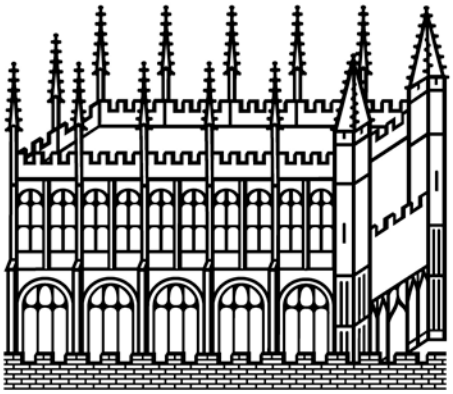

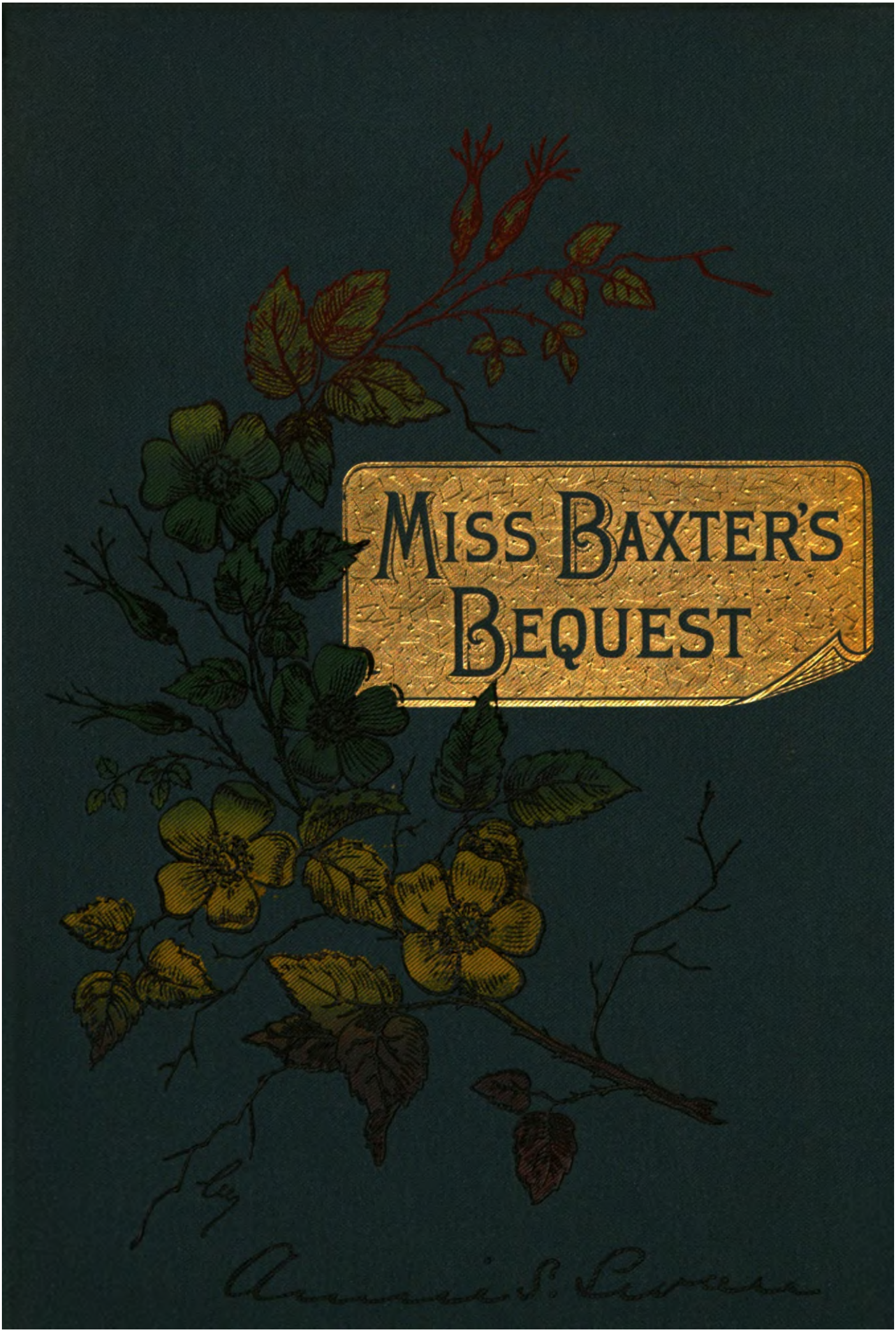
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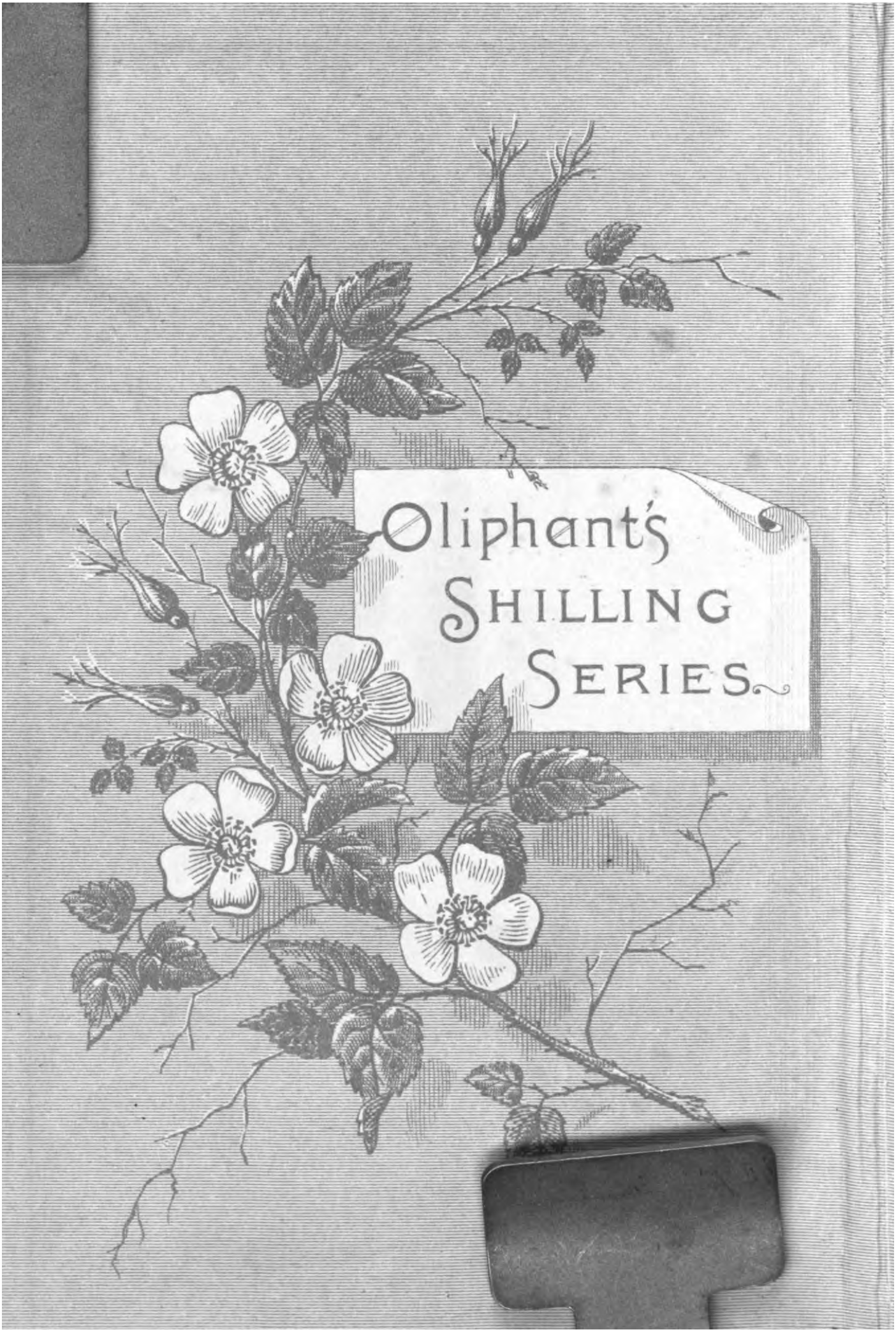
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MISS BAXTER'S BEQUEST.

BY

ANNIE S. SWAN,

AUTHOR OF "ALDERSYDE;" "A DIVIDED HOUSE;"
"THOMAS DRYBURGH'S DREAM; ETC. ETC.

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MISS BAXTER'S BEQUEST.

CHAPTER I.

THE INVITATION.

THE first time Miss Baxter's name fell upon my ears was when I was a young woman, at home in my father's manse of Ardstruan. Although that is nearly half-a-century ago, I remember that winter afternoon as well as if it had been but yesterday. We were alone in the dining-room of the manse, my mother, my sister Lindsay, and I, who was anxiously examining an old silk cloak which had pertained to our maternal grandmother, whose wardrobe had lately become the property of us two Hepburn girls.

