled.

"Willie McFarish jumped at me. I fought him. He kicked me." Fergus looked up, raising his eyebrows, as he related this unusual form of assault. "I pushed back his head. I hit him. I choked him. He ran away. Then, holding on to a tree, he spoke curses on our family."

"So," said Hector, his jaws tightening. "I met with him in the road, spoke easily to him, and was likewise cursed."

He paused, glaring in front of him, with red-rimmed eyes. Then he turned to Fergus abruptly.

"You did well," he said. "This is a big matter." He paused again, frowning. "The girl," he asked harshly. "She did not consent? She was not running to entice him?"

"Indeed, no," replied Fergus, bewildered at such a view of the occasion. "She did not consent at all. Before I saw them, I heard Willie call out. I think she struck him."

"Hm." Hector looked at the back of his own hand, as it lay upon his knee. "Fetch her," he said. "Fetch Peter also."

Mary came in front of the two brothers. She was white. There were dark circles under her eyes. Peter shut the door, latching it carefully. She stood before Hector, gently rubbing one of her broad bare feet against the other.

"This McFarish," said Hector harshly. "You have seen him before?"

"Seen him?" Mary looked bewildered.

"Met with him. Walked with him."

"Sometimes."

"How else would you come to be in the sandhills, at the only time when he is passing, on his way from work?"

Mary coloured.

"I have met him sometimes." She raised her voice.

"By arrangement?"

"No . . . that is, only once or twice."

"I see your kind," said Hector mercilessly. "You lurk about in the sandhills, hoping to meet with him. Then, after many meetings, he says 'Meet me/'"

Mary said nothing. She began to tremble.

"Do you not know," shouted Hector suddenly, "that that man is against us, and all his clan? Do you not know how it is between us and him? You know it well: and so you must needs go off, shameless, treacherous harlot that you are, to make meetings with a man that is the enemy of those who feed and shelter you."

Mary winced, and started to her full height.

"I am no harlot," she cried, facing him passionately. "I am neither shameless nor treacherous. I am true to you all. But what am I to do . . . alone here? I meant no harm."

Her face puckered like a child's, and she burst into tears.

"He was kind to me," she sobbed. "He said kind words to me, and joked with me. He brought me back a present from Fort William. I did not mean any harm. I did not know he . . ."

She looked imploringly at Fergus.

"Fergus will bear witness I am not bad," she said. "He will tell you I stood out against him."

"It is true," murmured Fergus, from the back of the little room. "She did not consent at all."

For a while there was silence, broken only by Mary's sniffs. Frankly, unashamedly, she wiped away her tears with her bare brown forearm. Then she looked apprehensively at Hector, waiting to hear her fate.

The longer Hector pondered, the weaker grew his anger against her. His sense of justice, which even in anger guided him unswervingly, told him that the girl was not to be blamed. Hector saw the relations

of the sexes very simply. The role of each was clear; man the pursuer, woman the victim. The girl was growing up. Nay, Willie McFarish had probably set himself to seduce her, as a blow at the Macraes. She was simple, inexperienced. Her head had been turned with soft words and presents.

When he spoke, his voice had lost much of its harshness.

"You have caused us great trouble," he said. "You have been foolish and wrong, but I do not think you had any wicked intention."

Mary bent forward, clasping her hands.

"Indeed, indeed, I had not—"

"You say that this man spoke kindly to you, and made jokes with you," pursued Hector, paying no attention. "Well: you see now, for yourself, the purpose of his jokes, and the nature of his kindness. What you do not see is that all the time, being the man he is, he thought you understood his purpose, and consented to it."

The girl started, and put her hand to her lips.

"No, no," she cried quickly. "He—"

Hector raised his hand, silencing her instantly. His sons expected to see him strike her down. It was the first time Hector Macrae had been contradicted on his own hearth.

"What, girl," he thundered. "Are you to know this best, or am I?"

Mary shrank back against the table, and began to weep again.

"I will not bid you take my word for it, then," said Hector more quietly, "I will bid you consider this. If the man did not believe that you understood

him, and that you would consent, would he attack you thus a quarter of a mile from your own door?"

"He believed you would consent," went on Hector, as she made no answer. "What had passed between you to make him so believe, I leave to yourself and God. I am not going to punish you."

The brothers sat open-mouthed. Mary stopped crying, and stared at him.

"I am not going to punish you, because I think you see what you have done. I think you see, also, that you have made trouble for the men of this house. You see that one is scarred with fighting in your defence. You know, too, that the matter will not end here. You tell me that you are loyal to us. I will believe you, and let your loyalty be your punishment, when you consider that you have made trouble for those who feed and shelter you. But"—his voice hardened—"if you again have any dealings with that lewd man, I will beat you within an inch of your life. Do you understand?"

Mary gazed at him steadily, her eyes large and dark, like an animal's at dusk.

"I understand," she whispered.

"Go, then." He turned, the leg of his chair scraping on the stone floor. "Oh, there is one thing more. You said this man gave you a present. Where is it?"

"It is away ... by my bed."

"Bring it here."

Still staring at him, Mary backed out of the room. There was silence till she returned.

"Well?"

"Here it is."

Pitifully she held it out to him. It was a little box

of yellow velvet. On the lid was a picture of Fort William, with Ben Nevis behind. The windows of Fort William were picked out with little bits of glistening sand, and the whole picture was framed with sea-shells.

Hector took it as if it were a pestilent thing. Gingerly, with a face of disgust, he opened the lid. The box was empty. Mary had hastily removed her few treasures before bringing it in.

Rising from his chair, Hector dropped it on the floor, stamped on it, and ground it with his heel.

"There," he said. "Now go."

White, expressionless, still staring at him with large, dark eyes, Mary went out and closed the door.



CHAPTER XII



HECTOR MACRAE WAS RIGHT, THAT WAS BY NO MEANS the end of the matter. When he and his sons came out from Mass on the following Sunday, and set their faces westward, they saw the three McFarishes, old Angus, Willie, and the stepson George, leaning together against the wall, with a small crowd about them. The McFarishes lived at Tougal, a collection of cottages a mile nearer the village than the group of which the Macraes occupied the most outlying. They could count on the support of their neighbours. Evidently these had an idea of what was in the air, for at sight of the Macraes they stirred expectantly, and began to grin. The Macraes' neighbours, all in ignorance, were scattered up and down the road.

Hector gave the group a single glance, and went steadily along. Peter kept close to his father, and looked straight ahead. Fergus, his slouch if anything exaggerated, came half a step to the rear. Glancing at the trio, he noted with sardonic pleasure that Willie's face was still discoloured.

Angus McFarish, his black brows thick as a nail-brush, sneered audibly as the Macraes drew level, but said nothing till they were almost past. Then, quite softly, he spoke two words.

"Macrae—!"

Hearing the unspeakable word, the three Macraes stopped as if they had been paralysed. Once, two hundred years ago, a Macrae had done an unspeakable thing.

Hector turned, and faced Angus. His eyes became invisible under his stiff white eyebrows. His moustache jutted out in a ridge of white bristles. Then, quite softly, delving back into the violent annals of the McFarishes, he spoke two answering words.

"McFarish —!"

At this open declaration of war, this public acceptance of a challenge, the crowd buzzed excitedly. A boy ran a few yards up the road, and called out something, making a trumpet of his hands. Some of the Macraes' neighbours turned, looked at each other in surprise, and began uncertainly to come back towards the group.

The rival families stood now, with clenched fists, glaring defiance at each other, and breathing hard. Then Willie McFarish, whom this exchange of traditional taunt did not satisfy, took a step forward. In the curious, broken scream he used when under stress of emotion, he cursed the Macraes, root and branch, with an appalling fluency. Centuries of illegitimacy, he implied, generations of bastardising, had culminated in the whelping of a pack of degenerate idiots, beside a cesspool, with every circumstance of the basest ignominy.

As he heard the insults, Hector's muscles jerked uncontrollably. Leaning his head to one side, he shook his beard furiously at the traducer of his race. Fergus listened stupefied. He had no idea there were such curses.

At last Willie stopped, hoarse, for want of breath. Foam stood on Hector's lips. Inarticulate sounds broke from him. He could not answer.

Then, to the amazement of his brother, Peter lifted up his voice. In a sort of holy ecstasy, turning up his eyes to heaven, he uttered musical curses, compared to which the ravings of Willie were a mother's benison. The McFarish blood, it seemed, had only been kept going by frequent and unwilling assistance from the beasts of the field. The black bristling hair, which that family so proudly claimed as an especial sign of manhood, became the stigma of a brutish appetite. Higher and higher rose Peter's voice, as he chronicled the debased aberrancy of ten generations of McFarishes. Crowd and victims listened open-mouthed. Finally, Angus, hearing how a sow had drowned herself in the river, sooner than submit to the embraces of his own maternal grandfather, could contain himself no longer. Frothing with rage, he looked round for a stone. His son and stepson caught his arms. Insult for insult, curse for curse. This was regular.

Almost dreamily, Peter ceased, withdrew his eyes from the sky, and gazed in benign pity at the trio. For a few seconds Angus stood, his arms held on either side. Then, frowning, he spat out something inaudible, and his arms were released. Taking two steps forward, he glared furiously at Hector.

"This must be answered," he said.

Hector, in turn, took two steps forward.

"It shall be answered," he replied.

Abruptly, the two families turned their backs on one another, and went their way.

For a mile at least, the three Macraes walked in

silence. Then, pausing to take breath at the crest of a hill, Hector turned to Peter.

"You did wrong," he said, "to miscall the man's race. It was not seemly."

Peter, who had been hugging himself all the way, who could scarcely keep in some reference to his exploit, was utterly crestfallen at this rebuke.

"I did not think it good that the Macraes should come second to the McFarishes," he defended himself.

"There are some things," retorted Hector, "in which a man of noble heart does not seek to excel. If a McFarish so forgot himself as to curse like a tinker, it is not for a Macrae to follow suit."

Peter said no more, and the trio walked home in silence. As they approached the turning, the two sons fell back, according to custom, and let their father walk on alone. The pathway up to the house was narrow. There, Peter took the second place, and Fergus slouched along behind.

For two days, nothing happened. Then, in the late afternoon, Peter, who was mending the gate, heard the McRorys' dog bark, looked up, and saw five or six men coming across the fields. He left his work at once, and called his father and Fergus. The two were busy repairing the roof of the byre, which had succumbed to the rains. They descended, Hector very stiffly, and beat the dust from their palms.

"See who is with them," said Hector, and Peter hurried back to the gate. "Fergus: give me my coat. Where is yours?"

"Below. But I do not need it. I have my jersey."

"Get your coat," said his father, holding out his

own for Fergus to help him on. "We will receive them as is fitting. My grandfather met them in his coat. Hurry yourself."

Fergus shambled off, without comment. Hector stood, pulling at the skirts of his coat, frowning at his old, caked trousers. He should have had notice. It was not right. Suddenly, he looked an old man.

"There are the three of them, with Andrew M'Gillivray, and Donald Grant, and Sam McPhee the postmaster. There are others, but they are behind. I could not see them from the gate."

"I thought so," grunted Hector. "How near are they?"

"They will be here in half a minute."

"Where is Fergus?" Hector burst out irritably. "We must meet them at the gate."

"Fergus! Fergus!"

"Don't shout, fool!" hissed the old man, clutching his arm. "Do you want them to hear you!"

He stood, biting his moustache, as Fergus shuffled round the corner into view, buttoning his coat across, and looking like a sleepy orang-outang that had been bundled out of its nest.

"Here you are," said his father. "Now."

Setting his peaked cap at a firm angle, and throwing back his shoulders, Hector led the way to the gate. All three had to bend to one side, to avoid the profusion of dangling fuchsia blossoms.

Their appearance was well timed. The visiting party had just reached the little open space in front of the gate. Hector saw, with indignation, that the three McFarishes had stolen a march upon him by appearing in their Sunday best.

At sight of him, Angus McFarish drew in his chin with satisfaction. Taking Sam McPhee by the arm, he came forward, halted, and nudged Sam so vigorously in the ribs that the postmaster, who was opening his mouth to speak, broke off and remonstrated.

"Ah, man," whispered Angus back, "go ahead with it."

"Hector Macrae," cried the postmaster, in a high, reedy voice. "Peter Macrae. Fergus Macrae. Seeing that a dispute has arisen between one of your family and one of the family of McFarish: and seeing that the elder member of each family takes up that dispute as a dispute between families: here are three men of the McFarishes, to prove openly in the sight of all men which family is the better family, and settle this dispute."

Hector bowed gravely.

"This man speaks for you, Angus McFarish?" he asked. "That is your will?"

Angus nodded.

"That is my will, Hector Macrae."

Hector paused for a moment. The gathering watched him in silence. Actually, he was reviewing the situation with all his cunning. Fergus, a tower of strength, was more than a match for the McFarishes' champion Willie. Himself and Angus, elderly men, tough but stiff: Angus maybe stronger in the arms, but with a lame knee. Peter—aye, Peter, as ever, the weak link: no match at all for George, the McFarish stepson.

"Two of us are old men, Sam McPhee," he said, after a pause. "Angus McFarish, and myself. It is not seemly that we should fight together."

Angus McFarish and Willie grinned simultaneously. The likeness of father and son in that single gesture was astonishing.

"No, Hector Macrae," replied the postmaster. "It would not be seemly."

"Though I wouldn't mind him," grinned Angus, *sotto voce*, jerking his head up and down.

"Have you a challenge for us?" asked Hector: for the ritual must be observed. At this question the McFarishes began to nod like apes.

"In the name of his family, Angus McFarish and his two sons challenge Hector Macrae and his two sons to the proof of the Rowing."

Hector heard this with a private dismay. He had feared as much. The McFarishes were great rowers. Not a shadow of feeling showed in his face. He bowed.

"We accept," he said simply. "I thank you for your pains, Sam McPhee."

Angus started, and glared belligerently. By anticipating him with the traditional speech of thanks to the official bearer of a challenge, Hector made his own repetition of it sound boorish and ineffectual.

He went away, scowling and muttering. Willie, delighted, kicked every tuft of grass he saw till they came to the road. He had no wish to fight Fergus again.



CHAPTER XIII



THE DAY APPOINTED FOR THE ROWING OPENED BADLY, with drifting mist, but by ten the clouds had lifted, and the sea gleamed calm. It was close on twenty-years since there had been a Rowing, and all who could avoid their work came to see the start. The finish they would not see: for the test was not, as might be expected, a race, but a test of endurance. The six men were to row together in a single boat, each family on one side: and the contest lasted till one side outrowed the other.

On the evening before, Fergus and Willie McFarish had met, in the presence of witnesses, and gone to the river to choose a neutral boat. As neither family owned a boat of the required dimensions, this was a pure formality, insisted upon by that stickler for tradition, Sam McPhee. There were two boats that seemed suitable, one heavier than the other. By a common impulse, both men preferred the lighter. There were great legends of the distances traversed at a Rowing by champions of the past, and neither wished to be handicapped by a heavier boat than was necessary.

The boat had been rowed round in the early morning from the estuary by a representative of either family, and lay moored, inconveniently, at a point roughly equidistant between Tougal and the

Macraes'. Contestants and spectators had to scramble over the rocks in order to reach the spot so conscientiously chosen.

The question whether a referee should sit in the stern had been long debated. Sam McPhee insisted that there should be a referee, and proposed himself for the post. To this the Macraes objected, with propriety, that as bearer of the McFarish challenge the postmaster could not strictly be regarded as impartial. For fear of Sam's displeasure, no other man cared to offer himself. A frivolous suggestion, that the Captain be invited to judge, and cheer on the rowers with his concertina, was badly received by both sides.

In the end, Angus and Hector swore together before God to abide honestly by the result, and to report it truly: and the services of a referee became unnecessary.

There remained to toss for sides. In the case of a man who preferred rowing on one side, this could be a serious matter. Sam McPhee spun the coin: Hector, as the man challenged, called.

"Heads."

The florin fell, and Sam bent over it.

"Tails," he announced, and pointed to Willie McFarish.

Willie, as the recognised champion of his family, had first choice. Grinning with satisfaction, he clambered over the rocks. Fergus grunted, deep down in his chest. He knew that Willie preferred to row left. He himself a little preferred the right.

Cocking his square bottom upwards, Willie jerked a short leg over the gunwale, and scrambled aboard.

He chose the thwart nearest to the stern, where, owing to the shape of the boat, he judged his strength would best be felt, and sat to the left of it.

Now it was Fergus' turn. With great deliberation, he followed Willie: and the onlookers, who had expected to see him sit beside his rival, uttered a murmur of surprise as he chose the thwart next in front. He had reasoned it all out, with his father, the night before. Willie, who sat well into the boat, rowed a shorter blade than Angus: and from the thwart in front, Fergus, rowing an exceptionally long blade, was convinced that his greater strength would tell to the best advantage.

The next choice, by tradition, also fell to the loser of the toss. Here the crowd received another surprise. Instead of Hector, Peter stepped forward, and went as instructed to the single-seated thwart in the bows. This was a position usually avoided, as it did not give the occupant a very good purchase. On the other hand, Peter, regarded as the passenger of the party, had a better chance of survival in a place that did not make much difference anyway.

Scowling, sticking out his thick underlip, Angus crossed the rocks, eyeing the boat as he came. Clearly, he could not decide whether to put himself next to Fergus, or take the empty double thwart between him and Peter. Finally, he took the empty thwart. Hector climbed in beside Willie, and George perforce seated himself beside Fergus. Though not in the class of his two leaders, he was a good strong rower.

By direction of Sam McPhee, the rivals took their boat a few yards from the rocks, trimmed her and sat ready. She was headed due South.

"Are you ready, Hector Macrae?"

"Aye."

"Are you ready, Angus McFarish?"

"Aye."

"Then go!"

The oars chopped and jagged at the water. The boat rocked and plunged. Then, shaking herself, she leaped forward.

For some reason they could not understand, the onlookers gave a cheer. Slowly, fanwise, a wake spread after the boat on the calm water.

For his first few strokes, Willie had pulled like a demon, making the boat sway, unsettling her: but now, instinctively, he had fallen into a long swinging rhythm. Fergus, going easy for a couple of strokes, felt Willie's strength, and knew he could master it. The one pause told him all he wanted to know about his companions in the boat. George was pulling with strong, ungainly strokes, but quickly settling into rhythm of the others. Fergus realised with grim pleasure that, for his weight and size, George was badly placed. Some at least of his strength could be discounted. Hector was pulling that iron, stiff stroke which had crossed to Skye and back many a night without tiring. This long swing would worry him. Angus had longer arms, but the McFarishes did not as a rule row a long stroke. Willie must have been about with George lately. That was it. Angus' leg had been bad: still was: so much the better.

Peter, too, was rowing well. He was no weakling, but he was not in the same class as the others. Fergus smiled to himself. Peter would be on his mettle: for, **fox** he never so skilfully, at the Rowing one could **not**

fox beyond a certain point. It was not the actual pulling, but the ceaseless movement, and the weight of the oar on one's hands, that told at last.

After the first mile, the first exultant, defiant burst of energy, the men instinctively eased off. No need to kill themselves. The pace was hot enough. Already, as if by magic, they felt their animosity eased. That was a great quality of the Rowing: men who had striven against one another were almost always friends afterwards. Viciously though each side might determine, first of all, to pull their own side of the boat round, and put their rivals to the shame of failing to hold the course, yet when once the boat had started, all fell under the spell of the fisherman's instinct, and co-operated unconsciously in the task of taking her along.

An hour from the time of starting, the boat was off the lovely island of Luinga Mhor. Twenty minutes later, she had cleared Ruadh' Arisaig and was cutting across the broad Sound that splits up into Loch Nan Uamh and Loch Ailort. There, the rising tide took her, edging her slowly up towards the mountains. It was a long stretch of water, calm, deserted. The bow of the boat made a great noise, as it rushed relentlessly across the glassy surface, leaving behind it confusion, broken light, and the deep swirling pock-marks of the oars, that hissed and bubbled a full half minute after the boat had passed.

Already, the pace was beginning to tell. Peter, who had eased after the first half hour, began to feel with terror that he could not last much longer. His palms stung, his muscles groaned, a red ache ran down his back. With every stroke, his head went back, and he

gasped painfully for air. Hector, his face a mask, pulled with stiff, aching back. As for Fergus, he had long since emptied his mind, and settled down to a dim, timeless dream, in which his great muscles mechanically swung upon their destined labour. He was good for a long time yet, and, even so, he had something in reserve. Willie bared his teeth with each stroke, but he had set his own pace, and his demon energy had not yet used up the half of him.

Suddenly Fergus woke from his dream to a pinpoint of consciousness. Someone was fidgeting in the boat. Someone was pulling out of time. For answer, he pulled two savage strokes that sent the boat off her course. Willie felt the pull, and responded with equal fury: and the uneasy rower, as if rebuked, settled down again. Fergus kept his point of consciousness alert. He had his suspicions about this.

Five minutes later, they were confirmed. The oar at his back caught a crab, recovered, jerked galvanically, and he heard a scream of pain. A sudden weight dragged the boat's nose crooked, and Fergus saw the blade of the oar trailing loose.

"My leg," cried Angus savagely. "My—leg."

He uttered a stream of fearful curses, and levered himself desperately about the seat, trying to find a position in which he could continue. Instinctively, the Macraes eased.

Angus grasped his oar.

"Thank you," he groaned. "Now."

And, all together, they sent the boat again upon her way.

Peter, hearing Angus' cry, nerved himself for a last effort of endurance. He was in a bad way. Indeed,

he marvelled dully that he had held out so far. Peter had no illusions as to his own nature. But with him, now, it was ceasing to be a matter of will. He could not see: a bloodshot mist covered his eyes. His back was on fire, his bleeding hands could scarcely hold the oar. He had been just about to collapse when he heard Angus cry out. Now, by the help of God, a Macrae should not be the first to fail.

For a nightmare quarter of a mile he held on, feeling now not that he was rowing, but that he was caught in a machine which ruthlessly moved the oar, swung him backwards and forwards, backwards and forwards, on a red-hot hinge that must soon break in halves. Now the fire spread: it was not only his back and arms and hands that were red hot, but his lungs too, and the great breaths that roared in and out of them blew up the fire like a bellows. Then, mercifully, the flaming rhythm was broken. Coming to himself, Peter knew that the boat had checked, and that a cool breeze was blowing on his face. Surprised, he found the gunwale close to his head, and realised that he had collapsed forward upon his oar.

But he had not collapsed the first. Angus, his bearded face white and wet with agony, was lying all across the thwart, clasping his leg.

"I'm not finished," he gasped furiously. "It's my leg. But for this — leg, I'd . . ."

He tried to drag himself up again, but collapsed with a scream, and lay, his eyes shut, panting like an injured animal.

Hector looked at Willie.

"Easy all a moment and make your father comfortable in the stern," he said.

Willie McFarish mumbled an uncouth word of thanks, and he and George between them sat Angus in the stern. There, with bitter, enraged eyes, he sat, helpless, a spectator, nursing his leg. The McFarishes were a good man short.

Their rivals, however, did not hold the numerical advantage for long. Three hundred yards from the point where the course was resumed, Peter Macrae collapsed with a groan, and lay unconscious in the bows.

Hector, though inspired by the fall of Angus, could not hold out much longer. It was beginning to be with him as it had been with Peter. Turning a bloodshot eye to the shore, he saw that they were heading up the narrowing waters of Loch Moidart. He summoned to his mind the memory of every stiff struggle he had known, a crossing from Skye with wind and tide against him, a pull from Ruadh' Arisaig with flour astern in a lumpy, treacherous sea, when the fourth man gave out and he had to pull one side single-handed. How was it with Fergus, he wondered? Oh, if it had only been ten, five years ago! But then, Angus' leg would not have betrayed him. The blood of the Macraes was pure. Pure blood; pure blood; pure blood; the words became a refrain that kept time to the strokes and the groaning rowlocks. Mary was not of Macrae stock. She was some rich man's by-blow. Like to like. Blood will out. Pure blood.