"Our grandmother Forbes must have been of a very saving turn of mind, mother," said I; "for all her clothes are threadbare to the last degree."

"And what was your inventive brain thinking to make out of grandmother's mantle?" asked mother, looking up from her knitting with a smile.

"I was wondering, mother, whether I could not make a new quilted cloak for you out of it," said I soberly. "I saw Aunt Forbes with one the last time I was at Glenbuich, and I have coveted one for you ever since."

"Oh, Magdalen, you absurd creature, how could you ever make a new cloak out of an antiquated thing like that!" exclaimed Lindsay, with a look of merriment on her winsome face.

"It might have been done if the front width had not been so worn, and the seams so frayed, and—but, there, it is no use to talk," said I, and folded up the old cloak with a sigh. "You 'll just need to wear the old Forbes plaid another winter, mother dear."

"My bairn, I am well off to have a good, warm plaid," said mother, in her contented way, and then she stirred the fire into a ruddy blaze, such as we loved in these raw and cheerless November afternoons.

Lindsay threw herself on the rug at mother's feet, while I walked to the window and stood looking out meditatively on the wintry landscape. Between the manse and the village of Ardstruan there was a wide stretch of dreary moorland; it looked especially dreary that day, for there was no brightness in the sky, and some big snowflakes, precursors of a feeding storm, were floating in the still and heavy air. I was in a very sober frame of mind that day, for household cares were weighing a little on my mind. My mother

had suffered a long and severe illness a few years before, when the management of the house had devolved upon me, and I had been housekeeper ever since. The post was no sinecure, for I was hard put to it to make father's small stipend do all that was required of it, and I was sore distressed that upon balancing my accounts at the Martinmas term I found it would be impossible to buy mother a new winter hap. And she needed it so sorely, in spite of her praise of the Forbes tartan plaid! We were not a large household, only father and mother, Lindsay my sister, and I, and Marjory our faithful servant and friend. But the needs of a minister's house are not small. He has to be aye giving, and must keep an open door for all and sundry. I daresay my father, with his abilities, might have found a wider field of usefulness, but he and my mother became so attached to the only home their wedded life had ever known, that, though a change was often talked of, it was never made. To be a Selkirk man, father had taken very kindly to his Highland home, and then mother being of Highland birth, one of the Forbeses of Glenbuich, it was but natural that she should feel most at home among her own people. I saw a figure wending its way across the moor, and even in the gathering dark I could recognise my father's swinging gait and the peculiar drape of his Highland plaid.

My heart warmed at sight of him, for I was very proud of my handsome father. They said I was not

unlike him, but I had ever been considered a plain substantial kind of person, more for use than ornament. As I was in my twenty-sixth year, and no suitor had ever come to the manse for me, they said too that I should be the old maid of the family. I was very well content that it should be so, and in no way jealous or envious of my sister's beautiful face. She was a Forbes, and that family had ever been famed for the loveliness of its women folk.

"Father has been at the post-office, and the mail is in, for he is carrying something in his hand," I said, as I turned from the window, and went to get the lamp from the sideboard.

Lindsay jumped up.

"I *hope* there will be a letter from Cousin George to say he is coming again!" the bairn exclaimed; and I smiled to myself, knowing that the sojourn of our Edinburgh cousin with us last New Year time had been a very pleasant season for her. Then I took the tea-caddy and went away to the kitchen to see whether Marjory had the kettle boiling. I had to wait a few minutes, I remember, and when I returned to the dining-room father was taking off his boots at the fire-side. I stooped down and unlaced them for him, and got him his warm slippers from their corner on the fender.

"Have you had a nice walk? Is it not very cold?" mother asked.

"Yes, dear, bitterly so. We shall have half-a-foot of

snow before morning, or I am mistaken," answered father, stretching out his chilled fingers to the cheery blaze.

"Are there any letters, papa? do let us see them," said Lindsay coaxingly. A smile touched for a moment father's grave lips, and he slowly put his hand into his breast pocket.

"I know what you want, pussy. Yes, there is one from that mischievous lad," he said, handing Lindsay her anxiously-expected letter. "There is one for you too, Magdalen, from Glenbuich I think; and now, my dear," he said, leaning forward and looking into mother's sweet face, "do you think you could guess who I have a letter from to-day?"

Mother shook her head.