A stifled groan roused Hector, a groan with more of chagrin and exasperation in it than pain. George's hands were bleeding. He could scarcely hold the great galling, red-hot oar. There was strength in him still, but his hands were gone.

Then, by inspiration, Fergus knew that his moment had come.

"Macrae!" he yelled, in a voice so wild and hoarse that a company of seabirds, already agitated by the boat, rose in afright, and wheeled seawards, pure white against the green wooded slopes.

"Macrae!" yelled Fergus again, and put forth all the might he had husbanded for this moment. With short, jagged strokes, almost doubling his rate of striking, he pulled the boat's head furiously round. Willie's muscles leaped in answer, but Fergus was putting forth all his strength, and ere he had taken a dozen strokes George dropped his oar, and doubled up sobbing over his lacerated hands.

Willie dug his oar frantically into the water, but to no avail. With a shout of triumph Fergus pulled the boat's head right round, till she faced the way she had come. White, swaying, but undeniably upright, Hector sat at his oar.

Angus spat, and made a helpless gesture with his hands. The Macraes had won.



CHAPTER XIV



HECTOR WAS A LONG TIME RECOVERING FROM THE Rowing. The two families spent the night at Kinlochmoidart, and next day Fergus and Willie, in temporary amity, rowed the boat back between them. They were stiff, but the day's easy rowing limbered their muscles up again, and when, at sundown, they moored their borrowed craft in the estuary, and stood on the sand, they smiled at one another grimly, with the satisfaction of strong men who have felt their strength come back to them.

The others were in something of a difficulty. Kinlochmoidart, at the head of the loch, was almost inaccessible except by boat. Angus' leg still pained him: he could hardly walk. Peter was much better, but stiff and weak. A ready collapse had defended his constitution from hurt. Hector, after a bad and breathless night, found himself in worse case. He suspected that he had hurt his heart. George was well, but his palms were like pieces of raw steak.

Hector's exhaustion sweetened the taste of defeat for Angus. He counselled his conqueror to remain in bed for the whole of the next day, and sat by his side, forcing his sullen spirit into a kind of amiability. After all—he said—Hector and he, though not the best of friends hitherto, had honourably maintained an ancient tradition.

"And if it hadn't been for my cursed leg," said Angus, for the twentieth time, "it's maybe a different tale our sons would be bearing back to the folk of Arisaig and Morar."

Hector smiled, magnanimous in victory.

"That may well be so," he said. "I, as you see, kept on till I could go no longer."

"And so did I," cried Angus fiercely. "Till my accursed leg went back on me. Ah, drink is a curse, neighbour."

Hector's lids drooped ever so little. Angus' ailment was not generally associated with drink.

"It is indeed," he assented. "And I do not mind saying to you, neighbour, that I have often been worried over my son Fergus, in that connection. Drink is a great temptation to a strong man."

"Aye. He gets so easy over it."

"A weaker man may be frightened, when he sees the effects upon himself. But a strong man throws them off. Therefore, when they come, they come upon him heavily."

"That is true," said Angus. "There was a cousin of my father's once, a man of great strength, a famous man—"

"DugaldMcFarish?"

"You know of him?" Angus was pleased.

"Who would not know of him? You bear an old and honourable name, neighbour."

A flush of sudden emotion rose to Angus' hairy cheek.

"I like you, neighbour," he said impulsively, and held out a huge, hairy paw. "Why have we not been friends?"

Hector closed his eyes, and lay back with the effort of the handshake.

"Our forefathers were wise, who instituted the proof of the Rowing," he said. "Often it is not till one has worked or striven by a man's side that one knows his quality."

"True. True enough," cried Angus. Never a man who thought easily, he felt transported above himself with the elation of intellectual discovery. "Well, as I was telling you, of my father's cousin. He drank greatly. Once he drank for so long that he feared to leave off. If once his sober wits awoke, he feared to find he had done himself some terrible damage. So, for nearly three weeks, he went on drinking."

Angus' face seemed to grow rounder, and his eyes dilated with superstitious awe.

"He drank till one day he saw a lobster as big as a horse come up the Bay of the Seals, to drag him away under the water. No one else could see it, but my father's cousin. His screams were frightful to hear, and my father told me it took six men to hold him back from the pulling of the lobster. They saved him: but, for nearly a year, he had no use of the right arm that the lobster took in its claw. For the rest of his life, it was liable to pain him."

Hector nodded. He was very tired. He wished Angus would go away: but Angus, full of an unaccustomed zeal, stayed hours with him.

It had been arranged that the old man should be fetched back by boat from Acharacle, at the head of Loch Shiel: and thither, on the third day, they went in a cart, with Peter and George walking on either side. The entente between these two had not

progressed as favourably as between their elders. They could find little in common.

At Acharacle, they were picked up by a drifter: but she had to call first at Eigg, and it was not till three of the next morning that Peter and Fergus supported their father over the dark, slippery rocks, and got him to his bed, where, by orders of the travelling doctor, he remained for many days.

As soon as his leg allowed, Angus McFarish came over to see him. It was a shock to Peter and Fergus to hear their father converse freely. They realised a fact they had forgotten, that it was only to men of his own generation that such as Hector talked, except upon such matters as were absolutely necessary.

To Fergus, this goodwill from the McFarishes meant little. He knew it for what it was worth—a temporary friendliness between families who had nothing in common. Moreover, Willie made little pretence of friendship. It was plain that defeat had made little impression upon his independent spirit. He came to the house once, but Fergus suspected that the visit had more to do with Mary than with him or his father. The incident in the sandhills had aroused Fergus' mind. Had he been at all introspective, he might have wondered at a sudden access of intelligence and intuition on the subject of Mary.

It was three weeks before Hector got up, and hobbled, weak and stiff, into a chair beyond the byre, from which he could look out to the Islands. Beautiful weather set in, long days when the sea was smooth as watered silk, when the Islands were dim, dream-like shapes that must vanish at a breath or

a word spoken aloud, when the boats were little fat beetles that crawled with insufficient legs upon the glistening waters. Drawing slow, deep breaths, but not so deep as to rouse that stabbing pain that slept underneath his heart, Hector felt life kind. Its warmth, its inexhaustible radiance flowed back gradually into his body. Every day he was a little stronger; every evening a muscle would yield half an inch that had been stiff in the morning.

Five weeks to the day from the Rowing, Hector was seated on the knoll between the Bay of the Seals and the Bay of the Oaks, helping to bait the long-line. He worked slowly, a few hooks at a time. New wisdom and new humility had come to him, and he no longer fought down fatigue as weakness. If he was to get back his strength, the young doctor told him, in plain terms, he must take things easy.

His father's illness had had one effect upon Fergus. He had been obliged temporarily to leave the Captain's employ, and do his father's work. Aeneas had grumbled, but let him go without question. The only difficulty was to find a successor. The successor, inevitable, perhaps, in the state of things, was not to Fergus' liking. His place was taken by Willie McFarish. Dimly but surely, Fergus suspected that Willie would use every effort to worm his way into the Captain's graces, and abet his worst faults. Really, he was by temperament better fitted to the post of companion than Fergus: a wild, reckless fellow, a devil with women, and, on occasion, a furious drinker. Fergus loved the Captain, though, when he paused to consider the matter, he could not see how the Captain could fail to be damned. It disturbed him to

think of Willie flattering the worst side of Aeneas. Certain things, Fergus knew, the old man would not do, because of him. He would not have women at the house. He would not get in young boys, and make them drunk. Fergus had, somehow, a sobering influence upon Aeneas: and, quite unselfishly, he feared to lose it. Willie would have no such influence.

So Hector sat on the knoll, in the lazy sunshine, baiting a few hooks at a time, and looking round with slow appreciation upon the scene he had feared not to see again. For weeks the serene and beautiful weather held. Hector went out in the boat, sitting up in the stern, and saw to it with shaking hand that the coils of the long-line flicked without hindrance, bait by bait, into the water, and sank in the eddies astern. At the sight of an oar, on the first venture, his heart pained him, and he began to tremble. He knew, without resentment, that he would never row again.

It was his St. Martin's summer. Early in October, when there were signs in the West that the long spell was ending, Hector ran a fish-hook into the ball of his thumb. The small wound festered. It was such a wound as he had had a hundred times before, but the poison ran up his arm, and through his blood: and the weakened heart could not resist it. On the fourth evening, Hector Macrae knew that he was dying.

He summoned his sons, and to Peter, the elder, he committed the headship of the family and the care of his mother. Fergus, taking Peter's hand, swore before his father to support him in all things. It was a promise easily given, though Hector had feared

for it. Fergus was too much in awe of Peter's wits, too mindful of his father's early praises, to think of taking upon himself any such weighty matters as family decisions.

Hector lay back, gasping, his mind relieved. Strength was failing him rapidly, and the poison, with its high fever, was confusing his mind. In a whisper, he bade Fergus go, but remain within call.

Peter waited by the bedside.

"Care for Mary," whispered his father presently, after a long pause.

Peter moistened his lips.

"Yes, father."

For another ten minutes he stood, waiting, his mind fixed, with little room for movement, like a sheep that has trapped its foot in a cleft rock. Himself head of the family. Himself responsible. Himself alone. There were the thoughts, solid, unyielding; terrifying, if one struggled against them.

Hector began to mutter. Peter listened, but could make out nothing. Then, to Peter's surprise, his father yawned.

"Send Fergus to me," he said, in a stronger whisper.

Peter went out, beckoning to Fergus, who sat by the fire. Wild wind and rain were lashing the hill outside, and every now and then a billow of smoke coughed out sulkily into the room. Peter blinked. He was glad to be out of his father's presence.

Hector, racing from dream to dream, spinning over chasms, swinging over a desert beyond which miraculously arose the Islands from a shining sea, felt his own shape in the bed and saw the grave face of

Fergus looking sadly down upon him. The urgency of a word unspoken rose in his mind.

"Fergus," he gasped. "My son . . . your brother . . ."

"Yes, father. I will be at his back."

A moment of peace descended upon Hector. He almost smiled.

"You have been my good son," he said, with a pause between each word: and then, remembering, "Your temptation . . ."

Darkness swirled up again, and he broke off to contemplate a field of charred stubble suddenly overrun by an army of livid yellow stoats.

"Your temptation," he whispered again, the matter made more urgent by this vision: for he remembered Angus' tale of the lobster. "Your temptation . . ."

His tired mind yielded to the screaming horde of fantasies, and was whirled away: yet in the rout he remembered one more thing he had to say: the charge he had given Peter.

"... Mary . . ." he whispered, and was lost.

An hour later, his mind cleared for the last interval. Father Roche, the thick-necked priest, had been assured by the doctor that the interval would come, and was drying his wet trouser legs at the fire. Hurriedly he robed himself, bustled into the sick-room, and did his holy office.

Hardly was all done when Ann Macrae, looking on Hector's face, uttered a cry and flung herself upon the bed. Father Roche stood a pace back, and in tones shaken with unearthly passion adjured the passing soul to seek its God,

"Go forth, Christian soul . . ."

So, on the wings of the noblest apostrophe mankind has framed, the soul of Hector Macrae rose from its earthly simulacrum and was received from time into eternity.



CHAPTER XV



HECTOR'S FUNERAL FELL ON THE THIRD DAY OF THE Spring tides, and the hour chosen was four in the afternoon, when the tide would be at its lowest. The reason was that at dead low tide it was possible to walk all the way round the headlands to the mouth of the estuary, and thence straight along the sands to the village, substituting thereby a mile and a half of smooth firm sand for three rough miles of road. The procession had first of all to climb the hill behind the house, cross a queer stony desert of sand, and reach the Bay of the Refuge. Thence their path was easy.

There was a large attendance. A piper of the Macraes, a skilled performer who had won many prizes up and down the country, happened to be in the neighbourhood, and insisted on giving his services to the kinsman he had never seen. The procession, leaving the house in order, straggled over the hill, and the piper saved his breath on the uneven ground. Then, in the Bay of the Refuge, with its magnificent sweep of level sand, they re-formed, a long, uneasy line of black figures, in twos and threes, and the pipes began their intolerable music.

The first fury of the delayed Equinox had broken. Heavy clouds blanketed the Islands. The sea was beaten silver, and brighter than the sky. **Only** a swell

on the rocks showed what had happened, and the breakers that gathered mysteriously from nowhere to curl and fall with a thud that shook the sand. Miles away, on the end of Skye, mightier breakers could be seen, gleaming wickedly; fangs of the ocean.

Fergus shuffled along, half a step behind Peter, whose mother was sobbing on his arm. Mary, upright, her grave eyes looking along the dark coast, walked at his side, yet not with him. She was sorry that Hector had died, but she felt no affection for him. Affection Mary had hardly known. Old Mrs. Macrae was kind enough to her: Fergus was never unkind: Hector had never been unkind. Yet they had never gone a step out of their way to make the child happy. Absorbed in their grave, necessary lives, they had no imagination to sympathise with hers. All Mary's stories, all her playthings, she had provided for herself. One man only had been kind to her. She could have wished it had been another: but wishes were common in Mary's life. Alert, watchful, she looked at the rocks and the dark, sodden hills. Every fifty yards, a shining band of wet streamers seawards over the sand. The headlands, in the long spell of dry weather, had forgotten how to drink rain. There was a great running and rushing of little busy streams from them to the rocks, from the rocks to the sand.

Disturbed by the pipes, three or four hooded crows rose from a hollow. Sure enough, Mary saw, when they came abreast of the hollow, a mass of tangled wool. There would be many sheep dead.

They were coming to the point. There was only a narrow strip of dry sand, owing to the weight of the swell. For a few yards, they had to walk in single file.

Great blunt tongues of water squirted at their feet, hissing, creaming, shot forward an amazing distance by the weight of each following wave. Her eyes lighting, Mary stepped in close to the rock, avoiding an envious tongue. The six men with the coffin carried on perforce, the loose foam swilling around their boots: and the piper, deep in his proud lament, marched heedlessly through all.

The tide had turned as they reached the bar, and the pipes were almost drowned in the roar of contending waters. The river, bearing down a huge weight, for water running off dry earth had filled it almost to winter level, met suddenly the force of the incoming tide, on a broad sandbank where a man could wade knee-deep. The result was sheer anarchy, waves mounting, shooting up madly, climbing on each other's backs, and jostling in confusion.

Once round the point, the piper, after a brief rest, broke into the fierce strains of "Lochaber No More." There was resignation in the hearts of those that followed him, but the wild lament would have none of it. The meek might inherit the earth, but those whom these strains lamented cared for earth no longer. It was a rebellion, from the very heart of the scene through which the mourners passed, against the power that takes man from it: a defiance of his oldest enemy. Though Death strike down one by one the dwellers of that country, strip its valleys and leave its crofts bare barracks for the owl and weasel, yet with his last breath the last living Highlander, on a high rock by the sea, would pour forth that ancient wild defiance, spokesman of a people whom death could not subdue.

Tears rose in Peter's eyes. He shook with ecstasy, his facile spirit reading, and recoiling before, the message of the music. Mary's eyes flashed. She walked elated. To die was noble. For a moment she almost loved the proud old silent man, whose passing was so sternly fitted to his life and manner.

Fergus heard the music in a dream. He walked like a man walking in his sleep. There was an obsession upon his spirit. Life could not go on again until his father was buried. Then, they would be able to breathe deep, and get to work. This interlude after death was neither death nor life.

Again the tune changed. "The Flowers of the Forest": a gentler, sadder tune, the melancholy of that wisdom that falls upon the spirit after long combat against sorrow. It was well, felt Peter, or men's hearts would break, for the exaltation of sorrow could not be borne for long.

From the estuary to the village the path ran steep, and the procession halted while the bearers set down their burden on the sand, and rested. They looked awkwardly at one another, withheld by a scruple from rubbing their stiff shoulders or commenting upon their readiness for a halt. One, forgetting himself, smiled at another. The other at once looked down at his wet boots.

After two or three minutes, the mourners began to fidget; the bearers picked up the coffin and made their way up the narrow path. As they climbed, the sun, watery and yellow, broke through the clouds, and cast dark shadows in front of them on the glistening ground. It was not far from the top to the graveyard, and at the gate the priest met them in his robes.

His red face had taken on a strange colour in the unearthly light.

High above the estuary, facing seaward to the Islands, Hector Macrae was laid to rest in the last splendour of a wild October evening; and the black figures, more grotesque than ever in the fantastic illumination, broke up into little groups and made their way homewards.

That night, when the neighbours came, Peter received them with dignity, standing at the door, taking each by the hand and bidding him welcome. One of the first to arrive was Aeneas, his concertina under his arm. He was lame, and walked with a stick.

"I'm sorry not to have been at your father's funeral, Macrae lad," he said to Peter in a low voice, cocking a solicitous eye at Mrs. Macrae. "My sins have found me out. I have a most damnably gouty foot."

He winked at Fergus, crossed over, silently shook Mrs. Macrae's hand, and lowered himself into a chair by the fire.

Dugald McLeod came in, leaning heavily on a stick, assisted by a neighbour. The rains had given him a severe chill, from which he had even now scarcely recovered. He was helped across to Mrs. Macrae, and took her hand. When he looked in her face, and opened his mouth to speak, words deserted him. His blue eyes filled with tears, and he began to babble. He wrung her hand, and the sympathetic neighbour settled him into a chair, and took the big handkerchief from his coat pocket, so that the old man could wipe his eyes.

Fergus stood in the background, filling the glasses.

Grave and reserved, Mary handed round scones and griddle bread for Mrs. Macrae, who was weak with sorrow. As soon as she decently could, the stricken woman retired to her room, with three or four sympathetic neighbours to keep her company.

It was easier when the women had gone. The men stretched their legs, sighed, and spat into the fire. There was a general slithering of boots and chair legs.

"Well, Macrae lads both," said Aeneas, lifting his glass to the light, "I'm not a believing man, as you know, but I trust there's no offence if I drink a glass to your father's memory. He was not a man I could be close to, owing to a great difference in our ways of looking at life: but he was a man I had a great respect for, and a man I would have trusted with every halfpenny I had. He had high principles, and he lived by them. He was a good man and a brave man, and I drink in hearty respect and goodwill to the repose of his soul."

He threw back his head, and drained the glass. One or two neighbours, uncertain, looked at one another, and half-heartedly raised their glasses to their lips: then put them down again. They had not heard such a toast before.

Peter rose to the occasion.

"I thank you, Captain M'Grath," he said, "in the family name, for your kindly thought. My father would be pleased to know of your goodwill towards him, and would, I am sure, return it."

The neighbours exchanged glances. The Macrae dignity, it was clear, would be safe with Peter. A man of learning, and a man of great strength: what father

could leave a better pair to carry on his race after him?

The piper, seated on the opposite side of the hearth from Aeneas, was soon noticed by the Captain, and drawn into conversation. They spoke of the Rowing, and from it passed to ancient tradition in general. They spoke of music, and its effect upon seals. They told tales of mermaids, and their music. Aeneas told them of the King of Connaught, who caught a mermaid on the rocks without her tail, and lived with her fourteen years in lawful wedlock.

The piper told of a family on Barra, whose women-folk were liable, every third generation, to turn into seals if a man loved them. A man of Coruisk on Skye fell deeply in love with one of them: he loved her more than anything in the wide world.

"I love," he said, "every hair of your head, every hair of your body. I love the skin of your neck, your back and bosom. I love the very kerchief with which you wipe it dry."

"Alas, my love," said the girl, looking at him sadly, "the day will come when you will kill me and sell my skin to a stranger."

"What," cried the man; and he was deeply angered, for her words seemed to him a terrible blaspheming of his love.

But he loved and cared for her so tenderly that, in her own despite, though she knew the danger, she let her heart open, and loved him almost as tenderly as he loved her.

Then the curse came upon her, and she was changed into a grey seal. For weeks she followed her lover's boat about on the waters, never daring to

come close. He was in a rage of sorrow, for he knew nothing of the curse, and thought that she had left him, or been drowned, or lost on the mountain. He spent every day in his boat. One day, rising close by him, she saw that he sat still across his oars, weeping.

At that sight, forgetting everything, she came near to comfort him. He leaped to his feet, picked up the tiller that lay on the boards, and struck her dead. Her grey skin was very beautiful. He sold it for many shillings.

Afterwards, in a dream, she swam up to him, and changed back into her proper form before his eyes. When the man woke up, and knew what he had done, he drowned himself.

There was a silence after the piper had told this tale. Dugald, who had listened to it with close attention, nodded his head many times, and looked with a kind of admiring affection at the teller. He was too weak and shy to say anything: but the young man who attended him, after a few words in his ear, went across and spoke to the piper. Rising, the piper went over to Dugald, sat down beside him, and shook his hand. Tears of happiness came into the old man's eyes. He held the piper's hand fast, and began talking to him in a weak, delighted whisper.

Then all in the room began to talk of seals and mermaids. Was it true, as some said, that there were no mermaids; but that seals were the cause of a legend?

Indeed there were mermaids, asserted one man, for his own grandfather had seen one combing her hair. He grew hot on the subject, and Peter thought best to change it. They talked then of the legends of princesses, and other women, who were changed by

enchantment into foul shapes of beasts or old crones, and could not be restored till someone had kissed or pitied them.

"I don't believe those stories," said Aeneas. "It's clear to me they were all made up by ugly women whom no one would kiss in the ordinary way of business."

"A sort of a bribe," smiled the piper, looking up from his place by Dugald. "Aye, very likely. The way the women all say, now why doesn't a man marry that one? See what a good wife she'd make."

"I don't know," mused another. "There's a number of ugly women gets married."

"The sun sets early in these parts, in winter," said Aeneas.

Sam McPhee raised his head deprecatingly.

"Neighbours," he said, with a little cough. "The occasion . . ."

"Oh, aye."

Aeneas winked at the piper, who was not quite sure whether to wink back. Peter made a sign to Fergus to refill the glasses.

"A little music, perhaps," he suggested. "Maybe Captain M'Grath would oblige us."

"Delighted, indeed," replied Aeneas, cocking an eye at Sam McPhee. "But I don't know that I've anything suited to a sober time, like the present. Most of my songs are bawdy, or concerned with drinking."

Fergus looked up.

"The Old Man," he said, his eyes glowing.

The deep rumble of his voice made the company start. He had not yet spoken.

Aeneas looked up, well pleased.

"Very well," he said. "'The Old Man.'"

He took his concertina from its case, shook it lovingly, and began to play. The hair rose on Fergus' back as he heard the rich music swell out into the little smoke-filled room.

*I thought I heard the old man say,
Good-bye, fare ye well,
Good-bye, fare ye well.
I thought I heard the old man say,
Hooray, my boys, we're homeward bound.*

"Aye," said the piper thoughtfully, when the song was finished. "That's a good song. 'Homeward bound'—as we must all be, neighbours, sooner or later. As he we now mourn has gone before us. Homeward bound."

"True," said Aeneas. "Fine words, and a fine tune. I ask none better, when my time comes: and if there's no one else to play it for me, why, damn it, I'll play it myself. Now you know," he said, addressing Peter and Sam McPhee, "when I hear good music like that, or when I'm in drink, I feel what you people must mean by religious. I'm happy, I wouldn't hurt a flea, I'd stretch out my hand to show loving-kindness and do good to every living thing. My heart is full of goodness and virtue—the way yours must be, when you feel extra godly."

Sam McPhee did not relish the comparison.

"I would put the sense of godliness higher than the mere pleasure of music and the bottle," he observed.

"Well," said Aeneas, "You've known both, so you

must be right. The only difference / can see is that godly folks aren't always moved to be peaceable, but show a disposition to quarrel with the pleasures of others."

Sam sniffed, and Peter, to prevent a possible dispute, asked the piper to play. A space was cleared, and the professional player walked stiffly up and down, filling the little room with storms of music.

For hours, the cottage resounded with talk and melody. Mary, lying awake under her blanket, cursed the music in her heart. Every nerve in her body was alert and tense. She sweated in the darkness. She waited till, cool and distinct, there sounded across the sandhills the sound she had feared to miss: the whistle of an owl. Then, rising swiftly, she slipped on a few clothes, crossed the yard, stooping where she must pass the lighted window, and ran down barefoot through the dew to her lover.

BOOK I I I



CHAPTER XVI



THE NEW ORDER OF THINGS WAS NEITHER SO STRANGE nor so difficult as the brothers had feared. Hector had been so long out of action that they were used to doing without him. For some time Peter waited apprehensively, feeling that some weighty matter must arise with which he would be incompetent to deal: but, as their life went peacefully on, he took courage. In the few points of business that had to be decided as winter drew on, he consulted Fergus, and obtained ready confirmation for his own course of action. Mrs. Macrae he made a show of consulting also, but the poor woman, lost without her husband, had nothing to say. She looked at Peter with eyes of complete submission, as the one to whom Hector had committed all the family care.

"Whatever you think best, dear/' she said sadly. "Whatever you think best."

The winter's work was well defined, and both brothers knew it by heart. Fergus saw little of the Captain now. His only chance was to go across at night, but ugly stories began to spread of the scenes at the big house, that were little to Fergus' taste. The unfrocked priest came again to stay, and was the centre of more than one debauch. One night, indeed, it was alleged, he ran out stark naked, but **for** his hat, which Willie McFarish, pursuing him

down the passages, had stuck upon his head, and delivered a sermon from the dunghill. The party had to struggle out and haul him in, before his stomach received a mortal chill. There were also stories of girls entertained of an evening. Fergus did not wish to be present on such occasions, and was shy of entering an atmosphere which had become foreign to him. He felt he had lost Aeneas' confidence. Once or twice he went in, at the Captain's express request: but there was a constraint, and he left early. As he rose, and bade his host good-night, he saw Willie McFarish grin derisively. It was enough. Fergus was never one to presume on his welcome. Like his father, he was touched and pleased if anyone showed a liking for his society. That it should be rejected might grieve, but could never surprise him. He found it all too natural.

On Christmas Eve, there was such an uproar at the Captain's that it reached the Macraes' cottage. The night was perfect, still and mild, yet with almost as many stars as a frosty night of March. Peter was out. Peter had taken to going out now, of an evening. He went towards the village, and often did not return till one or two in the morning. Naturally, no one questioned him.

Mrs. Macrae had gone to bed, and Fergus sat before the hearth, relaxed in his chair, dreaming. Now and then he sighed. For once in his life, he found himself looking into the future. It stretched away like an empty road, narrowing as it went. He had loved Aeneas, loved him still: but Aeneas had listened to another voice, and was not to be reclaimed. Fergus saw now how much the old man had

curbed himself for his sake. Aeneas was wicked. Aeneas did not fear hell. How came it that he, Fergus, reared in the fear of God, should be happy in the company of such a one? Happier than in any other company? There must be a great power for sin in his heart. That was it, maybe. The happiness he felt, the confidence, the sense of being himself, and a grown man, which he never felt at home: these must all be snares set for him by the devil.

He sighed again, and shifted wearily in his chair. Life was difficult. It was best, perhaps, to be guided by the priest, and go one's road, looking neither to the left nor to the right. The Captain got much more out of his life. He would pay for it, assuredly: yet it gave Fergus no pleasure to think of the old man in hell. Indeed he could not imagine it. He had never seen Aeneas otherwise than in good spirits, or, after music, in a happy melancholy.

A wild burst of noise came to his ears on the still air, and above it he distinctly heard Willie's catcall. He frowned, and kicked at a corner of the glowing turf. A hundred little sparks rose in protest, and danced away up the chimney. He would go to bed.

Fergus got up, crossed the room, and put his hand on the latch. What was the good? He was too restless to sleep. He shambled back, took down his coat and cap from the nail, and stepped out across the threshold. The sweet night air rushed into his lungs. Slowly, without thinking where he was going, he clambered down the steep bank to the burn, placing his feet by instinct in the darkness.

The sea was sighing to itself on the beach. The burn, running full, made little sounds that only

intensified the stillness. At each end of the valley, the starry heavens hung low.

"Haaaii-yow!"

Willie's demoniac screech rang out above a burst of distant bawling. It was harsh and piercing, like the tearing of sailcloth. Yet even the bestial outcry was somehow purified by distance and the night. Fergus sighed, glad to be where he was, yet very lonely.

But Willie's cries had reached other ears, and roused more intimate emotions. Hearing a stir in the broom, Fergus froze and stood motionless. It came again: he saw a tall figure against the sand, and then, the pallor of a face against the dark bank. The tall figure crossed the burn, and halted on the bank close to him. Fergus heard a sigh that ended in something like a sob.

Then the figure moved towards him. It was hard to judge distance in the dark, and he did not stir till she almost ran into him.

"Mary!"

The girl gave a soft cry, and started back. He stepped forward, and peered into her face. He could just make out her eyes, and the great arch of her brows.

"Oh, how you frightened me!"

"What are you doing out here this time of night?"

"I? Nothing. I — I was restless. I couldn't sleep."

A sudden fear came upon Fergus. He caught her arm.

"You have not been up there—at the house?" he asked harshly.

"No, no, indeed. I would not go near them. That horrible noise."

"You would not?"

It was impossible to see her face.

"Indeed not. I hate drunkenness."

Fergus let her go, satisfied, and Mary feared she had hurt him. She remembered, all too clearly, that terrible time upon the path. Unhappy, she stood beside him.

"Well," said Fergus, rousing himself. "Mind you never go there."

"Indeed, I promise, I never will."

"That is good." He turned, and took a few steps.

"Do not fasten the door," he said. "I will be up soon."

Mary stood for a moment, unwilling to go. Then he heard her sigh, and start up the slope. When she had gone some distance, he suddenly reflected that she would not use the door. She must get in and out some way of her own. Oh well. Why not? Restless: indeed, she had every excuse, on such a night. Obscurely, he pitied her. She could not have a very exciting life, perhaps. But then, a woman never had.

Fergus was so much relieved to hear she had not been present at one of the Captain's orgies, that it never occurred to him to wonder if there might be another explanation, besides mere restlessness. The fact that Willie was undoubtedly at the house prevented him from suspecting that her wanderings might directly concern him.

In any case, he was soon provided with a nearer concern. After this same night, Peter unaccountably gave up his excursions, and remained a whole week at home. He remained at home, but seemed so irritable and so ill at ease that it would have been as

well to have him away. He found tasks for himself, but did not finish them. He spoke sharply to Fergus about work for which there was no particular hurry. He would ask Fergus to see to such and such a thing, which was not urgent, and be much put out to hear on the next evening that it was not done. After several of such outbursts, Fergus regarded him in concern. Moreover, Peter, even when he had apparently settled down to work of his own, would keep looking up, as if he were listening for something outside.

To Fergus, there could be only one explanation for such behaviour. He concluded that Peter had been drinking. This, clearly, was why he went off by himself in the direction of the village, and did not return till late. Fergus looked at his brother with a mild quickening of interest. It was curious to think of this silent, secret, clever brother falling victim to so human a failing.

Next time he saw Donald Grant, Fergus sounded him, with elephantine tact, on the subject of his brother's new sociability. Donald looked at him blankly.

"Your brother Peter," he said. "Why, what do you mean? I haven't laid eyes on the man for weeks."

"At the inn," said Fergus, winking heavily. "Of an evening."

"Peter? He hasn't been near the inn."

Fergus in turn looked mystified.

"He has been going over to the village of an evening, for some weeks past," he said, "and not returning till late. Now he stays at home, and is all jumps and jerks, just like a man who is pulling himself up from the drink."

"Well, if he is," said Donald definitely, "it's not at the inn he gets it."

Stranger than ever, thought Fergus, trudging on: and then, seeing a stoat drag a rabbit across the road, he dismissed his brother from his mind, shouted, and threw a stone. With incredible strength and agility, the stoat climbed a low stone wall, the heavy body dangling limp from its grasp. Fergus threw another stone, narrowly missing it, and broke into a run, hoping to secure the rabbit. The stoat and its prey had disappeared. A couple of small birds flew quickly to the top of a bush, and stood, cursing heartily. They took no notice of Fergus.

He peered over the hedge, but could see neither rabbit nor stoat. Then he caught sight of the rabbit, lying on its side in a kind of gutter. With a grunt of satisfaction he swung his leg over the wall. While he was still astride, the stoat appeared, defied him with its sharp inimical eyes, seized the rabbit, dragged it away and down a hole before he could cross to prevent it.

Fergus swore in amazement. Then a grim smile grew on his face, and he gingerly swung his leg back across the wall. The stoat was a good stoat. It was not going to give up its prey for the want of coolness and courage. Its rush was so audacious, so perfectly calculated. There had been just time to get the rabbit. In high good humour, he continued his road home, taking a short cut across the brae that saved half a mile of less adventurous walking.

Coming out above the cottage, he was surprised to see the black-coated figure of the priest stumping resolutely along **the** footpath **below**. **What could**

Father Roche want? Anyway, it would be Peter he wanted, not himself. Peter was at home, mending lobster pots in the yard. Fergus could see the top of his head, and one shoulder and elbow, as it worked in and out. Slowly, with loose joints, he began to descend. A cackling reached his ears, and he saw the fowls streeling madly across the little field. Mary, invisible behind the hedge of fuchsia, was calling them to be fed. They looked like maggots.

By the time the priest reached the gate, Fergus was fifty yards above the cottage, coming down a sheep-path that ran along the side of the brae. He heard the gate flung back, and then, with a surprise so great that he almost overbalanced, he heard the priest's thick voice upraised in a bellow of anger.

"Peter Macrae," shouted Father Roche, "Peter Macrae, you blackguard, where are you?"

Recovering from his amazement, Fergus broke into a run. Priest or no priest, his place was by his brother. No one should miscall a Macrae unchecked.

The scene that met his eyes almost stunned him. It would come before his eyes for weeks afterwards, in a sort of static horror, an inadmissible thing that defied all explanation. The priest, red as a turkey's wattles, was pursuing Peter round the yard, shouting, and hitting at him with his big ash stick. Peter, his hands raised deprecatingly, was backing away, a foolish, confused look upon his face: Mrs. Macrae, holding on to the doorpost for support, was gaping at the priest in ludicrous dismay. To complete the scene, Mary appeared at the corner of the yard, basin in hand, with a few fowls frantically pecking about her heels. She stared, a carven statue of amazement.

Then, with shock as hideous and swift, the nightmare scene took meaning.

"You will marry the girl," bellowed Father Roche, "you will marry the girl, you blackguard, if I have to flog you every inch of the way from here to the altar."

At the first words, Peter's head had gone up, and his mouth opened, in wordless entreaty to the priest. Then his hands dropped to his sides, and he looked down, ashamed, confounded.

As the priest finished shouting, an unnatural silence fell. The furious, eager pecking of the hens behind Mary became a loud noise. Their heads and necks, shooting down rapidly at the ground, made the only movement in the yard. Even Father Roche seemed to feel the silence.

"You will marry the girl," he repeated, in an ordinary voice: and the silence closed in again.

It was broken by a sound from Mrs. Macrae.

"Oh," she said weakly: and then, long-drawn, "Oh. O-o-o-o-oh."

Her knees gave way: she came down heavily upon them, and then pitched forward on her face. Dropping the basin, Mary ran swiftly to her across the yard.



CHAPTER XVII



INDECOROUS THOUGH ITS PROLOGUE HAD BEEN, THE coming of Peter Macrae's bride to her new home was all that custom could desire. The wedding arrangements were generous, but not showy: and the neighbourhood, which had been suspicious, sank back contented and pronounced its blessing. The grounds for suspicion were the lowliness of the bride's family, and the suddenness with which the affair had been announced. Fortune had been kind to Peter, and the Macraes' good name had not suffered. The Mackenzies, who had come to the district from Perthshire a few months before, lived in a croft a quarter of a mile off the road to the village. Thus, in the dark nights, there had been no one to mark Peter's visits, nor his figure lurking in the lane outside: for he saw his Angusina oftener than her parents were aware. Moreover, when Angusina's mother discovered how it was with her, at an earlier date than well she might, she and her husband kept their heads. Instead of proclaiming the wrong done to him, Alexander Mackenzie put on his hat and went to Father Roche. As a result, in a very short time the pair hugged one another with glee at having brought off an excellent match for a daughter whose prospects had never seemed high: and the good name of the Macraes was saved a smirch. In many another family the smirch

would not have been serious. Such things happened often, and, provided they were adjusted by subsequent marriage, were looked upon as little beside the mark: but the Macraes had borne so high a repute that no one would have been sorry to see evidence of grosser clay.

As for Angusina herself, she was a mild, good-natured girl, inclined to fat, and anxious to be on the best of terms with all. She beamed on Fergus, as he gravely took her hand from his brother's, and welcomed her across the threshold. She beamed on Mary, and thawed out the girl's grave reserve. She walked about the hill, patting the flanks of the cows, and talking to them, when she thought no one was listening. The dogs came up to her, fawning and wagging their tails. She was so amiable, so foolish, that Mary could not be jealous to see her with the animals, and was glad they liked her. She had been to Glasgow, and, as soon as she heard that Mary also came from there, she was delighted.

"We must have many talks," she said, waddling slightly on the slope, for her condition was beginning to be visible: and Mary, brushing back a strand of hair, and looking out to the Islands, agreed that, indeed, they must.

Of the changes wrought by Angusina's coming, the greatest, yet the least felt, was the departure of Mrs. Macrae to live with her brother at Fort Augustus. The poor woman, who had been in tears almost continuously from the day of the priest's arrival, was left weak by the shock. An easier life, the doctor said, would suit her, from now on: and the brothers, perplexed, yet relieved, agreed to the one positive

suggestion they had ever heard their mother make, and let her go without demur. Peter was glad to see her back, for she felt his marriage as a disgrace, and, with a strength of character he had never suspected in her, she let him see it. She would not look at him, when he came into her bedroom: she sent all her messages by Fergus. In some way, she must have felt the spirit of Hector descend on her. Vague as she might be about many things, she knew well enough what he would have had to say to the business of Angusina Mackenzie.

Angusina cooked well, but was stupid, and forgot things. She was not as tidy as Mrs. Macrae; but otherwise Fergus experienced little inconvenience from his mother's departure. She had never been of any importance to him. He felt a vague concern for her welfare, too impersonal to be called affection, but nothing more. He accompanied her and her brother down to the road, where the trap stood waiting. Mrs. Macrae wept softly. Now and then she looked about her on the familiar scene with swimming eyes. Her brother managed to convey, by the angle of his broad back and by his general bearing, that he was removing his sister from those who had ill-used her to a place where she would be cherished.

The morning was grey and clear. There had been a touch of frost. The grasses of the brae were silvered, and the branches of dead broom stood out, delicate and clear, against the sky. The valley was very still. Fergus, as he pulled open the footpath gate, leaned back his head appreciatively, and sniffed the air.

The mare pawed the ground. She was eager for the

exhilarating eight miles beside the sea, over the **low** hills, down the winding edge of the Sound, between the mosses and the rusty bracken, to the pier.

"Well, Mother. Good-bye."

"Good-bye, son."

She was helped up, blind with tears.

"I will come to see you in the spring," called Fergus, as his uncle gathered up the reins. Then, with a jolt, the trap shot off.

Fergus waved his hand once, then stood, leaning on the gate, watching the trap drive up the brae. He watched it go without curiosity and without regret. It turned the corner, and disappeared. He could hear the mare's hoofs on the road for a minute after that, echoing back from the hill above. They ceased. Fergus straightened up, shut the gate, and went back across the fields.

His own position was clear, and unchanged. So was Mary's. Father Roche expressed an interest in the girl, and once he sounded Fergus, with a view to finding out his feelings towards her: but Fergus replied with such obvious simplicity and lack of personal interest that the priest decided he need not concern himself. After all, if such a question arose, the new bride was likely to be a far more efficient chaperone than Mrs. Macrae. He spoke to Angusina on the subject. Angusina, flustered, kept an eye on Mary for half the next day, observed nothing unusual, and forgot. She might have spasmodically remembered, at irrelevant times, but a nearer matter arose to take her attention off all else. Coming up the slope from the burn, when the sun had thawed the surface after a sharp frost, she slipped and **rolled**

down almost to the bottom. Mary and Fergus, hearing her cry out, came running, and Fergus carried her up. She was not hurt, but she had been badly shaken: and, that night, her child miscarried.

This misfortune had for Peter a double aspect. Secretly, he was relieved, for there was now nothing that the birth of the child at full time could have betrayed. On the other hand, if only matters could have been postponed, there might have been no need for him to marry Angusina. It was not a serious fall, not enough to make a woman fail who had not some delicacy. Still . . .

So he tortured his mind, ranging backwards and forwards, like a dog that cannot find the gap in a fence. Fergus, moved by the occurrence, tried gravely to condole with Peter, and marvelled at the fortitude with which he bore his trouble. Angusina cried, smiled weakly, cried again, and in a few days was the same as ever. Fergus, watching her in the parlour, laying the table, was visited by an absurd desire to say "Boo" to her and make her jump. It would be no use. She would just smile. Indeed, she was so much relieved that Peter did not scold and blame her for her mishap, that she smiled all the time, even when no one was looking.

So the weeks slipped on, and February went mildly into March. Mary, with no one to watch over her, had made the most of the mild still nights. Willie's wildness and violence had found their answer in her strong body and her passionate heart. She might be damned, but she did not care. She was his. Though there were times when she hated him, though when the smell of drink was on him she would fight and

pummel him, she was bound by a fiercer tie than liking or affection. He overrode her wishes, he took her by force, and in her heart she acknowledged him her master.

Yet her secret, when it came out, was betrayed not by her own boldness, but by Willie's. Willie had recovered from his friendliness towards the Macraes. His ascendancy with Aeneas, his success with Mary, had caused his spirit to swell in triumph. He felt more than even with his adversaries. For Fergus he kept a sort of unwilling respect. Upon the few occasions when he had ventured to disparage him to his employer, he had not been encouraged.

"Leave Macrae alone, McFarish lad," advised the Captain. "He's a better man than you."

"He may be," said Willie, showing his strong teeth. "But what good does it do him. He's a prig, as his father was before him."

"The country'd be the better of a few more such prigs," commented the Captain. "No, McFarish lad. He's a good man, and a man I have a liking for: and you'll do best not to fall foul of him in my presence."

For Peter, however, Aeneas felt no liking, and Willie might abuse him as he willed. Both men regarded Peter with derision. He was a weakling; he was careful, he had no endearing vices; he was said to be clever. Willie had another reason to think scorn of him: so that it only wanted a suitable occasion for the quarrel to be reopened.

Such an occasion chance took care to provide. Willie had sold a boat for considerably more than she was worth, and had celebrated his bargain with

the purchaser. A stranger, joining in, insisted that both men try a concoction of his own. They did. The purchaser was ultimately carried away by his friends, and Willie, whose iron stomach could survive anything, was given a lift into the village. From there, after a few steady glasses of his accustomed drink, he elected to walk home.

Willie was very drunk indeed. He was also in a bad temper. The elation of his bargain had gone. He suspected the stranger of having wished to poison him, and kept stopping, every few yards, to make sure that his money was still safe in his pocket. He had often been screaming drunk, but nothing had ever affected his legs to this extent. They went all over the road. On Kinsadel hill, he fell twice. Two small boys, observing him from the woods above, began to pelt him with fir cones. The first three or four Willie took as a manifestation of nature. Then, struck smartly on the back of the neck, he turned up a red, wondering visage, and beheld his aggressors. With a bloodcurdling yell, he stooped, and flung a stone. A shower of fir-cones, far more accurately directed, was the response. Wild with rage, Willie began flinging all the stones he could find, till the exertion of stooping, leaning back, and flinging, destroyed what little balance he had left, and he fell flat on his back, banging his head on the hard, loose surface of the road. He lay still for a few seconds, rolling his eyes, and the boys, fearful of consequences, fled away into the trees.

Willie picked himself up and stood, his stocky thighs planted far apart, swaying, and rubbing the back of his head. There was blood on his hand. He

looked up, and screamed a curse into the wood. Then, breaking into a run, he resumed his journey.

Peter, coming down the road on the other side, was presently astonished to see Willie trotting down the hill at an angle. When he reached the sharp corner above the estuary, Willie leaned to one side, and barely avoided going over the edge. Peter, who had never seen such behaviour, halted in consternation, thinking that the hope of the McFarishes had lost his wits. Willie, chanting wrathfully and unsteadily to himself, tacked from side to side, his eyes fixed earnestly upon the road, with the persistence of some big, slow dog following a scent. He trotted across the hundred yards of level road, and then stopped, breathless, feeling the pull of the hill. He planted his feet, and stood, still looking at the road, clasping the pit of his stomach.

Peter stared at him, and slowly moistened his lips. He took a timid step forward.

"Is there anything wrong?", he asked. "Can I help you in any way?"

Willie started, like a stung bull. Raising his eyes, he focussed upon a swaying scene, and saw Peter. The reaction was immediate.

"Macrae—!" he said.

Peter went pale. He knew himself powerless to do anything.

"Macrae," repeated Willie, with intense relish and deliberation, "—!"

Peter licked his lips. He saw that Willie was drunk. He could not fight him, but he might run away.

"That's no answer to a civil question, Willie McFarish," he said.

Willie uttered a scream of fury.

"You lecture me!" he yelled. "You read me my manners!"

Words babbled in his mouth, and were lost. He stood, shaking with rage, clutching at the edges of his coat. Then his eyes cleared, and a brilliant gleam of spite shone through them. He pointed at Peter, and began to laugh.

"Who are you, to teach a man his manners, or anything else?" he cried. "You can't even teach a girl her manners. You can't teach a girl anything. You can't even keep a girl under your own roof, two men of you, but what she has to come outside for her—!"

The road swayed under Peter's feet. Angusina? It was not possible.

"There you are, two Macraes, can't keep a girl between you," chanted Willie. "Men, d'you call yourselves!" His eyes flamed. "The poor creature couldn't abide to be under your priggish roof," he yelled, "so she has to be out at night, like a cat, looking for love in the bushes. Haaaa-iii-yow! And I took her, I, a man of the McFarishes, I took her from you, and made a woman of her, I Willie McFarish, and to hell with every Macrae that looked at a fine girl and hid his spittle face in his mother's petticoat."

Peter understood now. The spirit in him that responded to crisis spoke appropriate words.

"If you have seduced that girl, a ward of the Holy Church, put under our care, Willie McFarish," he said, "you will repent it. Father Roche is more than a match for you, you cross-bred, black-avised ape."

"What!" yelled Willie, and Peter had to spoil the effect of his speech by an undignified flight.

He would not go to the village now, he decided, although it would be possible to evade Willie by a detour into the estuary. He would go straight home, tell Fergus, and do justice upon Mary. He hurried, sweating, sick with waves of a feeling that surprised him, and a hatred that gleamed pale and vindictive, almost to murder.

When he reached the cottage, Peter went straight to Fergus. Fergus was sitting on the slope, mending a chicken house. Peter wasted no words.

"Mary," he said. "She has been with Willie McFarish. Not once only, but many times."

Fergus looked up, shading his eyes. The sun was hidden, but there was a grey glare in the sky.

"Been with him. . . . After our father . . . ?"

"In spite of our father's forbearance to her." Peter drew back his lips. "I felt, at the time, that was a mistake. He should have beaten her within an inch of her life."

Fergus frowned, and looked down at his work for a moment.

"How do you know?" he asked, looking up again at Peter.

"Willie met me in the road. He was drunk. He called me that name, and blurted it all out. Luckily, there was no one but myself to hear him."

"I wish Willie would call me that name," said Fergus softly. "He would never call it again."

"Well," said Peter, "he called it me; but that is not the point. The point is—Mary."