"I am not a good guesser," she answered, smiling too. "Is it from a *very* unlikely person?"

"Very. Susan Baxter of Broadlands." Mother sat up suddenly, so great was her surprise.

"What has she to say to you, Robert?" she asked in such a queer voice that I stopped the perusal of my own letter (only an invitation from Aunt Stuart Forbes to spend a few days at Glenbuich) to listen for father's answer.

"Listen, girls, while I read this letter," father said, and Lindsay very reluctantly took her eyes from the closely-written sheet upon which she was intent, and tried to give father her attention.

"BROADLANDS,
SELKIRKSHIRE, 22*nd Nov.*, 18—.

"DEAR ROBERT,—Although you have not heard from me for a long time, I am still alive, and in as good health as a woman come to my time of life can expect to be. Very likely you have forgotten my age. I was sixty-nine last month. I have often thought I should like to see your girls—I hear you have two; and I write to see if you will send one to stay for a while with me, perhaps till spring. I am not so able to go about as I was, and I am very dull sometimes in this lonely house. Perhaps you will wonder why I ask for one of your girls, but the Olivers, who used to come about Broadlands, are all married and away. As for the Pringles of Honeyburn, they are near enough—neither of them married, nor likely to be—but they are women I could never bide. I want you to send whichever of your girls is the most sensible and staid; keep the pretty one at home, because she would fret her life out here. Of course I will bear all the expense; and if your daughter can content herself a while with an old woman, she will find it worth her while. I don't say this to tempt you: you won't grudge me what I ask, for auld lang syne. With best respects to yourself and your wife, whom I have never seen, I am, yours sincerely,

SUSAN BAXTER."

"What a strange letter," said mother musingly.

"It is very characteristic of the woman who penned it," said father, and looked at me.

"It is interesting," was all I said, and looked at Lindsay; but she had no comment to make, having resumed the perusal of what to her was of more moment than Miss Baxter's blunt effusion.

"What is to be said about it, mother?" asked father presently; but mother only smiled and looked at me.

"It is for Magdalen to say," she said at length. "The invitation is for her."

"We can talk it over after, mother," I said. "But I don't see how I can leave home at this time of year—with the school-treat and the congregational soiree and the New Year so near at hand. What does George say, Lindsay?"

"He is coming on the 22nd, he says," answered Lindsay, her cheeks all aglow; "and he wants to know whether father and mother have any objections to him bringing a friend with him,—a college chum, Walter Inglis. His father was Dr. Inglis of Humbie Parish," added Lindsay, looking appealingly at father.

"Ay, I knew his father well. He was a fine man. Of course the lads can both come; write and tell them so," said father absently. "Well, my daughter, is tea ready?"

Father always said "my daughter" to me, never to Lindsay. She was his pet, his bairn, his lassie, and a

dozen other endearing terms, but I was "his daughter," and somehow, though it was never expressed in words, I knew I was more to my father than Lindsay was; perhaps it was natural, for I had been his right-hand companion since the days when, a little merry child, I sat proudly in front of him when he rode over hill and dale on the shaggy back of Shetland Donald, who had long since been gathered to his fathers.

Tea was ready, and we gathered about the table, and there was no more said about Miss Baxter's letter. But it was much in my head, and I saw that father was very absent-minded, as if his thoughts had travelled back to the days of his early youth.

After tea he went away to his study, for it was Friday night, which was always devoted to uninterrupted study for the Sabbath day. Lindsay ran singing to the parlour to write her letter to George, and I turned to mother with a smile, and said that the bairn seemed just bound up in our Edinburgh cousin. Mother smiled too, well pleased like, for George Dunsyre was as dear to her as a son of her own could be, and indeed everybody loved him, he was so frank and kind and true, and so clever with it all. He was not really our cousin, for his mother had only been a first cousin of our mother's, but he was always proud and fond to call mother Aunt Margaret, and us two girls his cousins.

"Mother, who is Susan Baxter? and why have we

never heard of her before?" I asked in my blunt way, drawing in my chair beside mother.

"She is a cousin of your father's, my dear, and——"

"And what?"

"I suppose I may tell you. She expected to marry your Uncle Donald, and because he took one of the Miss Pringles she has never been friends either with your father or them again."

"How strange! I should think she should be very glad now that she didn't marry Uncle Donald," said I musingly, for I was old enough to know a little of Uncle Donald's ne'er-do-weel life. He had been a banker in Edinburgh, but owing to his bad behaviour had lost his position and broken the heart of his wife, the gentle Aunt Agnes, whom as a child I had almost worshipped. She was dead now, and so was Uncle Donald, and yet this Miss Baxter seemed to keep up bitterness in her soul against those who had been connected with him or with his wife.