"What of her?"

"Our duty is clear. To carry out the sentence laid on her by our father."

"Oh, yes."

Fergus spoke without enthusiasm. He shifted his leg.

"That falls on you," he said. "You are head of the family."

"It falls on us both," retorted Peter. "She is a wild, strong girl. She might not submit."

This was a new idea to Fergus. He wrinkled his forehead, and looked at Peter appraisingly.

"Where shall we do it?" asked Peter, reading his glance. "We can't do it here."

This, again, Fergus had not had time to consider.

"We must do it at once. I could not rest till we had carried out our father's commands." The sight of his brother's face, the slow process of his thought, was driving Peter almost wild with irritation; but he controlled it.

"Where is she now?"

Fergus turned round, and pointed.

"Down there, round the corner, spreading clothes to dry on the rock."

"Let us send her on to the bay where the boat is, and go to her there."

Fergus rose, dusting his palms on his trousers.

"Are we to beat her now?" he asked, in a troubled voice.

"Yes. Now. You call to her, and send her on. I have a piece of rope in the house. It is better than a stick. I will get it, and join you."

He went, leaving Fergus little in love with his errand. To beat Mary: well, yes, he supposed she should be beaten. Certainly she should be beaten.

Going with Willie McFarish, of all people. He worked up a glow of indignation, as he thought of it. But he could not understand Peter's hurry. Peter felt more severely, perhaps. Then Fergus remembered Angusina, and stopped thinking.

Mary appeared, stepping lightly up the slope. Fergus called, and pointed. She stopped, and put her hand to her ear. He shouted again. She hesitated, looked surprised, and then went off in the direction of the bay.

A minute, and Peter appeared from the house. He joined Fergus, and the two set off without a word, Fergus two steps behind.

Mary was waiting for them in the little bay. She stood in an easy attitude, one leg forward, her long arms loose by her sides. The open sea, behind her, was calm and bright, beneath a still, grey sky. She was looking away inland, at the mountains. The little trees which Aeneas had planted stood up valiantly on the rise South of his house. She did not look at the brothers till they were near her.

Peter scowled at her from under his brows.

"My father called you whore and harlot," he said harshly. "Whore and harlot you are."

At this unexpected attack, Mary recoiled. She stared at him, uncertain that she had heard aright. Then, as the meaning of his words struck her, she raised her chin in defiance.

"You have betrayed us again," accused Peter. "Willie McFarish is your lover. You go out at night to him on the sandhills."

"You know a great deal," said Mary contemptuously.

"The whole country will know soon, with Willie blind drunk, bawling it to every man he meets in the road," said Peter, and grinned to see her wince.

For what seemed a long time, nobody spoke. Then Mary raised her head again.

"Well?" she said.

"Aha," snarled Peter. "I see you do not deny it. Very good. You remember the time before—what my father said to you?"

"Well?"

Fergus, looking on dumbly, wondered at her composure. It might be Peter who was the sinner, not she. With everything on his side, he could barely hold his ground.

"He said you should be beaten. Did he not?"

"Well?"

"Well," he mimicked her. "You shall be beaten, here and now. Then, tonight, you can go to Willie McFarish, and ask him to kiss the places and make them well."

Mary's lips parted. Her big eyes grew dark.

"You are going to beat me?"

"Within an inch of your life," said Peter with satisfaction, producing the length of rope from under his coat. "It was laid on us as a duty, and we shall do it."

Mary glanced swiftly round her.

"No good," rumbled Fergus, his head sunk on his chest: and, looking at him, she saw it would be useless to run.

"Here." Peter slung the rope to Fergus. "You have the better arm. I'll hold her. Then we can change over."

His eyes glittering and snapping, he approached, and seized Mary's wrists. At his touch, the girl suddenly blazed into life.

"Let me go," she cried, and began to struggle. Grinning, Peter tightened his grip, and signed to Fergus.

Then, in a flash, Mary used her strength. Instead of pulling, suddenly she ran in on Peter, and drove her knee hard into his belly. With a cry of anguish, he let go, and, as he doubled up, Mary hit him with all her might on the jaw. The blow was one that many a man might envy. Peter went down like a sack of coals.

"Beast!" hissed Mary at his prostrate figure, and then was off, running like a deer.

Fergus, now thoroughly roused, went after her. An instant of amazed admiration was swallowed up in anger, that anyone should so maltreat the titular head of the Macraes. Mary ran fast over the rocks, but she had no chance against the man who overtook a seal. When Fergus was close behind her, she turned aside, and dashed into a little creek. Fergus uttered a cry of triumph. She had run into a cul de sac.

He rounded the corner, and was up to her in a couple of great ungainly leaps. She stood, her back to the rock, panting, dishevelled, facing him.

Fergus grasped her wrist in his left hand, ready with a paralysing grip should she attempt to serve him as she had served his brother. But Mary did not resist.

"You may beat me, if you like," she said. "**But** I will not suffer it from him."

Fergus looked at her in wonder.

"Why?" he said at last. "Why did you dare strike him like that?"

"Him!" She spat a deal of scorn into the word. "What right has he to touch me? He has been after me himself, for a year and more."

Shocks came to Fergus like sudden changes in the weather. He did not apprehend them consciously. His mind staggered; then he realised she had made a terrible accusation. His grasp tightened.

"You are a wicked, ungrateful girl," he said, "to say such a thing."

Mary twisted in the fierce grip.

"It is true," she cried aloud. "It is true, it is true, may I burn in hell for ever if it is not true."

Fergus released her. She rubbed her injured wrist, biting her lip so as not to weep.

Strange feelings began to rise in Fergus. Clouds crossed his mind, obscuring its purpose. He stared intently at Mary, with a sort of gentle wonder. Then he felt the rope in his right hand, and remembered.

"You must be beaten," he said sadly, "for going with Willie McFarish."

Mary seemed about to speak, but said nothing. He reached for her wrist. She left her arm limp in his grasp.

He pulled her till she stood sideways on to him: then swung the rope.

At the first blow she started, and began to quiver. At the second, her head jerked back convulsively. At the third, a moan broke from her. She faced him, and seized his arm with an imploring, sorrowful cry.

"Fergus!"

It was not only a cry of pain, a plea for pardon.

There was something deeper in it. Looking into her great eyes, Fergus slowly let his arm fall to his side. The sky, the sand, the rocks seemed all to contract. There was nothing before his eyes but Mary's face, her parted lips, her great sorrowful eyes that stared into his own. Extraordinary feelings rose in Fergus, great surges of emotion, great tides of trouble. His throat was dry, his muscles reeled and could not support him, his bowels were heavy, his legs laboured; the blood roared tempestuously in his ears. The world contracted still further, and now there was only Mary's face, a face gone pale, great eyes that glared wildly into his own, nostrils that dilated and trembled with the rush of breath. Something came alive in Fergus that had never lived before, and at its terrible summons he staggered, clutching at Mary for support.

Then she was heavy upon his chest, her open mouth upon his, her breath and the fresh heat of her body rushing up sweet about him. With a deep, hoarse cry he seized her body and crushed it against him, bearing her backwards over the smooth, weedy surface of the rock. In his grasp, her muscles leaped to passionate life, holding him in a vice, leaping and straining fiercely against his iron body.

Then Fergus suffered a rapture that was far beyond the wildest feeling he had ever known, that swept him away from every hold of life, that made his veins pure flame. Uncontrollably he bore down upon her, straining, clutching her to him. Not Hector's ghost, not seven scarlet cardinals, not death itself could have stopped Fergus then.

unnerved and nerved him. He turned his eyes **from it, for** it made him feel lost and leaderless; and Fergus had to have a leader. At the same time, the rising of contempt strengthened his heart to face his own wrongdoing. His sin was not sickly.

There was much work to do in the next three days, and Fergus welcomed it. He avoided Mary, seeing with relief that she made no attempt to approach him. Mental perplexity is agony to men who rarely think: and Fergus flung himself upon his work. Often, at the joy of using his muscles to the full, he would forget, and pause in content. Then, cold and sick, conscience would rise again, and with a groan Fergus would fling himself back upon his task. Peter went about restlessly. He would come and stand over Fergus, biting his blackened nails, fidgeting with his boots. Sometimes he went away without saying anything. At others, under pretext of asking how Fergus was getting on, he would fumble round, trying to reopen the subject. He was puzzled and suspicious. He could not understand why Mary was able to carry on as usual, instead of being stretched moaning on her bed.

At last he said what was in his mind.

"You can't have beaten her enough, Fergus. She is well and able. There is no blood on her clothes."

"Beat her yourself, next time."

Peter flushed.

"I should have got you to hold her," he said, "and then I could have seen she got what she deserved. You're too soft-hearted."

"Get Willie McFarish to hold **her**," growled Fergus. "**He is not soft-hearted.**"

He had not made such a retort since his boyhood. Peter, taken aback, glanced at him sharply, and withdrew, still biting his nails.

On the fourth day, Fergus went down the coast to dig bait. The tide was exceptionally low. He made for a sandbank, rich in worms, which was only uncovered at such tides. The sand was covered thickly with fat worm-casts. It did not matter where he began to dig. Putting down his tin can, he plunged the fork into the pudding of sand, placed his foot on it, and with a dexterous twist turned up the first forkful.

Fergus used a fork with four prongs. A spade would cut the worms in half. The first three turns were blank, but the fourth uncovered two long, glistening lug, and showed the end of another as it hastily retreated. Smiling, Fergus drove the fork in ahead of it, and turned it up with the others.

The bank was a digger's paradise. Ordinarily, it would take him two and a half hours to get the three hundred he wanted. Here, he had nearly enough after an hour. He had been digging at a furious pace, and his back was stiff. He would take a rest, he decided, and look around among the rocks for a lobster. It was too early in the season: lobsters were not plentiful till the end of May: but Fergus, unlike most of his kind, worked by instinct rather than tradition. If one found full-grown lobsters in May, the same lobsters must be somewhere in March.

For once, however, he seemed to be at fault. Many a promising rock, many a weedy nook yielded nothing at all. Then, in a pool, under a huge ledge, he saw the long orange whisker, and, stooping down, the blue edge of a claw. The lobster was out of reach. Even

with his fork, he could not work round behind it. But the sight of it confirmed his belief, and he set about searching vigorously.

Fergus, like many slow-moving men, could move like a flash when he had to. Often, in the past, he had pulled lobsters out of holes with his bare hand, jerking the creatures out into the open before the claws had time to seize him. Usually he worked with a wire: but, not having it with him, he now fearlessly groped in every hole he came to. The rock under which he had seen the big lobster was one of a series, provided by nature for the accommodation of lobsters. Fergus worked methodically round them. For a while he found nothing but small flapping eels and agitated shore crabs. Then there was a click and a scurry, and a small lobster shot out upon the weed, and was secured before he could escape.

A lobster in March, caught by hand! Fergus grinned. No one in the village would believe it. He must catch some more. Forgetting all about his baits, he ferreted around the base of each big rock like a terrier. Ah! here was a grand place. Here, surely, he would find more than one.

As he stooped to pull aside the flat, glistening weeds, he heard a stir and sighing at his back. The masses of tangle, lying inert and listless in the exhausted water, came to life. A hundred indescribable soft noises came from them, creakings, murmurs, whispers, subdued strainings, and activities. The tide had turned. Three small waves, their impetus retarded by the tangle, collapsed wearily upon the sand.

Fergus heard them, and knew he must hurry. Recklessly he thrust his hand into the first hole, and

the second. Nothing. Then, jerking back a heavy curtain of weed, he saw a lobster, upset by the motion, struggling in shallow water. He grabbed furiously, but it was too quick for him, and settled back into the recess underneath. With an oath, Fergus flung himself upon his chest, and shot a long arm after it. He touched it, missed, groped frantically up and down, touched something else, something cold and rubbery: jerked back his hand, but was too late, for a paralysing grip caught him by the middle finger, and held him fast.

After the first frantic tug to escape, Fergus lay still. His wits raced, with the speed that had nearly saved his hand. One fraction of a second slower, and his whole hand would be held, not only his finger. One fraction of a second quicker, and he would be free. He knew what had happened. His finger was in the mouth of a big conger eel.

He lay still, easing his finger to the eel. As ill luck would have it, he was in the worst position possible. He was lying on his face, his right shoulder under the edge of the rock, his right arm full length extended: no purchase for his left arm, no purchase for his legs. To make matters worse, a curtain of weed hung about his head and shoulders, getting in his way.

Fergus soon had the situation clear in his mind. The eel was a big one. He did not know how big, but big enough. It was in a very strong position, with its tail braced round the rock. So placed, a big eel was a match for two or three men who could use their full strength, let alone one without a purchase. The eel was not actually pulling; it was holding on. To engage in a tug of war with it would be useless. The

only thing was to ease his hand to it, lie still for a while, and then, with a sudden jerk, gain the couple of feet that would give him a purchase for resistance.

With the patient cunning of an animal, Fergus set himself to wait.

He lay cramped and still. Apart from the discomfort of his extended arm, and the dull pain from his finger, he was victim to a dozen minor uneasinesses. His chest and shoulder were chill with water and the wet weed. One of his knees rested on a sharp piece of rock. He dared not stir, for fear of reminding the eel that he was alive. The heavy, wet tassels of weed chilled the back of his neck. He set his teeth to endure.

It might have been five minutes, it might have been ten, when Fergus decided he could endure it no longer, and began subtly to wriggle his muscles into place for the effort. It would have to be made soon, for they were stiffening. Gradually, with infinite care, he edged his left shoulder near into the rock, so as to be able to turn upon his left side without moving his right arm. If he could roll over, and pull far enough out to press his left hand against the rock, and then, perhaps, stick his right foot against it, he would have a purchase. Given a fair pull, Fergus would feel happy. It was being taken at a disadvantage that he hated.

Now he had rolled on to his left side. Here, for a moment, he was more helpless than on his face. He would have to give a jerk, to prop himself on his left arm. Turning his head stiffly, Fergus squinted at the ledge of the rock above him. He dared not ease his arm in further to the eel, or he would be wedged

under the ledge, and unable to raise himself at all. He would have to chance the jerk.

With a movement so sudden it almost surprised him, he shot up on his left arm, and flung his body backwards. The eel gave several inches. Then, just as Fergus was arching his body over, so as to roll on his back away from the eel, and add the leverage of his body to the pull, he was jerked back with sickening force upon his face.

For the first time, fear rose in Fergus. Hitherto, he had thought simply, how shall I get away? Now his thought was, shall I get away at all? For all the chill of water and weed, a sweat started out upon him. He felt the horrified fear of the trapped animal. His arm was aching with waves of numb agony. He was trapped, trapped, ignominiously trapped—and suddenly he remembered the tide. Screwing his head round, he saw a trickle running into the pool close to his face. He stirred his feet. One of them made a shallow splash. The tide was coming up fast.

A wave of panic rose in him, a mad impulse to yell and struggle, but he fought it down. He had only one chance of escape, to try again what he had tried already. This time, instead of arching over backwards, he would try to raise himself sideways, and wedge his right shoulder against the ledge of the rock. Then, maybe, he could get his knee against the rock, and make a fight for it. But he would have to wait, and lull the eel into forgetfulness. Pulling his lips back from his teeth, he steeled himself to wait.

To his horror, the eel began to pull. At first he thought it was fancy: then he felt himself unmistakably slipping across the rock. Raising his head, setting

the muscles of his neck, he offered what resistance he could by suffering it to be pulled against the harsh surface of the ledge. The pain was agonising: his ear was being crushed. Then, to his utter relief, the strain eased: he lay relaxed, drawing deep breaths.

Now Fergus was certain he must die. In his extremity, he began to pray—and then the remembrance of his sin smote him. This was it! He had sinned terribly, and God was punishing him, sending him by a paltry and agonising death to a world where judgment awaited. With utter horror, he remembered the preaching of the unfrocked priest, and the terrible picture he drew of the fate of those who lusted after women. Had not his own father warned him? Vividly the scene came back to him. ./. "Your temptation . . . Mary." It had seemed to mean that, at the time, but he had given it little thought. He was unaware of any temptation connected with Mary. But now he saw—or'thought he saw—only too well, that his father had been wiser than he. Oh, why had he not understood! why had he not heeded! He had had full warning. The sermon, too. Now he was going to die, to be drowned inch by inch: and then he was going to hell, to walk endlessly round a lake of flame, burning with that unappeased desire he had never known, save for Mary, source of all his woe.

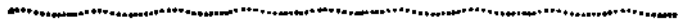
Suddenly, without any decision on his part, Fergus was fighting savagely. His body refused to be drowned and go to hell. What it was that suddenly released his muscles from the grip of consciousness he could never afterwards recall. Maybe it was remorse and

fear, maybe it was the touch of the rising tide under his chin. At any rate, he found himself up, his right shoulder wedged against the rock: then he felt the agonising sharpness of the ledge against his knee: then he had fallen down again, but with this difference, that his left leg was doubled up, and his left boot against the ledge: then his right boot was also against the ledge, and he was driving backwards, with the full force of both legs and one arm, and suffering such pain as he had never felt before. A foot—two feet—a yard he tugged back. Then he moved one foot up to the level of his outstretched right arm: then the other. With his free left hand he groped in his pocket, and pulled out a knife. His whole body was pulsing like an engine, braced against the savage tugging of his enemy. He brought the knife to his mouth, and with his bared teeth opened the blade. Then, summoning all his courage, yelling aloud, in an ecstasy of horror he hacked at what was left of his finger.

A second's hideous tension, a dull flame of pain, and he rolled over backwards into the water, free.



CHAPTER XIX



"WILLIE MCFARISH," SAID PETER TO HIS BROTHER, "is finishing his new boat."

Fergus grunted. He was sitting in front of the fire, with his bandaged hand lying palm upwards in his lap.

"I am suspicious about this boat," Peter went on. "There is something about it I do not understand."

Fergus lifted his head slowly, like a big dog, and looked at Peter.

"Why," he said, "what is there to understand about the new boat."

"This only," said Peter, darting a glance at him, "that in some way I believe this boat concerns us. Willie was talking about it after Mass yesterday, to Andrew M'Gillivray and the rest, and they all stopped as I went by, and laughed at me."

"That might not be anything to do with the boat," said Fergus, unconscious that the remark was offensive.

"It might not," said Peter shortly, "but it was. I could tell from the tone of their voices. And I have a better reason for believing it is something to do with us."

Fergus looked at him again. Peter would never give the best reason he had for a thing. It was his instinct to put forward all the lesser ones first.

"Donald Grant told me," pursued Peter, "that the McFarishes would be glad if we would both attend the christening of the boat. Now why would that be, unless it were to put some slight on us?"

At this Fergus certainly was surprised. He considered for a moment, and could see no other possible motive. He knew Willie too well to suppose that there was goodwill in his bosom. Peter must be right. He grunted, and resumed his contemplation of the fire.

"We should not go, do you think?" Peter persisted.

"I shall not go," said Fergus. "There might be fighting, and I am not strong enough in myself yet."

"No, indeed, it will be a long time before you can use your hand that way." Peter took the injury rather in the light of a deliberate inconvenience to himself. Still, policy, rather than sympathy, urged that the sufferer should be roused from his depression. There were a lot of things he could do with one hand.

"You must rouse yourself, you know, brother," he said, with a show of kindness. "It does not do to let your hurt take such a hold of you. It is nearly a week, now, and you do nothing but sit by the fire. There is no need to lose heart. The doctor said that in six weeks it would be well again. There will be little loss of power. You must rouse up," he repeated, "and not let a small hurt lie on your mind."

Fergus shifted his feet.

"There is more than a hurt on my mind," he said dully.

Peter eyed him.

"You have not been to confession for some time past," he said.

"I was not strong enough yesterday," growled Fergus.

"If there is something on your mind, is not that the best way to get it off?"

Fergus looked at him sideways, under his brows.

"You seem sure it is a sin that is on my mind."

"No, no. But, if there is a trouble which is too strong for you, and you will not tell me: why not tell it to the priest? That is the best way, the way our father always counselled me."

"Well," said Fergus, "I shall not tell you, and I shall not tell the priest." He hunched himself deeper over the fire, and would say no more.

Peter, after standing helplessly for a moment, left him, and went about his business.

The christening of the McFarishes' boat was due for the following evening. Peter did not attend it, but he sent a small boy to tell him everything that happened. He watched the clock till the ceremony must be over, restraining his impatience as best he might, and then went some distance along the road to meet the boy.

When he came back, his lips were wet and his eyes shining with excitement.

"What do you think, brother," he cried, bursting into the room. "What do you think they have done?"

Fergus looked up.

"What have they done?" he asked.

"What name do you think Willie has christened his new boat?"

"What name?"

"He has christened her *Mary*."

For a moment the significance of this did not strike

Fergus. Then he turned a dull red under his golden beard.

"So," he said quietly; and, his jaw working, he turned back to the fire.

"What are we to do?" expostulated Peter, after a pause.

"What can we do?" growled Fergus. "The man is within his rights. Mary is the name of many women. If we say to him 'Why did you do this' he will say he called her after his cousin or his cat."

Peter stared. Something had happened to Fergus. Such reasoning and such eloquence he had not heard from him before.

"Then we are to sit still under this insult?"

"We cannot prove it is an insult."

"But we know it. Everybody knows it."

"Everybody knew that Hugh McRory had slept with John Dobie's wife, but not one could prove it. Hugh McRory fell off the cliff and was drowned. It was an accident: but everybody knew how it happened."

"Oho. Then you mean—"

"One day Willie and I may meet. Or Willie may have an accident. Willie and I will know, but there will be nothing to prove to anyone else."

"You would kill him?"

Fergus glanced around the room, at the door and window.

"I have scores to settle with him," he said. "Willie fights hard. I might have to hurt him badly, in order to win."

Peter showed his teeth.

"He might die of it," he said eagerly.

"He might."

Fergus was looking at the fire again.

"I am glad to hear you say that, brother," said Peter. "I am glad to feel that there is one of us ready to defend the family honour by the might of his arm. I am not strong. I have to do as best I can."

"You do very well," said Fergus. "You are clever. Our father told me he could find many to do my work, but none to do yours."

"We each do our part," said Peter. "As long as we are together, no one can touch us. I will think what is to be done, and you will help me to do it."

"Indeed. I swore to our father that it should be so."

"Well. If you keep to that, we can hardly fail."

And, well contented, his mind working hard, Peter went out into the yard.

A few minutes later, Fergus rose from his chair, got his cap, and went out. A longing for air had seized him, the first since his accident. His body, shocked and exhausted, had had its fill of rest, and cried for action. He sniffed the air, and turned instinctively past the end of the byre to the headland. In a minute he was climbing along Mary's little path. The wind, whooping and galloping from the North East, struck the shoulder of the headland above him, and ricocheted by in broken gusts. The sea leaned away from him. It hit the sandy bay at an angle, spilling in angry foam that leaped higher and higher sideways along the beach, till it was hurled against the other rocky headland, fell back, dancing in mutiny, and was brutally elbowed aside by the next rushing wave. Fergus gave a grunt of pleasure. He

would go on to the point, where the full strength of the waves beat on the rocks below him.

Clambering along, muttering to himself, head down into the gusts, he passed the place where Mary climbed down to her retreat, and came round the shoulder into the full force of the wind. It seemed to gather itself together and spring at him like an animal. He stood, bracing himself against it, smiling grimly at the sense of conflict. The path grew rockier and more uncertain. He put out his bandaged hand to steady himself, winced, and growled an oath. It was his right hand he needed. Leaning in against the rock, he steadied himself as best he could with his elbow, and reached across awkwardly with his left when this was not possible.

Spray was breaking over the point, shooting up straight into the air, being caught by the wind, whipped off, and flung two hundred yards. Fergus pulled up, feeling it on his face. No use going on to the point. He would see nothing, and get soaked. He had not realised how rough the sea was, nor how high the wind. The cottage and the valley were perfectly sheltered from this wind, though, if it backed to the East, it would come tearing down, flattening the dried rushes by the burn, blowing the ducks off the water, altering, in a single day, the contours of the nearer sandhills.

Changing his course, Fergus scrambled down towards the gully. This was a long slit in the rocks, making an angle with a little bay. It was best of all in a South West wind: but heavy seas, from whatever direction, falling into the bay, by some trick of pressure sent a furious jet with terrific force up the

bottle-neck. Fifty yards long, ten or twelve feet wide, it provided in miniature a theatre for the raving waters.

Dropping down under cover of a high wall of rock, Fergus found himself in shelter. The tumult roared in the air above him, the spume flew by like snow: below, the black rocks glistened, as tongues of boiling foam shot up, laid hold upon them, and were torn hissing backwards, resenting every inch they gave, dragging the weed from the crevices; gathering in readiness for another desperate lunge; unwearied in the eternal warfare between sea and land.

Leaning forward, gazing with open mouth upon the spectacle, Fergus felt his fierce delight clouded with uneasiness, an animal's sense of being watched. His head jerked up, and he looked about him. There, in a hollow of the rock, a few yards off, watching him with large, grave eyes, stood Mary.

As Fergus saw her, a light moved in her eyes. Her face, pale with the reflection of the foam beneath, was like an unearthly bloom upon the darkness of the rock. He could not tell, in its strange luminous beauty, whether she smiled.

At the sight of her, Fergus' heart contracted in a mixture of anger and terror. There, close to him, stood the cause of all his woes. He stared at her, his brow wrinkled like a mask. There was nothing inviting in his expression, but he saw her lips move in an endearment; she left her nook, and came towards him.

As she came, Fergus' fear was complicated by another emotion. He knew by her movement that he might have her if he wished, and in the midst of his superstitious horror, the obsession deepened by

days of solitary brooding, his body gave a leap and proclaimed that it desired her very much indeed. In reaction from all it had suffered, in answer to the stimulus of sea and wind, it yearned towards her, hungry for comfort.

Fergus turned pale, and leaned against the rock. His mouth began to work, but he could say nothing. His strength had all gone from him. He felt weak and sick and ill. As Mary approached, her great eyes steadfast upon him, her face alight with tenderness, he made a feeble gesture with his good arm, waving her away.

She stopped at once. A look of hurt wonder came over her face. Seeing his advantage, Fergus struggled to follow it up.

"Get away," he whispered. "Leave me. Get away."

She stared at him. Her lips began to part like a child's. Scowling, Fergus stood up straight, then staggered, and put out a hand to save himself. Instantly she was at his side, her strong hand under his arm, supporting him.

"You are weak," she said, scolding him. "You are not well yet after your poor hand. You should not have come so far without anyone to look after you."

Fergus' eyes opened wide. Never had anyone spoken to him like this.

"It is lucky for you I was here. See now. I will hold you by the arm, and we shall go back together."

She began to lead him along the rock. Scarcely knowing what was happening, he let himself be led. Once his boot slipped, and he leaned on her heavily. She bore him up with a smile.

Fergus felt himself very young and tired, like a little child. He forgot about the danger Mary brought, he forgot about hell, he forgot about the judgment upon him, and his mangled hand. He knew only that he was weak and dependent, and that it was good to be led along, and helped by strong hands and springy muscles, and to hear a voice that scolded and comforted him by turns, with a note in it that he had never heard before.

And Mary, lost in the joy of serving him, lost in the joy of seeing him weak and dependent in her hands, forgot her aches and sorrows, her nights of cruel bewilderment, the times she had crept up to the wounded man and been rebuffed, her longing to take him in her arms, to hug his head against her bosom and comfort him: forgot all in the present ecstasy of finding that he needed her and obeyed her guidance.

All the way home she led him, into his room, made him lie down upon his bed, took off his boots, covered him with a blanket, brought him hot steaming tea, and chattered to him all the time, a stream of happy, loving chatter, such as a child uses who is putting a doll to bed, or a girl to her puppy. Peter had not come back; Angusina was up on the headland getting peats. They had the place to themselves.

"Now," said Mary, smiling upon him, her great eyes soft, "you must sleep."

She bent over him, tucked in the blanket, took away the teacup, and left Fergus, utterly bewildered at this new onslaught of the devil, so tired in mind and body that he fell into a deep sleep and did not wake till the next morning.



CHAPTER XX



SUPPLIES, WHICH EVEN TO-DAY ARE UNCERTAIN IN the wilder parts of the West Highlands, made a serious problem fifty years ago. The railway stopped at Fort William, some forty miles to the South. From there, goods were usually carried by boat to the little harbour at Arisaig, whence the villagers took them by cart or boat to their homes. Usually, to save expense, whole villages or districts clubbed together, sharing the expense of the little fat steamer that waddled up round Ardnamurchan, and arrived, sighing placidly, at the small tidal pier. In such a vital matter, feuds were forgotten. The villagers depended entirely, for such essentials as flour, oatmeal, sugar, etc., on the visit of the boat. The only shop in the district obtained all its stock in this way, and was often exhausted before the boat came round again: but, for the most part, the villagers preferred to lay in their own stores, in large amounts at a time. The boat came on an average every six weeks, but in winter, and bad weather, the interval was often longer. This spring, the gales had delayed her a fortnight beyond her time; so that there was rejoicing when a letter came, in mid-April, to say that she was starting the next day.

The morning she was due dawned clear and fine. Fergus' hand was now almost well, and he felt equal

to rowing down with Peter: but, going up to the top of the little headland, he thought badly of the day.

"The breeze will strengthen," he told Peter. "It will be against us all the way home. I would not be surprised if a big wind rose by afternoon."

Peter grunted. The alternative was a lift in the Mackenzies' cart. Peter's father- and mother-in-law were pathetically anxious to be seen about with him, but the association, particularly on public occasions, gave him little pleasure. However, he knew better than go against Fergus' sense of weather.

"We will ride with Alexander Mackenzie, then," he said.

Fergus nodded. The arrangement seemed to him excellent. Silently the brothers put on their Sunday coats over their jerseys, and their black peaked caps. Then, Peter a couple of yards in front, they went along the footpath down to the road. Angusina and Mary stood together, at the gate, watching them go.

Angusina turned to Mary.

"Do you ever feel," she said unexpectedly, "that something is going to happen?"

Mary frowned in grave bewilderment.

"What is going to happen?" she said.

"Nothing ... I don't know." For the moment, Angusina was dashed, and returned to her usual vague confusion. "I mean," she rallied desperately, "do you ever feel, on a certain day, like thunder in the air . . . feel it in your head, I mean . . . that something is going to happen?"

Mary went a shade paler.

"No," she said. "I don't think I do feel that. Why. Do you feel, to-day . . . ?"

Fearfully, Angusina nodded.

"I feel to-day, very strongly ... I don't know. Perhaps it is nonsense."

"What do you feel, Angusina?"

Angusina looked at her doubtfully, as if she felt she was being cross-questioned.

"I don't know," she muttered. "Nothing particular."

She turned away, but Mary suddenly caught her arm.

"Tell me, Angusina. What do you feel to-day?"

The elder girl looked at her, as if half afraid to speak.

"I know the feeling," she said at last. "I had it before James Ogilvie was killed by the bull. I had it before my little sister . . . What is it, Mary?"

For Mary suddenly put out her other hand, and clasped hold of her arm. She had gone very white, and was breathing badly.

"What is it?" repeated Angusina, in affright.

"I . . . feel . . . very . . . sick . . . everything . . . is . . . going . . . round . . . me," said Mary, and collapsed in a dead faint.

The drive to the pier took a good two hours, by the time they had stopped and talked to friends on the way. There was great clearness in the air. Skye was close to them, as they climbed the hill to Arisaig: it was pursuing them across a stiff sea, that did not seem as usual to be a separate element, but an extension of the land, solid, rough as sailcloth.

"It will blow," said Fergus, to no one in particular: the only words he spoke on the journey, other

than greetings and reluctant answers to enquiries about his hand.

Arisaig itself is in shelter, and the sun was trapped warm between the hedges as they jogged down into the village. The harbour was smooth, with a mere blurring of the surface to show that there was a wind. They drove on past the inn by the little road that led a long three miles further to the pier. It was a pleasant road, winding, very narrow, running beside the sea, taking a fit and turning inland, running on moor, and through a little wood, till it came out at last innocently by the boat house and the tiny pier.

A great sound of talking arose as they rounded the corner. The boat was in. Steadily and stolidly, her crew were unloading her. On the grass above the pier sat some fifty men, looking on, laughing, and talking, their voices rising as they identified a package which might be their own. It was a rule of the fat, fussy Captain that no one should touch any of the goods, even if he recognised it, till all were unloaded. Then he would come and collect receipts in order. If the people disobeyed him, he would stop all unloading, and even back the boat away from the pier, yelling at them with purple face that nothing should be delivered till they did his bidding. Grumbling, cursing, they would withdraw. It was vexing indeed to sit maybe for two hours in a biting wind or in the rain, while all the time one's parcel was there before one's nose on the pier. To-day, however, the sun was warm. They were none of them ill-disposed for a holiday. Spring was coming soon. Their hearts expanded in the sunshine, and they talked and chaffed good-humouredly.

The arrival of Aeneas in the McFarishes' new boat, the *Mary*, caused a great stir. With him came all three McFarishes, Angus, very lame now, a passenger in the bows, screwing round and grinning at the familiar animated scene. Willie and George were rowing. A young man who worked for Aeneas came as spare oar, in case the cargo was heavy on the homeward journey: and Aeneas himself sat up in the stern. He had grown very fat. Something stirred Fergus' heart at the sight of him, genial mountain of a man, almost kingly, sitting erect, waving his hand, calling greetings, utterly unselfconscious, not so much facing the crowd as unaware that it was there. Even Captain Gullan, from his post on the bridge, paused in his directions to greet his brother mariner.

Aeneas disembarked stiffly, swore, laughed, took a man's arm, and came up the slip. How easy he was, how confident everywhere of his welcome! He stopped to speak a word to a man here, to another there: broke off, with a gleam in his eye, to wave greeting to a third further off: then, finding someone with whom he wished to talk business, he drew him a yard aside, turned his back on the rest, and talked quietly and absorbedly, as if he were in his own parlour. The whole gathering was somehow toned up by his arrival. Men's faces changed when they saw him: yet half of them believed he was in league with the devil, and Father Roche had denounced him from the altar, and was only prevented from doing so again by the fact that the Captain bore him no grudge, and gave liberally to the parish charities. Many interviews had passed between the two, and the priest, while he hated Aeneas' **influence**, **could get** the better of

him in no way but that of sullenly pocketing his gold.

Most of the people had brought food with them, and the inn sent down a plentiful supply of drink. No orgy took place, however, and little intemperance, for many had difficult journeys before them, on foot, by boat, on horseback. Some had twenty miles to go, of rough, boulder-strewn track, of paths across the bog, of roads that twisted beside the edges of the sea lochs. Heads must be clear, and feet steady.

The boat had a heavy load, after her long absence, and it was half-past two and more before she was unloaded. At four, Aeneas and his party made ready to go home.

The wind had risen. There was small sign of it in the secluded harbour, but Fergus smelt it. He looked far out, beyond the opposite point: he threw back his head, and sniffed. A conviction rose in him that they were fools to go. They had a heavy cargo, mostly of flour. He looked round for Peter, but Peter was some distance away, talking with a man from Borrodale.

Aeneas got in. The stern of the boat went down visibly as he took his place. Biting his lips, Fergus took a few undecided steps down towards the boat.

Willie saw him, bent forward, and said a word to Aeneas. The Captain heaved himself round.

"Hey, Macrae lad," he called. "Come and join us. Take a lift home."

"Yes." Willie smiled, and patted the thwart. Fergus' accident, and his own pride in the new boat, made him feel almost amiable towards his rival.

"Come, lad," called Aeneas again. "We'll be glad of your company."

The whole boat suddenly sent out rays of friendliness towards Fergus. Understanding this, Fergus let his face relax in a slow, beautiful smile. His smiles were rare. He shook his head at them, and pointed out to the sea.

"I am thinking," he said, "it is not wise to go. The wind is rising."

Willie made a noise of good-humoured scorn.

"We will manage it well," he said. "You can see, the wind is nothing."

"I would not go," said Fergus, looking at Aeneas.

"Come," said Willie. "It's not like Fergus Macrae to fear a tough pull."

Fergus' expression changed.

"I could not help you to-day," he said anxiously. "My hand—"

"Why, man, we weren't asking you to help us," interrupted Willie. "We know you can't row yet. I only meant, in the old days, Fergus Macrae was never one to fear the wind."

Fergus smiled again.

"I would have feared the wind to-day, at any time of my life," he said.

"It's his hand. It's shaken his nerve," said Aeneas in a low voice to the others: but Fergus heard him. Then, aloud, "That's all right, Macrae lad. Come down and meet us when we get back. Then come in and have a drink, and own you were wrong."

Fergus stood back.

"Well," he said. He stood watching: and when the boat was some way out, an impulse made him wave his hand. Willie lifted a hand from his oar, and waved. Aeneas turned as far as he could, and waved over his

portly shoulder. Fergus stood for some time watching the boat, till he heard his name called.

"Your brother," they said. "Your brother is waiting for you, to start."

Fergus went up the slope, and got on the trap without a word.

They made a halt at the inn at Arisaig, but not for long. When they came to the top of the hill, and faced over to Skye, the wind hit the trap such a blow that it almost stopped still. Peter turned a look of awe upon his brother. Fergus, his jaw set grimly, made no sign.

It was left for old Alexander Mackenzie to voice the obvious.

"That boat will never make it," he said. "She'll have to put back."

Peter glanced again at Fergus.

"She may not be able to put back," he said.

"Why would that be?" asked Alexander.

Fergus answered instead of his brother.

"She won't feel the wind till they're clear of the channel," he growled. "The islands shelter them, till then. It will be easy going in the channel."

"Willie McFarish is experienced," suggested Peter.

"And old Angus is there, too."

"I think they will try to make it," said Fergus. "I know that I will get down at the bottom of the hill, and go across the rocks."

"To warn them?"

"If I am in time."

Suddenly Peter stood up on the step, and pointed.

"You are not in time," he said. "Look."

Fergus shaded his eyes, and saw the boat coming

out of the mouth of the channel. She must have gone at a tremendous pace.

"They are drunk," he said under his breath, remembering how Aeneas always took a jar with him in the boat: and he saw them, in his mind's eye, rowing along the channel and between the rocks, like demons, scaring the seals and sea-birds, cheered on by drink and song.

Drunk or not, it was evident, even at that distance, that Willie kept his head. His course was North-East: the wind, due North, was driving him at an angle on to the rocks. At once, the boat headed North, to take the waves bow on, and keep off shore.

"They have a spare oar, for the near side," said Peter tentatively to Fergus.

"I will go on to Bu na Caimb," Fergus said to Alexander, and sank back on the seat. There, off that point, they would meet the strongest force of the weather. Alexander shook the reins, and they went on at speed.

For some time the boat was hidden from them by the land. When next he saw it, Fergus uttered a grunt. As he expected, it was half way across the little bay, and too far in. He knew, in that instant, that it would not clear the point.

He said nothing, but watched, bending forward, clutching the rail of the trap, until they reached the place for him to jump off. Just before he did so, he turned to the others.

"They will not clear the point," he said. "I am going down. Drive on, you, Alexander, and get help. Peter, go you up to McLelland's house, and get ropes. Get him to bring a ladder if he has one. Quick. There is no time to be lost."

He jumped off, and set off at a shambling run. It was three quarters of a mile to the point. Peter, after brief hesitation, sprang down too.

"I will go on," cried Alexander, "and fetch men from the farm above."

He whipped up, and drove off, leaving Peter biting his nails with indecision and vexation. He loathed going near Martin McLelland's house. The dogs always rushed out and barked at him. Why couldn't . . . Maybe Fergus was exaggerating. He always thought ill of Willie. Probably he would get there only to see the boat go triumphantly by. There was no need for all this excitement.

For shame, Peter, you coward, you miserable coward! Men are in danger, may even lose their lives, while you stand blethering, afraid of a couple of dogs! The wretched man's conscience sprang at him, worrying him, till at last with a snarl he turned and hurried down the road, at a fast walk. Run up to the house he could not. That would be enough to bring them out in a fury. Scarce daring to let himself think, he hurried along, and was soon on the grass edge of the road.

The accursed dogs sprang up with a hideous barking, but by the grace of God there was Martin himself. With a shout, he quieted them.

"Martin! The *Mary*—Willie McFarish—Captain M'Grath on board: she's near the rocks. My brother sent me."

Martin woke quickly to the needs of the situation. He ran at once to the back of the house, bellowing.

Peter's heart glowed with relief. Now he was seen in all men's eyes to be the competent man of action.

His shameful lost three minutes vanished, buried furtively, deep, in a private cesspool. Soon he was running, a coil of rope over one shoulder, while Martin and his daughter followed with a ladder. Peter hurried now. He almost welcomed the weight of the rope. He would get there exhausted. All men should see that Peter Macrae had done his part.

What befell the boatload, they put together as best they might from the story given afterwards by the spare man. As soon as they left the channel, and Willie's trained senses knew what they had to face, Willie, who was rowing inside, bade the spare man row inside also. There was barely time, even in the mouth of the channel, to make the change. Then pulling hard, they saw the threatening rock recede, and settled down to a stiff pull home.

It was not, the spare man explained, the size of the sea that bothered them: it was the force of the wind. The combs of the breakers were blown off almost before they could break. The *Mary* shipped water, but not overmuch. Aeneas, without perturbation, reached for the baler, and began placidly slinging the water over the side.

The blood of the rowers was aflame with drink, and they pulled their hardest. Thus it was that, almost against belief, they made their way for half a mile in the teeth of the gale. Then, as happens to drink-excited men, their powers began suddenly to fail. Willie felt his arms grow weak. The spare man, who had drunk less, was rowing strongly. Aeneas bent forward and said something, but in the noise of the wind it was not heard. Willie, rolling a bloodshot eye, saw that they were three parts of the way across,

and too near in. It seemed as if a current, besides the wind, were taking them towards the rocks. Willie jerked his head round to yell at Angus in the bows, but the old man had read his thought. Tapping George on the shoulder, he seized the rowlock, and whipped it over to the other side in time to receive the oar. All three were now rowing on one side of the boat, and driving her head against the wind.

For a minute it seemed that this manoeuvre would succeed. Then, so quickly that they hardly knew how it had happened, they were close to the point, fighting for their lives. Frantically, with the energy of trapped rats who see their murderer approaching, they strained and tugged to clear the fatal rock. If they could pass it, there was the bare chance of running with the waves, of being carried bodily up into a cleft of the rocks, and scrambling clear before the next wave came.

All this time, the spare man said, Aeneas sat upright in the stern, without anxiety, urging them on with occasional smiles, but never a gesture. The spare man did not know what happened for a while. He was pulling, pulling, pulling. Then, opening his eyes, he saw the Captain deliberately reach for his concertina. Thus, to Fergus' astonished ear, as he climbed with pounding heart over the last rocks before the point, were blown torn shreds of ghostly music, now bright, now nothingness.

The boat was almost round the point. A wave caught her and knocked her sideways. With marvellous presence of mind, Willie backed, and swung her stern to the wind. Then, as the stern rose, Willie and George pulled madly together. A huge wave

gathered under the boat, lifted her up, and carried her forward on its crest. She swooped deep as it roared into foam. All shut their eyes, expecting the crash. Sickeningly, it did not come. The boat staggered, and slid back confusedly in the backwash. Suddenly something grated; and she spun. George's oar kicked him violently under the chin, and in an instant his limp body was jerked overboard. The boat tilted, shipped water, and recovered, broadside on to the waves.

Fergus did not see exactly how it happened. He saw the *Mary* lurching in the broken water, just beyond the rocks. The next wave caught her and lifted her up, tilted her. He saw Aeneas tilt with her, still sitting bolt upright, playing to the last. Then there was a welter of foam, and three black struggling figures.

Men could do nothing in such a cauldron. Two figures were sucked out, flung in, sucked out again. One scrabbled wildly at a rock, and was torn ruthlessly from grasp to grasp. One rolled over on his face. The backwash left him, sprawled limp across a round smooth rock. Fergus, stumbling, jumping, falling, got down close to him. The next wave lifted him off the rock, carried him further up, but left him stuck in a cleft. Fergus saw him move feebly. The next wave hustled him further up the cleft.

Gathering what force he had left, Fergus waited till the backwash bared the round smooth rock, leaped down to it, and managed to wedge himself into the cleft. The icy water bit into him, but he easily resisted its force. As soon as the pull slackened, he stooped, and picked up the limp body. It was the spare man.

How he scrambled back, Fergus never knew. There was no time for calculation. Instinct nerved him. He knew nothing till he found himself hanging on desperately, but safe. Then, as he struggled up, Peter came with the rope.

One more man reached the shore alive—Willie McFarish. He, too, was wedged in a rock. They were half an hour getting him, with ladder and ropes: and when they got him, it was not for long. A small crowd had gathered, men, women in shawls, running, stumbling, leaning against the wind.

Willie lay senseless on the rock, his mouth open, the whites of his eyes turned up. His ribs were crushed, his hands were raw lumps of flesh: but he breathed. Fergus stood, looking down at him helplessly. The icy wind chilled his stiff wet clothes till they felt like steel against him.

There was a stir in the crowd, and Mary burst through. She fell on one knee beside Willie, and made to lift his head. A growl came from the onlookers.

"Don't touch him."

But, as she touched him, his face moved. His eyes, swivelling dreadfully in his head, came alive, and closed. He coughed weakly. She took his head, slipping her arm beneath it.

Willie coughed again. Pale as his face was, a change came over it. Fergus took Mary's shoulder.

"Stand back," he said. "The man is dying."

She shook off his hand fiercely, and he let it drop to his side. He did not care. Nothing mattered. He was tired.

Then, quite suddenly, Willie opened his eyes. He saw Mary, and smiled broadly.

"Mary, begod," he said, in a loud, bantering voice, coughed up a stream of blood, and fell back dead.

Fergus stood for minutes in a dream. Then he awoke to the stir of voices around him. He heard Mary weeping. Men were going to take up Willie. They did not like to touch Mary, but looked enquiringly at Fergus. Almost absent-mindedly, he stooped, took her under the armpits, and lifted her to her feet.

She swayed, and clung on to his arm. He released her, and stood, his mind still full. After a few seconds, she let go his arm.

"Two minutes," said Fergus suddenly, in a loud voice, "if I had had the rope two minutes sooner, I might have saved him."

"Don't worry yourself, man," said a voice. "You could not have saved him. He was dashed on a rock."

Fergus shook his head. He had not been thinking of Willie.

"Two minutes," he repeated, staring straight in front of him at the sea. Long, envious tongues were shooting into the creek from which he had rescued the spare man. They hypnotised him. He remembered the gulley. Mary! With a start, he looked about him, and saw her being led away by some women. How tall she was!

A hand caught his arm. He turned, and looked stupidly into the anxious face of Peter.

"I came as fast as I could." Peter's voice was almost pleading. "I ran across the rocks. I could come no faster."

Fergus could not connect his mind with these words. Then he understood.

"Yes," he said. "Yes. You came fast. Very fast. You were not long after me."

Indeed, everyone could see Peter had come fast. He was still out of breath. His trouser leg was torn, in a long triangular slit, where he had fallen on the rocks.

"I could not come faster," Peter insisted.

"Ah, don't distress yourself," said the man who had spoken to Fergus. "He couldn't have got them. No one could have got them. It's a miracle he got this fellow."

The spare man was sitting up weakly, his face red and spluttering with the whisky that had been poured into him. People were explaining to him what had happened, and pointing to Fergus. After a couple of minutes, he was helped to his feet, and supported over to Fergus.