"Are these Pringles of Honeyburn Aunt Agnes's relatives?" I asked, with interest.

"Yes; her two sisters, maiden ladies, I believe, are still living there. Delightful women they are. Your father has often spoken of them. What is to be said about your going?"

"Can we afford it, mother?" I asked, for it was a long and expensive journey. And yet there was in my soul a strange unaccountable yearning to see with my

own eyes the mystic charms of Ettrick, Tweed, and Yarrow—names I had long loved in song and story.

"I would like to afford it," said mother. "I have often thought I would like my girls to see something outside the walls of a Scotch manse, a little more of the world than that bounded by the limits of a Highland parish, and I think your father would like you to go."

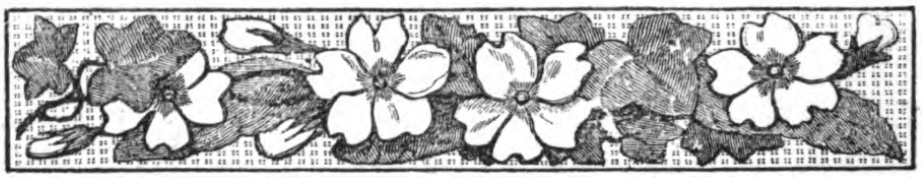
For a few days there was no more said about Miss Baxter's letter, except when it was occasionally mentioned between Lindsay my sister and me. But the bairn had little interest in it, being so taken up with the coming of our Cousin George on the Monday. Father asked me if I had duly weighed the letter and its contents.

"Would you desire me to go, father?" I asked.

"Not against your wish, my daughter; but your mother and I both think it would be a pleasant change for you; and when would such a chance of seeing the south come to you again?"

"Very well, father, I will get ready," I said; and somehow I was well pleased that it was so decided. So I set to work to put my wardrobe in order, and after overhauling grandmother's wardrobe I made myself a gown for evening wear out of a crimson brocade silk. After it was made and trimmed, I thought it too gay for a sober young woman like me, but mother and Lindsay declared it perfect; and when I put it on to let father see it, he looked surprised, and said I looked like a

Highland princess. So busy was I, that in less than a week I was quite ready to go; and on the Monday morning I bade them all good-bye with a heavy heart, for I had a strange prevision that I was taking a serious step in life. I was not afraid, for I knew that the God who had kept me safe and happy in my father's home would be with me to guide and shield me among the strangers to whom I was going. I just felt like Abraham setting out for a strange land, not knowing whither he was bound, but yet abiding in faith and steadfastness upon the promise, knowing no fear, because of the hope and faith that was in him. So it was with me; and with my father's blessing upon me, and the sure confidence that God would care for and protect me upholding my somewhat sorrowful heart, I began my journeyings to my new home.



CHAPTER II.

MY WELCOME.

I ARRIVED in Edinburgh about half-past ten at night, very weary and dull, and glad was I to see the frank kindly face of Cousin George peering in at the carriage window.

"Hulloa, Magdalen! tired out, eh?" he said, in his boyish, cheery fashion. "Here, let me help you out. I'll see to all your traps. This is my friend Inglis; Walter, my cousin, Miss Hepburn."

I looked curiously at George's friend before I shook hands with him, then I smiled and said I was glad to meet him, for he was just such another as George himself.

"I have a commission from my mother, Miss Hepburn, that you will accept the shelter of her roof-tree for the night," said Mr. Inglis. "She would have come to meet you herself, only she is suffering from severe cold."

"I'd advise you to go, Magdalen," said George. "Jolly good cheer Mrs. Inglis will give you, I can tell you. She 's as much my mother as Walter's. I nearly

live there, so you needn't be afraid; and *you* wouldn't like hotel accommodation."

"Mrs. Inglis is truly kind, and I will gladly accept her invitation," I said thankfully, for, truth to tell, the thought of spending a night in an hotel had rather dismayed me. Since Uncle Donald's death we had neither relative nor friend in Edinburgh but George himself, and he was in lodgings. He had been commissioned to engage a room for me at an hotel, but had not done so, in the hope that I would accept the hospitality of his friend's mother. We got into a cab then, and drove rapidly through the streets out to a suburb called the Grange; and shortly we drew up at a garden gate, and when I got out I saw a pretty house standing in its own grounds, and in a very few minutes I was welcomed into its warmth and comfort by that dear woman Mrs. Inglis, whom I was long proud and glad to call my friend.