Fergus stared at him. The spare man, his face all wet and blubbered with weakness and emotion, was holding out his hand. A sudden smile broke upon Fergus' face, and he shook the proffered hand warmly, many times.

Then he sat down on the rock. Someone offered him a flask of whisky, and he drank gratefully. Presently, raising his eyebrows, as if something had surprised him, he wiped his moustache on the back of his hand, rose, and went home.



CHAPTER XXI



THE LOSS OF THE MARY AFFECTED PROFOUNDLY THE community from whence she came. For fifty years, the story would be told, to strangers and to children, round firesides upon stormy nights, and aboard boats that idly passed the spot in summer. Arguments about its details would lead to the scraping back of chairs, the overturning of drink, the curses of men at each other's throats, the chill of the rainy puddles on their skin as they came to their senses in the roadway outside, where the barman flung them. Young girls who had sweethearts would shudder over it, and hurry off to their rooms to entreat the Virgin: women with child would sigh, and pray their child should see its father. More than this, for fifty years lingered on hearts whom the loss touched more nearly, a girl who loved Willie, a girl faithful to George's memory. A family had been virtually extinguished, the most important landowner and employer of labour was dead, his property would soon be up for sale: and who knew what might come then? Nothing of such weight had happened for half a century to remind the people how much their lives depended upon chance. Nor did it comfort them to be told by Father Roche that their loss was the manifest will of God. Aeneas and Willie McFarish might have earned their violent end, but the stroke reached others.

The Macraes felt the blow as hardly as any. Angusina, it was true, was little concerned. She felt no more than the insecurity all women feel whose men work upon the sea. But the other three were hard hit. Fergus had lost the one man he loved, the one man who quickened his pulse of life, the one man with whom he felt at home. He had lost his Captain. Though for months he had seen little of Aeneas, the estrangement was all wiped away by that last friendly greeting by the pier. For nights afterwards, as he lay awake, the Captain seemed very close to him. He could almost see him, sitting in his chair by the fire-side, twinkling at him with his delightful smile of complicity. He could almost see the glint of the firelight on the concertina, and hear the music he loved. "Homeward bound." Yes, the Captain had gone home. When he saw his death certain, he had taken up his beloved instrument, and played his own dirge. It must have been that same old song: he could have played no other. The end of the voyage. Could it be possible, could it be possible at all that the end of that voyage was the fires of hell?

Fergus groaned in torment, and twisted upon the bed. Aeneas had been a wicked man: yet he was good. He did terrible things: yet he was good. Of all the men Fergus had ever met, he was the kindest. Fergus' head throbbed in the agony of trying to reconcile the paradox. Certainly, he was lost without the Captain. His life had no compass now. To stay on, look after everything, help Peter: yes. That was the narrow road. It looked narrower, emptier than ever. He even regretted Willie, an enemy to be respected, a man of prowess, like himself, whose last word to him had

been friendly. Fergus was thankful that they had parted friends. Still, Willie's enmity had been one of the rocks by which he steered, and he felt lost without it. Mary—from Mary his mind shied off. He dared not think of her. Filled, now, with a superstitious horror of her, as of an ill omen, he felt yet a perverse impulse that drove him for comfort to her side. He would have liked to rise from his bed, and seek her out: to take her his weight of inarticulate sorrow: to bury his head in her breast. Sin, sin, screamed his mind, foul sin! and with another groan he twisted his sweating body, and prayed for sleep.

Upon Peter the load pressed less broadly, but with a sharper point. Two minutes, it said, in a small ugly voice that could not be stifled: a voice like the small hidden croak of a toad. Two minutes, it wrote, in print so small it could hardly be seen, so clear he yet must see it. The whole landscape came before him, the rocks, the mountain, the cottage with the long strip of grass by the roadway: and across it in tiny white letters, like lice, crawled the hideous words; two minutes. Hungrily he seized upon the words of comfort, that no one could have saved them. Fergus—what did Fergus know? Men of great strength were often apt to exaggerate their powers. He saved one, said the ugly little voice, even without ropes: and when Peter defied it, and cursed it, the voice became a toad-like little gnome. Look, it cried, and he sweated in horror on his bed, for it went to the private cesspool of his mind, kicked away the sand, and lifted off the lid. LOOK, cried the ugly little creature, and it swelled up suddenly till it filled the sky, and its voice became a bellow, and Peter leaped like a trout in

the bed, and lay clutching the bedclothes, glaring with great eyes into the darkness; and Angusina stirred heavily and whimpered in her sleep beside him.

Then Peter hardened his heart. It was the only way. He would go mad otherwise. He defied his conscience. Others were wickeder than he, and they flourished. That old sea-captain, only now cut off—he winced at the reminder—that old sea-captain had been a sinner for seventy years. He, Peter, was but thirty-two, and had only a few sins. To hell with conscience! he would go on, and do as he would. If it was sin, well then, be damned to godliness. He would harden his heart, like the brave Pharaoh of old. So far, the wrath of God had not touched him. Time enough to yelp when it did. You are a coward, said his heart. You fear your conscience now, and it is all cowardice, the dread of what God may do to you. If you were not afraid of that, you would do all manner of things. Be brave, be a man!

Thus he lay, in alternate fevers of defiance and self-abasement, longing for comfort, unable to sleep, or to lie still. Angusina stirred again and whimpered in her sleep. His hatred rose in a red flame against her. Fat, sweaty cow!

And Mary—she was in a worse case than either. Of the two men who had loved her, one was drowned and cold, the other shunned her, avoided even the sight of her if he could. Fergus, whom she loved, for whom she would gladly give her life, if he would but acknowledge her and speak a word of kindness, now again unaccountably set his face against her. To the frank, simple mind of the girl there was no possible

explanation of this. He had fiercely possessed her, once only it was true, but in such sort that her instinct knew his was a stronger thing than Willie's passion. Once, again, after repulsing her, he had suffered her to help him and to wait upon him. What curse was upon her, that he now would not so much as show he knew she lived? And Willie was gone, poor reckless, heedless Willie, who had been cruel to her, loved her in his headstrong way, left her, and now was dead. Dead! it mattered more than the blow to her heart alone. Angusina suspected something. She had looked at her queerly sometimes, since she fainted. Oh, there was nothing sure or safe in life at all. Nobody cared for her. She was born under a curse. Had not she always half-known that, even in her Glasgow days? What was it the priest had said?

A lassitude fell upon Mary, and she no longer cared what happened to her. There was nothing to live for. She lay almost in stupor, too weary to sleep.

Suddenly a sound roused her. A soft step outside: a hand fumbling at the door. Slowly, timidly, the door creaked open.

Hope leaped up in Mary's heart. It leaped up to her throat, almost choking her. She had to fight for the breath to whisper a single word.

"Fergus," she gasped, rising on her elbow, staring with wide eyes into the gloom.

There was silence. The shadowy figure did not move.

"Fergus," she whispered again, and stretched out her hand.

The figure moved convulsively forward. Someone

was kneeling by the bed, fumbling, pressing his head into her bosom, trembling, crying. It was not Fergus.

For a moment Mary's back stiffened in revolt. Then a great sea of weariness swept over her. What did it matter. She turned away her face, and lay still.



CHAPTER XXII



A SOFT MIST HAD DRIFTED IN FROM THE SEA, MUFFLING away from sight even the sandhills and the vague shoulder of the headland. Now and then, it would thin slightly; the sandhills would loom through, pale milky smoke, and disappear as with an inaudible sigh. At three in the afternoon the mist came, first in patches, then deeper, softer, pressing down without weight upon the sand. By four, every blade of grass was silver with tiny beads of wet, and all but the place whereon one stood was hidden in a sightless, soundless world. Dusk and darkness fell as a slow withdrawal of the light behind the mist. The evening, beginning thus early, plunged the people back two months into winter: yet, even inside the houses, was the feeling of difference, the strange sense of being a hundred miles away from one's nearest neighbour. The Macraes' little gate opened on nothingness. Even the path back from it to the house, beside the fuchsia hedge, was an amorphous tunnel, vague and unfamiliar. Peter shivered as he hurried back to the house, brushing a shower of drops from the fuchsia with his shoulder.

Little was said that evening in the cottage. All feared the mist, and none cared to admit it. Mist, as they knew, was the worst weather. It was worse than the rain, which sooner or later gave you rheumatism,

worse than the East wind, which cracked your hands, worse even than the storms which drowned you: for mist sent men melancholy, cut them off from their kind, made them men alone: and the people of the hills and villages did not like to be alone. Even from that small community, there was a long list of folk who had gone melancholy and been taken away, sitting with helpless, unseeing eyes, to madhouses in the South.

"It will clear maybe by the morning," said Peter, as they rose to go to bed.

Fergus rumbled. It was the sort of mist that might last for days. Peter knew that as well as he did.

Next morning, pale, reluctant light suffused the soft mass. For a few seconds, at about eleven o'clock, a gleam brightened. Fergus felt a warmth upon the back of his neck, and saw a brief, unearthly suggestion of the brae opposite, and the bushes of broom. Then it closed down, thicker than ever.

That night the brothers sat for a long time in silence. Peter was restless, more restless than Fergus had ever seen him: but—ominous sign—he controlled his restlessness. Several times, aware of tension, Fergus looked sideways to see his brother's knuckles staring yellow through his skin. Angusina, for some reason, was unwilling to leave them. She fussed about the room, glancing uneasily at the pair. Fergus could feel her eyes on his great back. At length Peter, unable to bear it any longer, turned round and harshly bade her go to bed.

For half an hour after that the two sat, staring at the fire. Fergus, in whose mind a mild curiosity had stirred, soon forgot it, and sat inert. For days, now,

his mind had been weary. Grief and fear alike had left it. There was only resignation, the setting of his feet upon the empty road. The interesting things of life were over. His friend and his enemy were dead. Mary, that bright syren, was already behind him. He had passed her dangers. Her mermaid shape, still visible out of the corner of his eye, allured vainly from a receding rock. That was dead, with Aeneas and Willie. On, now, into nothing. Into mist. Why not? Why want to see, when there was nothing to be seen?

Coming to himself, he realised that Peter had begun to speak in a low voice. Slowly he sent his mind back, to see if it could remember the first words. He was not sure what he had heard and what he had not heard.

"Eh?" he said finally.

"Mary." Peter was speaking straight at the fire, in low, urgent tones. "She is a danger. She is a curse to us. We must get rid of her. She is a danger and a curse."

Fergus wrinkled his brow. This was very puzzling. Just as he had decided that Mary was for him a danger past and gone, here she was being dragged into the foreground again. The intensity of his own first visual image forbade him to realise what Peter was saying.

"How?" he enquired, after a long pause.

"How?" Peter turned to him, his face working with suppressed passion. "I will tell you. What has she done? First, she brought ill-repute on our name, by going with Willie McFarish. Next, she killed our father—"

Fergus made a sound of astonishment and protest. Before he could speak, Peter cut him off.

"Did she not? Did he not injure his heart in the rowing? Did not the young doctor say so? Was it not because his heart was weak that he could not recover of the scratch on his thumb? Was that not so? And for whose sake did he go upon the rowing? Who was the cause of this quarrel between the Macraes and the McFarishes? Answer me that!"

Stunned, Fergus considered an aspect of the matter which had never struck him.

"Next," went on Peter, seeing the advantage he had gained, "not content with that, she goes again with Willie McFarish. The Lord knows how many times it was, before we found it out. Then"—Peter began to hesitate in his words, but the venom of his purpose blazed behind his eyes. "Then we go to beat her, as our father ordered."

Fergus' mouth became dry. He kept his eyes on his brother.

"Then . . . then . . ." Peter licked his lips. He looked away from Fergus into the fire. "Then she tempts you, and seduces you from your duty . . . and whores with you."

There was a silence. Peter's hands shook.

Fergus cleared his throat.

"How do you know that?" he asked, without expression.

"Because," said Peter, still staring into the fire, "when I went in to her the other night, she called me by your name."

"When you went in to her . . .?"

"Yes. I . . ." Peter turned to him, his face contracted

in a snarl. "She has been a curse to me, for years. She tempts me. I lust after her. I cannot put her out of my head. I hate her, I hate myself, but I cannot keep away from her. Any more than you can," he added.

Fergus considered, his head sunk on his chest.

"You have Angusina," he said mildly.

Peter looked into the fire again.

"I desire Mary more than Angusina," he said in a low voice.

Fergus could understand that.

Peter clenched his knuckles tight. He struggled with words for a moment.

"It ... it was to be safe from Mary that I took Angusina," he said.

Fergus' eyes opened wide. Here were deep waters indeed.

"So, you see," muttered Peter. "Her temptation is too strong for me."

Fergus nodded slowly.

"Mary is my temptation too, as you know," he said, "and in spite of a warning."

"A warning?"

"Our father warned me on his deathbed."

Peter stared in amazement.

"He warned you . . . against Mary?"

"He warned me against my temptation, and then said 'Mary.'"

Peter's body went very still. In a flash, his quick mind saw what had happened. The dying man had sought to warn Fergus against the temptation to drink, and charge him to care for Mary: and Fergus had misunderstood.

There was a stillness. Something cold and terrible was hatching out in Peter's mind. He watched it, fascinated, terrified, knowing that he was powerless to interfere, that he would say the words.

"He said something to me of Mary, too."

There, they were out, they were spoken. Peter's head swam. The room seemed all unsteady around him, the chairs monstrous. It's not a lie, the old Peter rushed forward saying, it's not a lie. It's true. He *did* say something.

He looked up, and saw Fergus' eyes upon him.

"He warned you too?"

"He said something."

"I see. He thought Mary was especially my temptation. He did not know about you."

Peter said nothing.

"It is strange," said Fergus. "For you had been after her."

Peter looked up quickly. How did he know that?

"I did not know at all, about myself. I had not thought of her. It was not till afterwards."

Peter leaned forward.

"We must get rid of her," he said. "She is a curse, and a danger. Why, the very boat they call by her name drowns its crew on the first voyage. She is a curse to me, leading me into mortal sin. She is a curse to you, leading you into sin. Nothing can cure her. She is a wanton, and we must get rid of her."

"Get rid of her?" said Fergus. "How?"

Peter looked round the room. Then he pulled his chair closer to Fergus'.

"How do we get rid of anyone who is a curse

to the community?" he whispered with dry, hot lips.

"How did our fathers get rid of the informers and traitors? What happened to Red McHugh, that defaced four women and cursed the priest? What happened to the wife of the keeper in the upper glen, that drew strange men in off the roads?"

Fergus stiffened in his chair, and leaned away from Peter.

"Kill her?" he said incredulously.

"Why not? She is the peril of our two souls. I cannot resist her. You cannot resist her. Who knows what terrible things may happen here? Angusina is going to have another child."

Peter broke off, and made a queer, desperate gesture with his hands. Fergus felt a stirring of pity.

"You have got yourself into a deep trouble, brother," he said gently.

"God knows I have," cried Peter. "If you knew the nights I have spent, lying awake, in torment. . . . I am in trouble: and I call on you to help me out of it. Is my family to be made wretched, am I to end in hell, because a harlot is here, bewitching me, putting a curse upon me? And you, too."

"I have given her up," said Fergus quietly. "I will never go with her again."

A sneer twisted Peter's features in the firelight.

"And how long do you think that will last? How often have I said that to myself—I, with a stronger reason not to take her than you? Why, man, the spring is coming, your body is strong, and hers is strong, curse it to hell! When this grief and shock

have left you, you will turn to her in the first warmth of the year. Will you be content to have known her once, and not to know her again? No, Fergus. She is inexhaustible. She breeds desire."

His eyes bright, his lips glistening, Peter proceeded to tell Fergus how he would be tempted, one warm night, soon, among the broom.

A harsh cry stopped him. Fergus shot out a great left hand, and gripped his arm.

"Stop, brother," he cried. "You will drive me mad. Why must you wake up my wickedness?"

"To show you it is there still," said Peter earnestly, "To show you it will not vanish for the weight of a word. Ah no. The harlot weaves her spell too strong for that."

Fergus sat upright in his chair. A sweat poured from him: he laboured in anguish of spirit, and broke into unaccustomed eloquence.

"I am full of wickedness," he cried. "I am full of wickedness, and God in His mercy has sent me many warnings. First, it was a sermon preached by the unfrocked priest, that showed me the terrors of hell. Then, it was our father, warning me. Then, when I had sinned in spite of these warnings, God took my finger from me, but spared my life. He has shown me too the punishment of evil upon others. Do not think I am blind to these things. I had made up my mind to leave evil alone for ever, but you show me it is still in my heart. Oh, brother, you have suffered, but I have suffered too. You are clever, and can think; but my thoughts drive me round and round and beat me, till I do not know what to do."

"I will tell you what to do," said Peter, gazing

fixedly at him. "Do you remember our father's last charge to you?"

"Yes. I told you, I remembered it."

"I did not mean about Mary. I mean, that in times when the family name was concerned, you should do my bidding?"

Fergus' face cleared.

"Yes. Yes, of course."

"Well, the time has come. Here is a matter which concerns the whole name and fame of the Macraes. I charge you, in our father's name, to help me rid us of this danger."

Fergus looked at him in silence. Then he sighed.

"Is there no other way? Can we not send her away?"

"Away? Where? Man, do you not realise how it is with her?"

"How it is. . . ?"

"What will the world say of two men who send away a girl in that state from their house?"

Fergus looked at him aghast.

"And where would we send her? She has no home. No parents—or, if she has, they will not own her. Loose blood—" Peter suddenly ground his teeth. "It is that devil of a priest," he said viciously. "More than one thing, we owe him . . ." He broke off suddenly, remembering Fergus. "Where could we send her?" he went on. "To the streets of Glasgow?"

"We could not do that," said Fergus.

"Well, then, are we to keep her here, and have the boys of Tougal asking us in the road which of us is the father?"

Fergus flushed slowly. His beard sank on his chest.

"You are right, brother," he said.

Peter sat back, his hand on his knee, and looked at him.

"She is better out of this world," he said.

Slowly, unhappily, Fergus nodded his head. Peter waited for him to ask the next question.

"How?" Fergus said presently.

"The mist still holds. We will take her out in the boat, to-morrow. No one will see us come or go."

Another long pause, and Fergus nodded again.

"I am sorry for her," said Peter. "But we have no choice."

Slowly, his troubled eyes gazing into the embers, Fergus' great head nodded up and down.



CHAPTER XXIII



NEXT MORNING, THE MIST WAS AS THICK AS EVER, IT might have lasted since the beginning of the world. Had there ever been hills and mountains, and islands across the sea? They were like a memory handed on by ancients to hearers who could but dimly picture them.

Fergus had not much time to consider the mist, for quite early Angusina came to him with a round face of concern.

"Peter is sick," she said. "I cannot get him up from his bed."

Fergus looked at her in astonishment.

"Sick?" he said. "He was well last night. What is the matter with him?"

"I don't know. I cannot get him to rise or to speak to me. If I ask him what is wrong, he cries out."

A minute later, Fergus stood in perplexity at his brother's bedside.

"What ails you?" he repeated: but Peter, lying flat on his back, with the point of his beard jutting into the air, uttered only a faint moan. After several unsuccessful efforts, Fergus left him, and shut the door.

"I cannot think what is wrong," he said, to the now tearful Angusina. "He has his colour. I have not seen him this way before."

Angusina stared up at him, her wet eyes blinking dolefully.

"Will we send a message for the doctor?"

"I will go back, and ask him," said Fergus.

Peter groaned, and twisted on the bed, as the door opened again.

"Will we send a message for the doctor?"

"I don't think so," whispered Peter after a pause.

"You will not get him. It is his day for the Glen."

"We will get him if I send a message in by the postman."

Peter rolled over, turning his back.

"Do as you like," he muttered. "Only leave me alone."

Fergus and Angusina, after a brief consultation, sent the message: and Fergus went about his work in great perplexity of mind. This was the third day of the mist. It might clear, before their task was done.

He worked about restlessly in the yard all the morning. The mist was thicker than ever, but it was beginning to turn white: a sure sign that a break was coming.

At two o'clock, Fergus went in again to see his brother. He found him no easier, but able to speak.

"I am sorry . . ." whispered Peter presently. "To-day, of all days . . . cannot help you . . ."

"Shall I . . . ?"

Fergus paused, heavy with doubt, eyeing the figure on the bed: but Peter turned over, and would not answer.

Then Fergus knew that he must do the task alone. In a way, since it had to be done, he was not sorry.

Mary was in the byre. The mist was thick there

too. It was more confusing than at night time, when one could see nothing. She heard a sound outside, turned round, and saw a figure shadowed in the soft oblong of the doorway.

"Mary?"

Her heart gave a leap.

"Yes?"

"I want you in the boat."

"In the *boat*?"

"Peter is ill."

She stood up, smoothing down her coarse dress.

"Are we going to fish?"

Fergus did not reply. He turned on his heel.

"I think the mist will clear," he said, by way of explanation, over his shoulder.

Her first surprise past, Mary was only too glad to go. She would have followed Fergus with confidence in any weather, even if she had not loved him. Hastily putting down what she was at, and rubbing her hands dry on her hips, she followed him up to the house.

"Get your oilskin," he rumbled, from the passage.

She did not need to be told that. In a minute, she was following him down the slope, her bare feet and legs exulting in the tickle of the dripping grasses.

By the time they were on the sand, Mary's heart had risen, and she began to skip like a child. The change from the dark byre, and from her accustomed work about the house, was in itself enough to liberate her mind. She forgot that she was a woman with the man she loved, and knew only that she was bound for excitement and a ride upon the water.

Fergus shambled along in front of her, a bundle of tackle in his left hand. He seemed morose. Mary's

eyes twinkled, and she made a little mouth at the back of his neck. Mischief entered her. The days of isolation in the house, the eerie, melancholy darkness of the mist, that changed the sea-birds' cries to the wailing of ghosts, had weighed down even her serene, animal spirit. She had been oppressed, with bursts of sharp, fierce misery. Now, for no reason, she was happy. She skipped three or four times, and began to sing softly to herself.

Fergus started, and looked round almost in terror over his shoulder. His mind shot back, with dark clearness, to another afternoon, on Loch nan Uamh, when he had felt this same tension in his breast, and suddenly a voice had started to sing.

Mary stopped. She made another face, as soon as his back was turned again, hugged herself, and almost laughed aloud. They had crossed the first bay, and came to a little rocky point.

Step for step, Fergus went up and across it, as every Macrae had done for a hundred years. The way was worn clear on the rock, and there was a path over the grass.

Another bay, and then the Bay of the Seals. The mist drifted down, thick and chill. Fergus growled to himself. He hated this bay now, especially on a misty day. He was afraid always now of the ghostly fighters. He went across with his eyes obstinately fixed upon the sand, lest he should see anything unseemly.

Suddenly Mary ran forward and caught his arm.

"Look," she cried. "Look there."

"Tchagagh!" Fergus wrenched away his arm with a snarl of terror, and recoiled, drawing it across his

eyes. He set off at a shambling run to the other side. Mary followed him in consternation.

"Why," she cried. "What is the matter?"

"Don't point me out things here," said Fergus with difficulty. "I don't want to see anything."

She ran after him, pulling at his arm.

"But it was only a seal," she said. "Right in close to us, upon the sand. You might have caught it."

"I don't care what it was," grumbled Fergus. He had got across now to the other side, and stopped, breathing hard, showing his teeth. His face looked yellow-grey in the mist. "I do not want to see anything in this bay."

Mary gazed at him in wonder. He scowled. Huffed, she shrugged her shoulders.

"As you like," she said, and turned away, to hide the fact that tears were stinging the back of her eyes.

Fergus shivered, cast a dubious glance backward into the vague milky pit of the bay, and made for his store upon the rocks. Methodically he got out what they would have wanted: and, at the last moment, struck by a memory, he picked up the tiller of the boat. They never used it: once in a year, perhaps. It lived with the other stores, in the Macraes' little cave upon the rocks.