"My dear, I am a minister's widow, and you are a minister's daughter, so we are friends," she said, taking my hands in hers. "I could not possibly allow Magdalen Hepburn to go to an hotel when I had a shelter to offer her. I remember your father quite well; and besides, George has made your name and your sister's household words among us."

After that, who would not feel at home? I never experienced so much kindness from strangers in my life, and I assure you I lay down in my bed that night

with a grateful and hopeful heart, for my welcome to Edinburgh was like a promise that my pilgrimage to the south and my sojourning there would be pleasant and happy.

Dear Mrs. Inglis was most urgent for me to remain a few days with her, and the lads anxious to show me Edinburgh, but Miss Baxter was expecting me early in the day. However, I was persuaded to telegraph that I would not leave till three o'clock in the afternoon, so we had time for a delightful drive through Edinburgh, with which I was quite enchanted. And though I have travelled much since then, and seen the most lovely cities in Europe, I have never seen the marrow of our beautiful Edinburgh, "grey metropolis" though it be.

The lads took me to the station and put me safely into the train, and also made me clear about remembering to change at Galashiels for Selkirk.

"Good-bye, cousin Magdalen. May you be happy," said George in his mischievous way; "only I can't quite forgive you for leaving Ardstruan when you knew we were coming. Who 'll bake scones and dumplings to equal yours?"

The train moved away before I could answer, so with a smile and a nod I settled myself in my corner and fixed my thoughts upon what awaited me at Selkirk. I also looked with interest on the landscape through which the train was speeding. It looked very pic-

turesque, for the rich brown furrows of the newly-ploughed land showed well against the stubble. I was astonished at the green freshness of the lea, and to see brown and yellow leaves still upon the boughs. Even the hedges in some sheltered nooks were green; evidently winter did not so soon hold the earth in icy chains as I was accustomed to see it in my northern home. The air of the December afternoon was so mild and pleasant that I could afford to strap up my plaid, which had done me such good service on my journey of yesterday. Dusk had fallen when the train stopped at Galashiels, which seemed to be a manufacturing town, as I saw many tall chimneys showing sharply against the clear sky. I had not many minutes to wait till we were off again, and now my heart began to beat a little quicker, for I was coming very near indeed to my destination. It is a very lonesome feeling arriving in the dark at a strange place, and I began to think what should I do if nobody came to meet me. I got out at Selkirk, and having seen all my traps safely landed on the platform I stood rather disconsolately beside them with a dreary feeling of isolation and dread in my heart. Just then I saw a woman's figure attired in a long black cloak bustling along the platform. Her face was veiled, but if that common-place uninteresting-looking figure pertained to Miss Baxter I was grievously disappointed. She came directly towards me, however, and put up her

thick veil. "Miss Hepburn, ma'am," she said, with a very broad accent, "I am Miss Baxter's maid; will you please come with me?"

"Thank you," I said, with a sigh of relief, and lifting my handbag I left the porter to follow with my portmanteau and travelling basket, and accompanied Miss Baxter's maid out of the station. There was only one vehicle outside, a carriage and pair of greys, and what was my astonishment when my companion opened the door and requested me to enter. I did so, and sank back among the soft cushions, which were all covered in spotless holland, sure sign that the owner of the carriage was of a careful and thrifty nature. It was a great surprise to me to learn that Miss Baxter drove a carriage and pair, and I began to wonder how I, the plain daughter of a country manse, should comport myself if the other equipments of Broadlands were equal in grandeur to the carriage.

"Is it far to Broadlands?" I asked, turning to my companion.

"Seven miles up the Yarrow, ma'am," was the respectful answer, and at mention of Yarrow my heart thrilled. "Miss Baxter would have come herself, but she never goes out at nights."

"Is she very frail?" I asked.

"Middlin' for her years," was the answer given, a little sadly I thought, but probably my companion had been with her mistress for many years. There was

little more said, and though Miss Baxter's carriage was delightfully cosy and warm I was not sorry when we came to a stand-still at the entrance to Broadlands. Looking out I saw that the approach was guarded by a massive stone gateway, and that there was a quaint little lodge within its precincts, from the front window of which a bright light shone out pleasantly upon the darkness of the night.