Mary, with deft, curt movements, helped to unmoor the boat. Fergus jumped aboard, and backed her in. Light as a gull, the girl leaped from the rock into the stern, and settled herself.

Fergus, who had rowed every inch of the coast in pitch darkness, was not to be hindered by a mist. He felt his way surely along the channels. They were

uncannily silent. There were no birds upon the rocks. The sea was flat, tame, and gave a strange feeling of being nearer to one than usual. The sound of the rowlocks was startling in the silent channels.

Soon the last soiled ghost of rock had passed them, and they were heading for the open sea. At once the universe contracted. As in those dreams when the ceiling comes down, the foot of the bed draws nearer, till one is in a nutshell of space that presses in on every side, so there was now nothing but a boat creaking woodenly in infinite soft space, lost, alone for ever.

Mary watched Fergus. His head was half turned sideways. He rowed with slow, regular strokes. The oar-pits bubbled up on the still water, and vanished into whiteness, drifting and glimmering like the ghosts of water lilies. Nothing abode, but their own dark, resinous world. She sat back, raising her head, letting the softness that was neither air nor light drift against her face and throat. Early that morning, she had felt sick and depressed. Now her body was her own again. She dipped a hand into the cold water, and let it trail, feeling the light, rippling pull at her wrist. Fergus rowed on and on. He must be making for the haddock grounds, she conjectured lazily, and looked about in the bottom of the boat for worms. Oh well: it didn't matter.

She looked at Fergus again, and realised that she was in the boat alone with him. With Fergus, who had violently loved her. He was taking her far away from everyone else. They were alone, the only man and woman in the world. She looked at him, at his great hands broad upon the oars, one with its dirty

bandage still: at his arms, his shoulders, his beard, his downcast face. A pang twisted in her, so sharp that she almost cried out. Actually, she made some soft murmur, so that Fergus looked up quickly, and saw her great eyes staring into his own. As he looked up, her eyes deepened in colour, like a change of light upon a pool. Unable to face them, he quickly turned his face aside, and began to row like a man possessed.

But Mary was not to be denied. It must be fought out, this clash of wills, this strange obstinacy with which he avoided her. She started forward on one knee, put out her hand, and caught his left hand on the oar.

"Fergus," she said.

He looked away, he bared his teeth, he leaned back, he rowed with all his might, but Mary, now thoroughly roused, seized his hand in both hers and held it. For a few seconds she hung on, driven helplessly backward and forward by the movement of the oar. Then, with a cry of anger, she seized his knuckle in her teeth and bit it hard.

Fergus stopped rowing. Frozen, calm, terrible, he shipped the oars.

"Fergus, listen, Fergus, I love you, you know I love you. Why are you so cruel to me? You leave me alone, you will not speak to me, you will not even look at me. Why are you so sulky and angry? What have I done to you? What have I . . . ?

"Fergus! Why do you look at me like that? . . . Why have you brought me out here?

"Fergus . . . don't look like that . . . Aaaah! . . . Fergus!"

Slowly, softly, from some hidden source, the mist was irradiated. It was impossible at first to tell from where the light was coming. Then a faint warmth gave a clue, and for a minute the sun was seen, a pale, flat disc, drifting wanly in the heavens. It disappeared, but left a change, for now one could tell one sort of mist from another. The mist that was away Northwards began to resolve itself into the vaguest of billowy clouds, and the mist underneath the hidden sun began to look old and dirty, like a cobweb. Stretches of sea appeared, flat, tremulous with uncertain radiance. Overhead, a small way out to sea, appeared a patch of down-fringed, baby blue. Then, in what seemed less than a minute, clouds of the mist, faintly golden, were rolling up from the sea, which appeared in longer and longer levels, innocent, gleaming, lovely. Tender and new, the world was re-born. The sun was out, gaining on the scene, his light still softened in the gentle fading vagueness of the atmosphere. The seaward cloud rolled further and further back, uncovering a wide stretch of shimmering water. The sun, shafting down through the parted curtains, dazzled on the water, paving it with unsteady plaques of gold: and then, coming from nowhere, there was a boat upon it, black against the light. Reaching the plaques, it broke them into leaping fragments: a boat rowed by a solitary man, with bowed back, pulling for the shore.



CHAPTER XXIV



ANGUSINA SPENT A TROUBLED AFTERNOON AND evening. The oppression of the mist had been heavier upon her than upon the others, and there was added to it a sense of impending calamity. The Lowlander, transported to this mysterious region, was more sensitive to its moods than its own children. She could never get used to a landscape and an atmosphere that was not content to remain a background to human activity. These hills and waves not only challenged man's attention: they dominated him, and forced his mood into harmony with their own.

When the mist lifted, filled with a private apprehension she hurried along Mary's path by the headland. The good-natured, frightened creature, who had never yet succeeded in making a friend among these strange people, counted Mary the best friend she had. The promised talks about Glasgow had never really come to pass, for Mary, her own half-hidden suspicions confirmed by Willie, had grown sensitive of her connection with the town. She treated Angusina with a kind of good-humoured reserve, taking very little notice of her. Still, the two worked together often in the kitchen and about the place: and the sympathy born of such companionship had to satisfy the eager, friendly curiosity of Angusina's soul. Mary had never spoken an unkind word to her,

and was more easily understood than the men with whom she had to deal: Peter, of whom she went in secret dread, Fergus, who was to her as much an enigma as the country: whom she feared not as a man, for she could see he was kindly and would not harm her, but as a force of nature like the sea, into whose moods she could never enter. All her thwarted instinct for companionship centred upon Mary: and Mary had of late caused her much anxiety. She suspected the girl's condition: in fact, as far as Angusina ever faced a thought, she was sure of it. She knew something of what had happened about Willie, and the prospect of what Peter would say and do terrified her. Wiser than she realised, she did not for one moment consider that the fact that Peter could cast no stone was likely to make him tolerant or merciful. There was nothing to make him suspect as yet: but, when he did. . . .

Since the coming of the mist, another fear had risen in her mind. Miserable herself, she caught Mary more than once in a moment of misery. Angusina readily understood the stories of people whom the mist sent mad; and now she feared that Mary's own dread of her predicament might combine with this oppression, and make the girl take her own life. She did not express her fear to herself in words. The nearest she would go was to tell herself that Mary might have lost her way in the mist and fallen into the sea. So, a shawl about her shoulders, Angusina waddled along the rough path, shading her eyes at the growing dazzle of light, eyeing in apprehension the rocks and the artless, innocent sea, and returned, shaking her head, and murmuring to herself, a gro-

tesque, incongruous figure, whom not even these surroundings could assimilate.

As afternoon darkened into evening, and there was still no sign of Mary, Angusina's anxiety grew till she could scarcely contain it. Peter was in bed. No use to bother him. The doctor had come, unexpectedly early. He could find nothing much wrong, but recommended keeping the patient in bed, poulticing his stomach, and giving him plenty of warm milk. There remained Fergus. She glanced at him from time to time, wondering whether she dare speak. He seemed sunk in a stupor: deep again in the black mood which fell upon him when he lost his finger.

Angusina looked at him. Her finger nibbled at the corner of the woollen tablecloth. Three or four times she put down her sewing, and took it up again. She made small nervous noises in her throat. At last with a stammer, she broke silence.

"M-Mary," she said.

Fergus did not move. His back went rigid. Then, slowly, he turned round to her a face graven like stone.

"I was w-wondering where Mary would be," babbled Angusina, utterly unnerved by this. "She has not ... I have not seen her ... I mean, I do not know where she is, and s-she has not finished in the byre. I had to . . ."

She broke off, almost weeping, fumbling at her underlip. Fergus looked at her for some seconds without expression, then turned slowly round again.

Angusina rose. Something like resentment glowed in her mild bosom. She felt hardly used.

"I will shut up the houses," she said, to no one in particular, "since she is not here."

"Do not trouble yourself," came Fergus' deep voice from the fire. "I will do it."

She took a step nearer him.

"Where is she, Fergus? Have you seen her?"

He looked at her again, slowly turning in his chair.

"I saw her by the byre, this afternoon," he said, "before I went to the boat."

Angusina looked at him. Then, biting her lip, she went out of the room.

The next morning Peter was still in bed. Fergus went in to see him, but the sight of him seemed to aggravate the invalid's condition. It was impossible for Fergus to speak to him. He turned his face to the wall, and groaned loudly every time Fergus opened his mouth.

The day was fine, and there was much to be done. Fergus took some scones from the dresser, and went off to the boat. His mind was quiet. He had slept well, in an exhaustion of spirit. During the day's work, he hardly thought at all. Even the sight of the tiller, out of its place in the store, awoke no response in his mind.

It was five o'clock by the time he returned. He climbed the slope slowly, as always, with the gait of a man who is indifferent how soon he gets to his goal. Then, some yards short of the cottage, his senses gave a leap, and at once his mind was alert as an animal's. The day's indifference shrivelled like a wisp in a flame, and Fergus was the savage who scents danger. What alarmed him he could not say. Not voices, nothing he saw, but a sudden realisation that the house was not as usual. For a moment he checked,

and his eyes darted from side to side. Then, with no difference of gait that could be seen, he went on.

As he passed the wall, a sharp hiss caught his ear. He looked round, and saw at the little bedroom window Peter's face, contorted in fear and urgency. With a single wide spring, Fergus was at the window.

"They have come. Remember—say nothing. On your obedience as a Macrae—say nothing, *nothing*, not a single word!"

Fergus' eyes narrowed. He nodded, and went on.

The room was full of men. Fergus' face was expressionless. It showed neither fear nor surprise. In the background, Angusina wept audibly, squeezing her hands one against the other.

Before he realised, Fergus heard his voice replying to questions.

"You do not know where she is?"

"No."

"You say you have not seen her since yesterday afternoon?"

"Yesterday afternoon."

"By the byre?"

"In the byre."

"I must tell you that you were seen to go with her to the boat."

Fergus said nothing.

"You took her out with you in the boat. When you came back, she was not with you."

Silence.

"Did anyone see you going to your boat? I mean, did you speak to anyone, who saw you going alone, as you say, who could witness for you?"

"I spoke to no one."

The big man glanced round.

"Yet you were heard talking, in the Bay of the Seals. Was there anyone there?"

For some inexplicable reason, Fergus smiled.

"There was a seal," he said.

"You did not tell the seal, I suppose, that there were things in the bay you did not wish pointed out to you?"

Silence.

"Did you?"

"No," replied Fergus gently, as if to a child. "I did not tell the seal."

"Whom did you tell, then?"

No answer.

"This girl—did she wear shoes, or go barefoot?"

"She went barefoot."

"Do you know that there is a track of bare feet going with the track of a pair of boots on the sand going down to the boat?"

Fergus raised his head.

"No," he said mildly. "I did not know."

"It comes to this, Fergus Macrae. This girl's body has been found. It has marks upon it, but we cannot say if these were caused by the body being washed upon the rocks. The sea has been calm, of course; but there is a possibility, so that we lay no charge to anyone about the marks. We do not know how she came by them. What we do know is that she was last seen and heard alive in your company."

The man kept his eyes on Fergus.

"We know two other things. First, that she was going to have a child. Second, that you were her lover."

Despite himself, Fergus' eyelids fluttered.

"Rest easy," said the man, reading his look. "No one has informed against you. We know that fact from a witness in your behalf."

"A witness in my behalf?" said Fergus slowly.

"From your own brother. He said, 'Oh, but it is impossible that he should do her harm. He was her lover.'"

There was a long silence. Fergus' mind went still and dark, like the inside of a cave. He said no more.

Ten minutes later, he was led away, in the centre of a knot of men. They put him in a cart, and drove him to Fort William.

On that journey something happened to Fergus. For a few miles he sat stunned, unable to make head or tail of anything, seeing on the dark sea of his mind one ugly, grinning reef, pale and ghastly, with white fangs—the ugly reef of treachery and betrayal. Then, suddenly, light broke upon him. For the first time in his life, Fergus thought he understood. Hitherto, his mind had been a mere confusion of impressions, cautions and desires, all unrelated, many of them at war, to be pondered piecemeal. Now he seemed to be lifted high above his life, and able to see the whole scene in order. Here, at last, was the purpose of his life made plain. He was to be a sacrifice for the good name of his family. He was to preserve the fame of the Macraes for generations to come, and by his death to expiate the sin into which he had fallen.

His sin was the sin of desiring Mary's body. Killing her would never be on his conscience. That was not sin; it was a mere breach of the law, that outside power which none of them recognised. All his life

Fergus had been used to breaches of the law. His own father, the best man he ever knew, broke the law three or four times a week. The law and its chief missionaries, the excisemen, were natural enemies. In killing Mary, Fergus had done a difficult but virtuous thing, for which the law would now exact its penalty: but, in the eyes of God, the sin for which he suffered would be the sin of lust. So Fergus believed, with the full force of his being. A Macrae was dying for his race; dying honourably, delivered from the narrow road; following his Captain and his enemy. In his exaltation, he almost laughed aloud.

During his trial, Fergus would not utter a word. He was found guilty, and condemned to death.

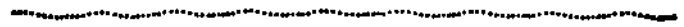
But life had a trick in store for one who read her workings so simply. The public conscience was uneasy about Fergus. There was a doubt, perhaps, somewhere. The man evidently could not understand what was going on about him.

At the last moment, Fergus was reprieved, and his sentence commuted to one of penal servitude for life.

BOOK IV



CHAPTER XXV



THE TRAIN DASHED THROUGH A GORGE, SWUNG OUT above the estuary, clanked across the viaduct, and slid steeply along the curve towards the station. She switched off her steam and emitted instead a thin black smoke. The curve was banked: the tall engines leaned inwards as they hurried to their goal.

"Here you are. Here. This is Morar."

The elderly man with the bundle started apologetically, hesitated, blinked, and with a grateful sound began to clamber backwards out of the train. He seemed to be terrified lest it rush on before he had time to alight. Once on the platform, he stood uncertain, clasping his bundle, shading his eyes with his right hand, and looking about him. The tourists leaned out of the window and watched him. He was very neatly dressed in an old fashioned navy blue suit, buttoned up tight in front, and he wore a navy blue yachting cap. He was coming back to his home, after a long absence. That was all they had been able to get out of him, with his queer, halting English.

Fergus stood on the platform, bewildered, like an animal that cannot get its bearings. Certain sights at once reassured him. There, in front of him, its green wall humped and shadowed, stood the mountain. There, below, dazzling, familiar, the white sands

stretched under the sparkling green of June. Into his lungs blew, with astonishing sweetness, a breath from another life: the breeze from the Islands and the sea. But these familiar, half forgotten things, that staggered the senses with their return, made more perplexing the strange new things that filled the foreground. The crowds, the oddly dressed people, the women: the garish platform, the houses: how would he ever get past them?

A man in uniform was asking him something. After two attempts, he tried Gaelic, and Fergus at once fumbled in his waistcoat pocket for his ticket.

"How do I get down to the road?"

The porter looked at him as if he were daft.

"There. Straight down."

"Thank you. I am strange here. It is a long time . . ."

"Where do you want to go?"

Fergus was just on the point of saying "Macrae's," when he thought better of it.

"Tougal," he said.

The porter directed him.

"And at this tide, you'll make the stepping stones," he said.

Fergus nodded.

"Aye," he said. "I remember them."

Grasping his bundle, he hurried past the station and the buildings, past a motor-car, and was away upon the road. He knew the road. It had been remade and widened, but he knew where he was. There was a new bridge below the falls: of the old one only the piers remained: but he knew where he was. The stepping stones had been neglected: they had been

allowed to sink too deep into the ooze: but he knew where he was.

It seemed to Fergus, as he walked the road, as he smelt bog-myrtle and clover, as he saw once more sea-pinks and stonecrop, as he heard again the crying of the gulls and saw them wheeling high in the still, shining air: as a host of impressions rushed into him through every sense, astonishing him with the realisation of all he had forgotten to remember, making a thousand times more real the land upon which he had brooded in far off darkness: it seemed to him, not that he was coming back to what he remembered, but that a son was coming back to the land his father remembered: that all those long past happenings belonged to the life of another person. And then, for moments at a time, the long dark corridor of years contracted. It was but an archway leading from one day of light to another: and he could hardly believe he had been away at all.

As he approached the turn to the cottage, Fergus' soul felt faint. He sat for a while by the roadside, resting himself, and letting the storm of feelings calm. He did not know what they were: they leaped and jostled in him like broken water. Then he knew that he was tired. He would go home, and sleep.

He got up, and shambled down the hill.

The gate was the same as ever, but a stout new gatepost had been stuck in. There was a girl playing in the long grass, who looked at him curiously. She wore a neat print dress. He could not see what she was playing with: then he caught a glimpse of the excited hindquarters of a puppy. A likeness in her face held his eyes. She would be one of his nieces,

maybe. He smiled at her. She smiled doubtfully back, and turned her attention quickly to the puppy.

The gate of the house was the same. And the hedge of fuchsias. A dog rushed out and barked. Fergus spoke, and he began to wag his tail, still barking.

A woman came to the door, to see who it was. She was fat and shapeless, but her face had hardly a line to mark the years. He recognised her at once.

"Angusina."

"Fergus!"

She glanced fearfully round into the house, then smiled at Fergus. The smile dropped from her face: then came again, pitiful, conciliatory. Fergus made to step past her across the threshold. He was weary and wanted to lay his bundle down.

Suddenly another figure appeared, and pushed Angusina aside. Peter's beard and moustache were white. He had a high colour, and he had put on weight, but Fergus would have known him in a second.

"Peter!"

Peter looked round quickly, as if he was afraid someone had heard.

"Fergus," he said cautiously. Then, with manifest irritation, "What brings you here?"

Fergus smiled.

"They let me out," he said. "I did not understand it. I did not think I would ever be set free. I do not know. . . ."

Peter was looking at him, his mouth open, his face growing redder. Fergus made to pass him.

"Let me inside, Peter," he said. "I am very tired."

He lurched by, but, to his amazement, Peter caught his arm.

"Do you not know you cannot come here?" he said, in a low voice. "You, straight from the gaol?"

Fergus stood very still. He stared at Peter.

"You cannot come here," said Peter, speaking hurriedly, almost apologetically. "I — People think differently of these things now. It is a disgrace to have been . . . to have done . . . We have a fine position here now, a fine name. . . . I fish for the big families that come up for the summer. What would they say if they knew I was keeping a gaolbird in my house. Besides, there are the children. Some are grown up, in places here. One is in Glasgow, one in London."

"I see," said Fergus quietly.

Peter again caught his arm, to follow up his advantage.

"Would you have people pointing at them?"

Fergus felt suddenly very old. Bitterness rose in his soul.

"If that is so, have they not been disgraced all their lives?" he said. "If people know who I am, and what I did; if that is a disgrace; does it matter where I live?"

"It matters if I seem to condone what you did," replied Peter.

Fergus looked at him, and Peter could not bear the look.

"I forgot," said Fergus softly, with an indescribable smile. "You were ill, brother, were you not?"

He shouldered his bundle, and turned round. Peter followed him to the gate.

"We have not room for you, in any case," he said, almost pleadingly. "The girl has your room. There is no bed."

Angusina, weeping, followed a little distance behind. Fergus touched his cap to her.

"Good-bye, Angusina," he said.

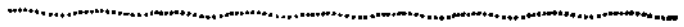
Peter still followed.

"You see my trouble, don't you?" he kept saying. Then he would stop, and scowl nervously round, for fear someone was looking. "I could not. The family name . . ."

"It is hard to keep up, is it not, brother," said Fergus over his shoulder.



CHAPTER XXVI



So, IN MEANNESS AND TREACHERY, WAS DEFEATED Fergus' attempt to go back to his first life. The gap, the years he had spent away, could not be called a life. They were darkness. The sun did not shine upon those years, the rain did not fall upon them, the fresh wind did not purify them. They had done nothing to Fergus' soul: it had slept. They were a gap, a nothingness.

Turned away from his brother's door, Fergus went back as far as Tougall, and begged a night's shelter. One of the cottages had a room to let, a bare place, built against an outer wall, damp, half ruinous. Fergus took it, and here for nearly sixteen years was his home. It had no furniture but the box in which he kept his Sunday clothes, and the pile of rags that was his bed.

A living he made easily, from the first. It chanced that the laird required a fisherman whose services he could let in summer with the house that had once been Aeneas': and a word from the priest got Fergus the job. Fergus managed a long-line for the house, took the tenants fishing on the sea and on the loch, tended the donkey engine, cleaned the boots, and brought buckets of water from the spring. Gradually, as he found himself practising the craft, memories of **that other** Fergus came back to him. His stiff mind

thawed, and a lore that had had no equal stirred and throve again. Hole and rock, channel and lochan—in a sort of haze Fergus felt his way about them, as if a mist were lifting, knowing somehow that here was a stone which was a good place for a lobster (had he dreamed it? He seemed to know the way), and that by these bearings, taken subconsciously, it was propitious to set his line: not *remembering*, but seeing as with a telescope that other island, his first life, sunlit, far away, over the dark waters.

In the winter, there were jobs to be had too. His knowledge of building, particularly of plumbing, gained from the building of the house where he now served, proved valuable to him. The priest, too, was his friend: not Father Roche, who had gone the way of all angry red-faced men, but a new young priest, who knew his story. Yet even the young priest could not keep Fergus from the one fault that now settled on him: the fault of despair, and the way of solace that Aeneas had taught him. Fergus drank; not steadily, but in bouts. He drank first in his despair, but soon because he found that in drink he could miraculously cross the gap and go back in dream to that first life which looked so fair: the life when he was a man, and carried his head high: the life when he was strong, and had good company. He was strong still. He could take a heavy boat down the sands at low tide and float her single-handed: but his strength gave him no joy. It was but the means of easing his servitude. He was a drudge now, treated kindly, yes, kindly enough, but as a servant, not as a man.

The tenants varied. Sometimes they were purse-

proud, and he despised them. Sometimes they were friendly, and had boys and girls eager to learn the lore of the boat. Fergus received their friendliness, and earned their respect: but nothing could really penetrate the apathy which lay over his heart. They made friends with him, they treated him kindly, they gave him money, and wrung his hand at parting. The surface of his heart warmed to them: he stood, waving his hand, as the big cars bore them Southwards in September: then turned off dully, without emotion, to the long winter sleep, the odd jobs, and the grey torpor lit only by flaming nights of drink, that left him more unhappy than before. The one feeling of hope and emotion that rose in him, and it was faint, relief rather than hope, was the coming of the summer months, that took him again on the sea. For Fergus had no boat. But for his job at the house, his knowledge must have rotted in his head.

For fifteen years the iron constitution of Fergus withstood a damp and leaky hovel, irregular meals, often no meals at all, hard work, a total lack of care, and occasional poisonous doses of whisky. After twelve years of it, his stomach began to trouble him. He had pains after his food. Fergus could not understand that to eat regular meals at the house one day, then to go fishing, miss his midday meal, have a large meal at six, and the next day do something different again, was bad for a weakened digestion. For the whole of one summer he suspected that the tenants' cook, whom he disliked, was endeavouring to poison him. At last he consulted a doctor, who promptly gave him a mixture which relieved his

pains. He dismissed the suspicion, but kept a watchful eye upon the cook till her departure.

The pains recurred. Gradually, as the time went on, they became more violent. The doctor's mixture would no longer cure them. There was only one cure—whisky. Actually, it aggravated the disease, but it produced a marvellous temporary relief. Fergus drank more of it: not in debauches now, for he was ashamed to fail his employment at the house: but in small, regular nips. There was a young doctor among the party of the tenants. He had been there before, and was a friend of Fergus. He lectured Fergus about his food, found out that in winter he lived from hand to mouth, went to see a niece of Fergus who lived at Tougal, and arranged that regular supplies should be sent to her for him, throughout the winter. The girl's heart had often ached for her uncle, but she had been afraid, both of him and because of her people at home. She took on the task readily. For a winter, by aid of her ministrations, Fergus kept the enemy at bay: but he had a terrible drinking bout in March, and she was in despair.

Fergus lasted out that summer. He was seized with agonising pains in the boat; it took all his courage to work the oars that had suddenly become so heavy. He would not give in. His summer employment was now all he had, the one hold upon his self respect. He lasted out the summer. Then, in October, he collapsed. The local doctor ordered him away to Glasgow for an examination.

The young priest took Fergus down. Time and time again Fergus had tried to repulse this smiling young man, who took such an interest in him, who

remained his friend, unruffled. He had tried to repulse him because, in the dark winters, he had wished to become as he felt, only an animal, lurking in its cave, fearful and suspicious of human kind. But the priest had a way of instantly touching the gentleness in him. He would come to him, after a bout, walk cheerfully into the hovel, sit on the floor, refuse to notice Fergus' condition, refuse to see rebuffs, refuse to lecture him or speak of anything but everyday, local things—and Fergus, with a groan of the spirit, would feel the hard ground thaw, and suffer his soul to be broken up into friendliness and gentleness, once again.

"That man," cried Fergus to himself aloud, with the fervour of discovery, "that man is a man of God."

For a few minutes, gazing at the jagged triangle of stars that showed through the hole in his roof, Fergus had a vision of a gentler God, the God not of Father Roche, bellowing anger on the world, His veins swelling in the thundercloud and bursting in the apoplexy of the hurricane, but a kindly, reasonable God, Who preferred things to go smoothly, Who disliked wrongdoing, rather than gloated over it in ecstasies of rage and punishment. Then the God of wrath pushed the reasonable God aside, and smote him, Fergus, in the stomach. He huddled his rags closer, and groaned.

When he lay ill, under sentence to go to Glasgow, it seemed only natural that Father Lenahan should come to the door, smiling, with two tickets, and a little two-seater car.

Father Lenahan sat on the floor, while Fergus,

feeling better for the sight of him, dressed himself shakily in his Sunday best.

"We'll have a rare jaunt, while we're at it," said the young priest. "I hear tell these restaurant cars are a great thing."

Fergus smiled. If he had to go, he was glad to go now. It was a clear morning. The bracken was rusted on the hills. The sands of the estuary were pure white in the morning air. Smoke rose straight from a cottage on the far side. The noise of the falls came clear in the stillness.

"Father," said Fergus, after they had started. "Tell me one thing. Have you heard anything about my illness that I have not heard?"

"I don't think so," said the priest, leaning forward to change his gears on the hill. "I don't think so, Fergus. I know they're going to have a look at your inside with the X-rays, to see just what it is that's bothering you."

"Will I come back, Father?"

"Sure, why on earth not?" They ran up the steep little hill, and faced the uneven wall of the mountain: then dipped between the trees. "I haven't heard that you are mortally ill, if that's what you mean," said the priest. "I'd say to yourself, if I were you—and it's the truth, mind you—I'd say to yourself that you've stood whatever is wrong all this time without proper attention, and that now you're going to have the best attention in the world. The King himself could have no better. To stay on here, as you are, now, that *would* be foolish. You're doing the wise thing."

The priest's words, and the rush of air on his face,

revived Fergus. He looked about him, smelling the sweet scents of October morning.

"I'd like to die here," he said wistfully.

"So would I," said the priest, "though it's not my home": and he proceeded to tell Fergus all about his home, so that they were at Mallaig in no time.

The restaurant car was as wonderful as could be hoped. Father Lenahan found on the menu several things Fergus might eat.

"Now," he said. "A drink?"

Fergus' eyes twinkled. A young man looked out of them at Father Lenahan.

"Please, Father," he said; and ordered a double whisky.

"Well," smiled the priest. "Make the best of it, now, for it's the last you'll get for a while."

The hospital was huge and terrifying. Fergus could not sleep. There was no air. There were smells. He had to fight with himself, not to leap choking out of the high, queer bed, rush to the window, break it, and draw in great gulps of air. But he got used to the atmosphere of the ward: to the nurses, to everything. In a dull twilight of mind, he set himself to accept whatever happened: and remained torpid for over a week, till he woke one morning after a sound sleep, and realised that he felt much better.

From that morning, everything changed. The undifferentiated shapes took life and became separate people, kindly, encouraging. The doctor joked with him. The nurses smiled. One of them fluffed up the edge of his beard and called him "Daddy."

"You were so unkind," they said. "You wouldn't take any notice of us, or speak a word."

"I don't remember," said Fergus, with simple truth.

Soon he was almost enjoying himself. There was an islander in the next bed, a fisherman like himself, with whom he held long talks. The young doctor who had been at Aeneas' house had written letters to the hospital about him, it seemed: so had one or two others. He became an object of interest and importance in the eyes of the hospital authorities. And, best of all, he grew steadily better. The ulcer improved without an operation. In his fourth week, he was allowed to get up, and to help the nurses with the food, taking it round from bed to bed, grave as a judge, administering to each patient his due proportion.

In six weeks, Fergus was a kind of pet for all the ward nurses: a sort of performing bear. All the simplicity and goodness in his nature came uppermost, combining with his weakness to make him like a child. The nurses would bring him back little presents from their evenings out. He got quite a collection of teddy bears and miscellaneous objects round his bed. When Father Lenahan came down to visit him, he laughed heartily; and Fergus laughed too.

Fergus came out of hospital in March. He was not altogether cured, but he was well enough to go home. A diet chart had been sent to Father Lenahan for him, and he was told, in the surest, most explicit terms, that whisky would mean death. Fergus nodded his head, thanked them all, made the round of the ward, shaking hands with every patient, with all the nurses—several of them kissed him good-bye and he kissed them back, gravely—and went his way. His

Sunday suit was much too big for him. He could not think, at first, what had happened to it.

One of his first acts, when the train got well away from Glasgow into the country, was to drop out of the window the parcel which contained all the teddy bears and keepsakes.

Arriving back, he was astonished to be met by Father Lenahan, and taken to the priest's house. He protested, but in vain.

"You're never going back to that place again," he was told. "You couldn't live there. You have to take care of yourself now. Besides, it's pulled down."

The priest's jaw set humorously. He did not tell Fergus of the interview he had had with the landlord.

"Where am I going, then?" asked Fergus.

"You are going where you belong. Back to your father's house."

"My father's house? But I cannot. Peter will not have me."

"Won't he," said Father Lenahan grimly. "I think you'll find he will. I've been to see him once: and I don't think another visit will be necessary."

It was not. Peter had been overwhelmed by the young priest's flow of words. Quietly, without passion, but with the lash of an infinite contempt, Father Lenahan had told Peter what he thought of him. When Peter, relying on his age, summoned up a show of dignity and anger, the priest went further. It was bluff, but Peter did not know it. Though he had heard stories from the elders of the village, the priest was only guessing at the true history of Fergus' crime; but the blank terror that crawled in

Peter's face confirmed him. His heart sang, and he assailed the quivering white beard with opprobrious words.

"He shall come and live with you," he said pitilessly, "or the congregation shall know the man they have been respecting a quarter of a century too long. What is more, if, when he comes, you use him unkindly, or otherwise than as your brother, I will blazon your iniquities from the altar, and all shall shun you."

Peter's wet lips babbled. He shot a glance of hate at the priest.

"This is blackmail," he said.

The priest smiled.

"So is the wrath of God," he said. "God levies blackmail on the souls of men. If they will not yield to love (as you will not) He threatens them, so that they yield to fear. Such is the wickedness of mankind that most of them, like you, yield only to fear."

"You have a ready tongue," sneered Peter.

"You are an insolent blackguard," retorted the priest. "Because I am a young man, you bandy answers with me. On your knees, you dog," he shouted suddenly, gripping Peter by the collar. "Acknowledge the authority of your priest, or, by God, I'll thrash you till you do." •

Terrified, cringing, looking sideways, Peter got down on his knees.

"I don't love your brother, Fergus," said Father Lenahan afterwards. "He brings out the bully in me. I hate people who only answer to a shout."

"Aye," said Fergus thoughtfully. "Cowards."

The priest turned a curious glance upon him.

"That's true," he said. "But I wouldn't have expected a brave man like you to know it."

"Oh," said Fergus, "I know it. Cowards are noisy, yet noise always deceives them."

Two days later, he went back to live with Peter. Angusina and the daughter she kept at home—she whom Fergus had seen in the field—looked after him well. Peter did not conceal his hatred, but he dared not express it. The two worked together, but never walked together: and the titular distance by which Peter walked ahead was now increased to a quarter of a mile, or even more.

So came the evening of the first chapter in this story, when Peter and Fergus mended the boat together in the Bay of the Seals, and a gleam of the yellow sunset, shooting away inland, touching summits and high places, made an image whereby their history could be conveyed.

But this is not the end. For one moment only Fergus crossed the gap, and returned to his first life.



CHAPTER XXVII



THERE WAS NO REASON OBVIOUS TO THOSE OF THE local moralists who knew his story why Peter's next visit to the village should have been his last. They could see no relevance in his end. He was cut off in no spectacular sin, and by an instrument which had nothing at all to do with the circumstances of his life. Why on that day of all others his life should end, when it might so well have ended earlier, was a problem beyond their powers. On one particular, however, they fastened greedily. Peter for sheer envy would not let Fergus walk close behind him; and, but for the space between them, his life might have been saved. Of this they made the most. Father Lenahan, who though a young man had long since given up trying to understand the occurrences of the physical world, sought no appropriateness in Peter's end. God moved in a mysterious way: and a black bull who had never yet hurt anyone was neither more nor less mysterious than anything else.

The bull, in accordance with local custom, was put out to graze in a rough enclosure beside the road. Bulls of his breed are seldom dangerous till they reach their third year, and the people, with easy fatalism, wait till they discover ferocity before getting rid of them. At the very first sign of temper, the reigning bull is sent away, and a younger rises in his

stead. The bull in question had shown no tendency to assert himself, though he was close on three years old. He had once jumped the low railing of his enclosure in pursuit of an attractive cow: but this was not held to constitute vice, so he was left where he was.

The day had been hot and thundery. All the air seemed to gather in the pit between the mountain and the sea, and die there. The sky towered with clouds. The sun, breaking uneasily through them here and there, cast dark, shapeless shadows, and, whenever the clearing gave him scope, magnificently illuminated the big clouds away Eastward. One, a mass of solid, piling cumulus, reared up tangible and rounded as a great orange cauliflower: while, through the gaps overhead, far up above the lowering shadows, appeared lofty battlements, white, softly gleaming, curled in upon themselves as if in a heavenly dream. On the hills, all was near, black, and vivid. So bright was the surface of the road, that it seemed to rise in the air above the peat and moorland. The sands of the estuary hurt one's eyes with their fierce, uneasy whiteness.

The bull, restless, swishing his tail, felt a dull resentment he had never known before. The flies were maddening. They buzzed about his head in a cloud, and the fierce horse-flies were insatiable. Again and again they found out the softest parts of his anatomy, and stung him savagely. Everywhere he went, they followed him. He could not lie down in peace. Low moos came from him, sounds of complaint rather than anger: he walked slowly along, dissatisfied, his feet squelching deep in the soft black ooze. It was

not yet time for him to be taken in for the night: but, impelled by his discomfort to seek human aid, he made his way slowly down to the gate from which he was fetched every evening.

The flies were even worse at the gate than they had been higher up. The ground all round it was trodden into a deep soggy mess where he and his cows stood waiting of an evening. The hoofmarks were filled with foul iridescent water, from which the flies rose hissing. New clouds fastened on him. Dogged, stubborn, the bull stood, his head forward, swishing his tail, twitching his ears, a picture of dull endurance. He had no horns. His forehead was broad and curly, his eye dark: his forequarters were magnificent, and he tapered off to haunches that were light, but broad across the saddle, and neat, strong hind legs. He was a handsome fellow, willing enough, hitherto, to do anybody's bidding; fond of the farmer, his master; running obediently before the small boy who clapped him on the haunch and turned him shrilly from one pasture to another; roused only to a vague hostility by the voice of the bull from the next farm, which came to him sometimes, in tenor challenge, on the South wind.

A particularly vicious onslaught on his ears made him lower his head and toss it impatiently. He rolled a weary eye down the road. Would no one ever come and relieve him? Then a horse-fly, getting cunningly in, stung him under the tail. The bull started forward. He swung his head round, and a low menacing sound came from his throat. Three times more the fly stung him, before he could get rid of it: and the multitude, dislodged by his violent antics, sank down

on him at once again, so that he could hardly see at all. The bull made a curious, high sound, almost a whimper. He was frightened. This persecution was not to be endured any longer.

Tossing his head, he squelched off to a piece of firm ground on the right of the gate. He had to wrench each foot out of the foolish, sucking mud. The railing was low: it came up only to his chest. Tucking his legs up nimbly as a cat, with an agility unbelievable in so heavy a creature the bull leaped the fence, and started off down the road towards the farm. He longed, as never before, for the friendly deep voice of the farmer, the swish of bracken that would beat away the swarm from round his eyes, and the rough coatsleeve that would rub the side of his cheek.

Ah! Here was a human being, coming along the road towards him. Here was deliverance from his tormentors. The human being was not anyone he knew, but it would do. With a rumble of pleasure, the bull quickened his pace, and trotted towards the man.

But the man hesitated, and drew in to the side of the road. He waved his arms. He called out something unwelcoming. His voice was high and angry. The bull stopped, lifted his head very high, stared, and came on more slowly. The man spoke again, in a fierce voice. He stamped, and shooed him off with both his arms. Then, as the puzzled bull was just stopping again, the man picked up a stone, and flung it.

This was a sign the bull well understood. Frightened, he swung half round, snorted, and prepared

to run. Not content, however, the man picked up another stone. By accident or design, his aim was good. The stone struck the bull sharply on the nose.

The surprise and the sudden pain made the bull roar aloud. He lowered his head and shook it, to escape the pain. Then a queer thing happened. Instead of advancing further, and putting him to head-long flight, the man turned, and began himself to run away.

When the bull saw that, something changed inside him. All his discontent, his irritation, his sense of ill-usage, the heat, the flies, the blow of the stone, were suddenly all concentrated in that figure that ran so stiffly and curiously down the road. A wild desire to avenge himself rose up in the bull. His head suddenly lusted for that fleeing back. All at once, and for the first time in his life, a pride of rage boiled in his veins. With an earth-shaking bellow, he put down his head, and thundered down the road after the fugitive.

The low railing ran on both sides of the road, and, fifty yards ahead, on the opposite side from the pasture, was a thick wood of pine trees. The man made for the trees: realised, too late, that he could not reach them: and started unavailingly to climb the fence.

The bull's first blow glanced off him. It knocked him into the wires of the fence, which gave, and he fell off on to the low wall, and off that into the road, underneath the bull. For some seconds the bull lost him, and stood staring down the road, with lowered head and switching tail, wondering where on earth his victim had gone. Then something brushed against

his hind leg. The man had crawled out under his legs, risen shakily to his feet, and began to totter off in the opposite direction, holding one hand against his side.

Wheeling, the bull saw him, a bare five yards off. With a wrathful bellow he charged. The blow of his broad head sent his victim rolling over and over. He fell on his back, and lay spreadeagled, his white beard pointing up at the sky. Then, with slow, vicious satisfaction, the bull advanced and kneeled on his chest. As the great bulk crushed down, one of the man's hands clawed frantically at the air; he made a gargling outcry, and his beard jerked up and down. A thrill of appeasement went through the bull, as he felt the thin figure beneath him crack and give and grow soft.

When Fergus came along, five minutes later, the bull was browsing peacefully by the roadside beside Peter's body, and he drove it away without difficulty.

Peter was dead. Fergus did not need to go near him to realise that. While he stood, his mind a blank, an approaching car, hidden round the bend, sounded its horn. Peter's body lay near the corner. In horror Fergus shambled forward, holding up his hand.

The car stopped. A man and a woman got out. The man eyed what lay in the road. The woman gave it one quick glance, made a grimace, and looked away. Two boys, in the back of the car, stood up, peering with fascinated white faces.

As the man was coming forward, with every evidence of distaste, to help Fergus move the body to the side of the road, a second car pulled up abruptly behind the first. Its occupants, two young men, were less squeamish. Inside a minute, Peter was laid on

the grass under the fence, and covered with a tarpaulin. The first car went on, its occupants white and sick. One of the two young men drove after it, to take word to the farm. The other offered to stay by the body, while Fergus went on to tell Angusina.

An hour later, Peter was carried home. A cart brought him as far as it could go, and two men, with sheet and hurdle, brought him the rest. His body could not be laid out properly, nor was it fit for Angusina or his daughter to see. With an access of decision, Fergus bade them lay it in the byre.

Angusina had collapsed. The girl was with her. Fergus went vaguely to the door, and stood there.

The girl came out, shutting the door behind her.

"It is no use," she said. "I must stay with her. Perhaps she will get off to sleep soon."

"There is nothing I can do?"

"Nothing." She hesitated, biting her lip. "I do not like to think of him lying out there in the byre," she said, looking at Fergus with troubled eyes. "May I not . . ."

"Do not go there, my dear," said Fergus, using an endearment to her for the only time. "Trust me, it is not good for you to go. You will distress yourself for nothing. Think of your father as he was when you saw him last."

She looked at him, horror slowly dawning in her eyes.

"Yes," said Fergus, looking into them. "To-morrow he will be in the coffin. Do not go. I forbid it."

"Very well."

"You promise?"

"Yes, Uncle Fergus."

"That is a good girl."

Abruptly, he turned away from her, and went out of the house. Unconsciously, he made his way along the path to the headland. When he had gone only a few yards, he stopped, and stood still. With blank staring faces, mountain, sky and sea forced down upon him the terrible truth. This was the end.

Peter was dead. Peter had not been good to him. He had been base, treacherous, mean. He had hidden behind him, made him his catspaw, made him the scapegoat for his crimes. He had betrayed him, and turned him from his door. He would not suffer him to walk the same yard of earth with him. But, for all this, Peter had been his leader. Peter, appointed by his father, had told him what to do. Peter had been the brains of the family. Now upon him, Fergus, an old, broken shell of a man, no man at all—a wandering ghost of a man, banished even from himself, from the real self of early years—a prisoner, a sick man, a man with no heart nor appetite of life in him—on him fell now the care and management of this family, half of whom he had never seen, the rearing up of the young girl whom, any time now, a man might seek after and desire. . . . Oh, no. It could not be so. Peter was a traitor, but Peter could guide him. All his days, Fergus had carried out orders. Now there was none to give them.

He took a few steps along the path, and suddenly his stomach hurt him. There it was,—the old, gnawing grip that drew his body into a ball, that sucked the strength from his limbs and the courage from his heart: and at the feel of it, the last depression settled on Fergus' soul. If it was to be that, too . . .

A wind had risen. It blew off shore, making the sea avert itself from the land. Further down the coast, it was blowing harder, for the heavy clouds were streaming out to sea. Rhum smoked like a bonfire.

An hour later, he climbed the hill into the village. For the first time since he went to Glasgow, his feet shuffled on the iron scraper outside the inn door. He hesitated, pushed it open, and went in.

The noise of voices was hushed at the sight of him. He spoke a shy, confused greeting here and there. They had been telling of Peter's death, and hesitated to speak to him. He found a table in the corner, where he could sit alone.

The first furious sting of the raw spirit took his breath away. He gulped down a second measure, and a third. A glow spread in the centre of his body. Slowly, like a flower, it unfolded, and blossomed, hiding the pain away beneath its petals. Lulled into content, Fergus brooded. He had come now to this, that happiness was only to lack pain.

Slowly, one by one, the thoughts left his mind. He sank into a haze, conscious only of warmth and a sound of voices, steady and soothing as the breakers on a beach. For a time he slept. Then he woke, to find the glow of warmth changed into a hideous starfish of pain, that sent long agonising tentacles into his vitals. Sheer fright took hold of him. He had never felt it as bad as this before.

Tremblingly, he ordered more drink.

"Here," he said, "put the bottle beside me. Then I won't have to be calling you. I have the money," he added, pulling it out.

Two stiff pegs, and the starfish changed slowly to the flower. Blessed, warm drowsiness settled again over Fergus. He began to dream. Vague landscapes glimmered before his eyes. Strangers performed elaborate actions upon unknown beaches. Just when he feared they would fight, they changed into a flock of glossy seals. He took boat to an island, landed on its shores, and lobsters came and stood at the edge of every rock, like old men at their cottage doors. Fergus went through a hundred years of such adventures. Every now and then, half consciously, he took a peg, to keep the flower from changing into the starfish. The visions faded, and he lived for a whole spring in shimmering mist, through which came light and warmth, so that one did not mind its dimness.

Suddenly the mist cleared, and Fergus gazed with alert eyes on a vivid scene. Upon the road from the village, which had become the monstrous skyline of the world, the figure of Peter marched on to glory. He cast a long capering shadow, and went lit by great sunbeams of solid gold. He went on, leaning this way and that, staggering into glory. Fergus looked aside at the mountain. Its great wall was hung with shadows, as with curtains, soft as the bloom upon a grape, deeper blue than the sky at nightfall. Against it flew milk-white birds, calling musically to one another. Their cries blended and swelled: and then, faint across the gap of years, Fergus heard the music of a concertina. Yes! there it was, clear, swelling to the old tune. In his vision Fergus cried aloud with happiness and wonder, for the gap of years was dwindling. Swiftly, swiftly, he

was crossing the dark strait to the island **of** that first **life**. Clear, sunlit, it rushed to meet him.

*I thought I heard the old man say,
Good-bye, fare ye well,
Good-bye, fare ye well.
I thought I heard the old man say,
Hooray, my boys, we're homeward bound.*

Oh, yes, yes, but where was Aeneas? Aeneas was dead these thirty years. Trouble and darkness descended again upon Fergus. The picture changed. He saw still, dark waters, and a secret sky. He did not recognise what he looked upon, but for some reason he peered into it earnestly, striving to understand why it came before him. Then he uttered a cry, and started forward, for there appeared clearly, as in a picture, the face of Mary. With amazement, he looked upon her, for she was so clear, he could see her freckles, the strands of her hair, the curled lashes of her eyes. The eyes looked upon him without fear, but with a sad understanding, and then it seemed to Fergus that she smiled at him. He half rose: but something stopped him, and the picture clicked out of sight.

The bump against the table shook Fergus from his dream, and for a couple of minutes he sat, rocking to and fro. The starfish of pain, dull, but with a wide hold, was beginning to grip his stomach again. Focusing all his consciousness, Fergus managed to raise the bottle to his lips, and pour down what remained.

Darkness came down upon him, with silver flowers of fire. They bloomed meaninglessly before him and **around** his eyes, shooting up, popping like seaweed

in the sun. The likeness to seaweed caught his mind, and in an instant it was careering along the seacoast at a dizzy rate, a few feet above the rocks, as if it now inhabited a gull. Fergus tried to close his eyes from the rush of water and gleaming sand. It hurt them. Darkness came down again, and he sank into insensibility.

Then, for a moment, Fergus returned to his first life. It was a perfect evening: the West was full of glory. He was walking over green grass to the sand-hills above the Bay of the Seals. As he topped them, he saw below him a large boat, the boat of the Rowing, waiting to put out to sea. In it sat his father, and Angus, and Willie McFarish. Aeneas was in the stern. They turned and waved to him, their faces radiant with kindness, beckoning, calling him to come with them.

Fergus raised his hand, and gave a glad shout. At last! He was back again.

"Wait for me," he called: and ran down the sand-hills to join them.



A NOTE ON THE TYPE
IN WHICH THIS BOOK
..... IS SET

*This book is set on
the Monotype in a face called Scotch. There is a
divergence of opinion regarding the origin of this
face, some authorities holding that it was first
cut by Alexander Wilson & Son of Glasgow
in 1833. Whatever its origin, it is certain
that the type was widely used in Scotland
where it was called Modern Roman, and
since its introduction into America has
..... been known as Scotch.*

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