It was not a long avenue, for in the space of three or four minutes we stopped again, and my companion got out and then assisted me to alight. I looked with some curiosity and not a little timidity upon Miss Baxter's dwelling, but in the darkness I could only see that it seemed a long, low building, apparently in the architecture of a bygone day. The front door was open, and I walked into the wide hall, which, with its quaint oak panellings and polished floor, was quite a sight in itself.

"Miss Baxter said I was to show you to your rooms, ma'am," said a pleasant-featured quiet-voiced maid-servant, coming towards me. "Will you please to walk upstairs?"

I assented, and followed the girl upstairs. Perhaps I thought my welcome a little cold; but doubtless people in Miss Baxter's position stood more upon ceremony than we simple Highland folk. I found my rooms the very picture of comfort and luxury combined. There was a fine large bedroom and a delightful

dressing-room opening off it, and both were warmed and lighted by blazing fires. The girl set down my portmanteau and asked if she could wait upon me. I smiled and thanked her. I was accustomed to wait upon myself.

"I will tap at your door in half-an-hour, Miss Hepburn," she said then; "dinner is to be served at half-past six."

When she withdrew I sat down rather helplessly, a little overwhelmed with everything, for how could I, plain Magdalen Hepburn, accustomed to the quiet ways of a country manse, ever feel at home among the formalities of this grand house? However, now that I had come, it behoved me to make the best of it, so I opened my basket, took out my brown merino which had been bought for this visit, and proceeded to make my toilet. I was never one who spent much time or thought on my clothes, but I did think as I put on my fine lace collar that I had never had so neat and well-fitting a gown on before, nor one which became me so well. I was just ready when the tap came, and I found the maid ready to escort me downstairs. She opened the drawing-room door, waited to see me enter, and then withdrew. I saw nothing in the room except the figure on the hearth—that tall, spare, yet stately figure; my eyes were riveted by the face—that poor, proud, patient face, which seemed to tell its tale of disappointment and heart-sickness and weariness of

self and of all the world. The delicate white hands were both outstretched in greeting to me, and a smile smoothed away for a moment all the hard lines upon the brow and about the firm sad mouth.

"Magdalen Hepburn," said Miss Baxter, and her voice shook, "you are welcome, thrice welcome, to Broadlands."

I am not a demonstrative woman, I do not kiss and make a fuss even over those dearest to me, that is not my way, but I felt so suddenly and strongly moved that night, that, still clasping the thin slender hands, I raised my head and kissed Miss Baxter's cheek—I had to raise my head though I am not a little woman, for Miss Baxter was considerably taller than I.

"You would have a long tiresome journey," she said, and slightly turned away. "You must be fatigued and hungry. Let us go to the dining-room; I fancy dinner will be served." She offered me her arm. I smiled as I took it, for it struck me as very comical that we should go downstairs arm in arm. What fun Cousin George would have made of it! I was hungry, and did ample justice to the delicious cookery of Broadlands. We did not talk very much in the presence of the maid. Miss Baxter asked several questions about our home life and parish work, which I answered in my plain straightforward way. I noticed that Miss Baxter ate little or nothing; I noticed too, now that the little flush of excitement had passed away, that she had

grown deadly pale. I wondered if that was the habitual colour of her face. Also her eyes gleamed restlessly, as if there was inward pain. I had thought her youthful-looking upstairs, but now she looked her age to the full. But she was still a handsome and most ladylike woman.

After dinner we returned to the drawing-room, and sat down, one upon either side of the hearth.

"You are very like your father, Magdalen," said Miss Baxter.

"So people say, and so I am glad to believe," I answered. "My sister is my mother's image, and is very beautiful."

"Was your mother beautiful?" Miss Baxter asked.

"She was a Forbes of Glenbuich, and they are famous for beauty, Miss Baxter," I answered. "My mother is the handsomest woman in the parish."

"Were you quite willing to come here, Magdalen?" was Miss Baxter's next unexpected question.

"Quite; and both father and mother were very anxious for me to come," I replied frankly.

"It will be very dull for you; I keep no company with my neighbours," said Miss Baxter, and her voice took a harder tone. "I told you so, I think, when I wrote."

"Yes. I shall not be dull. I am a quiet, easily-contented person, Miss Baxter," I said cheerfully.

"So was I at your age," said the old lady in the

same still hard way. "But the world has used me hardly. Friends I trusted in have failed me, those from whom I expected most have given me least. You find me now a desolate, miserable old woman, who has proved life to be nothing but vanity and vexation of spirit." She spoke with bitterness that was almost passion, and the worn eyes gleamed with a brightness I did not like to see.

"Dear Miss Baxter," I said, speaking very gently, for my heart was sore for her, "it grieves me to hear you speak so bitterly. Surely there are some kind, true hearts in the world yet."

"None for me," she said fiercely. "They came fawning upon me for what I had, and when I did not give lavishly enough they left me with bitter words on their tongue. Where money is, there can be no right feeling between kindred. It is the root of contention and bitterness, it poisons truth and saps the affections of the heart; ay, money is an evil thing."

"Not so, only the abuse of it is evil," I maintained stoutly. "Money is a good and precious gift if used aright, the lack of it saps the springs of hope and youthfulness in many hearts."

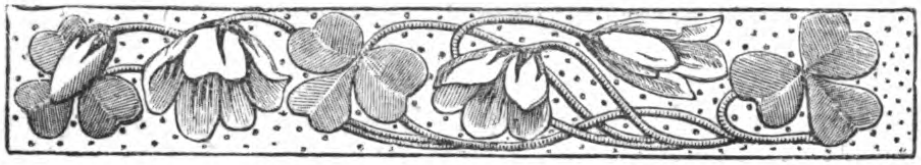
Miss Baxter looked surprised, and her lips parted in a grim smile.

"I like that; you have an opinion of your own and can stick to it, bairn," she said. "You are like your father in more ways than one." I laughed and looked

towards the spindle-legged pianoforte in the corner. Both Lindsay and I were musical—indeed singing was my sole accomplishment.

"Do you play, Miss Baxter?"

"I? no, not these many years; you may open the instrument if you like." I rose and crossed the room and lifted the lid. The keys were worn and yellow—I doubted much if there could be any melody left in them. However, at touch of my fingers they gave forth a sweet if rather tinkling sound. Then I sang "The Rowan Tree." It was my father's favourite, and through long practice I had learned to sing it well, to give expression to every feeling of the pathetic words. So absorbed was I that I was oblivious of everything around me; when the echo of the last refrain died away in the room I looked round, and to my astonishment found myself alone. I saw Miss Baxter no more that night.



CHAPTER III.

A PROUD HEART.

I WAS downstairs before eight o'clock next morning, and found breakfast laid in the library, a small but cosy room, where a cheery bit fire brightened the grey morning gloom. I walked away over to the window, and stood looking out with interested and delighted eyes. Truly it was a goodly and pleasant land to which I had come.

Right in front of the house was the close smooth-shaven lawn, round which the avenue swept in a graceful curve. Beyond that the somewhat thinly-wooded park sloped down to the road, which ran parallel with the river. The sun was just rising in the soft grey sky, and a subdued brightness touched the windings of the stream till it shone like a thread of gold. That must be Yarrow, thought I, and again my heart thrilled. Upon the opposite side of the river rose a mighty hill crowned with silver birch and glossy pine to its very summit. The shadow lay upon it yet, and it seemed to frown upon the meander-

ing of the gentle stream. Turning my eyes to the right, I beheld through the trees the grey towers and turrets of another house, standing upon a little knoll, a most picturesque situation, and evidently an ancient picturesque building. Just then Miss Baxter entered the room, and I turned to greet her. She looked even more haggard and ill in the clear morning light, and the folds of her plain morning gown hung loosely about her wasted frame.

"I hope you slept?" she said, looking inquiringly into my face. I said I had, and expressed my regret at seeing her look so far spent.

"I have had to breakfast in bed this winter for the first time," she said, "but now that you have come I must bestir myself. It is not good for man or woman to dwell so utterly alone as I have done these past five years. The mind becomes too much occupied with self, and imagination is allowed to run riot. Bring your chair to the table; we will wait upon ourselves. It has never been my habit to have serving-women about me at meal times, except on rare occasions."

"It will be a relief to me, Miss Baxter," said I. "For my part, I would much rather wait upon myself and you too while I am here."

"Your father has trained you well. Come, make out the tea, then. At my time of life it becomes a pleasure to sit idle and see others work."

I readily took my place behind the urn, for I always presided at the tea-table at home.

"What a beautiful countryside this is, Miss Baxter; I have been feasting my eyes upon it for the last ten minutes. Tell me, is that Yarrow flowing down there?"

"That is Yarrow," answered my hostess briefly.

"And, Miss Baxter, what lovely old house is that beyond the trees on the right?"

"That is Wolflee, the family seat of the Olivers," answered Miss Baxter, briefly as before.

"The Olivers; do you know them?" I asked, all unconscious that I was treading on dangerous ground.

"Did I not tell you, Magdalen Hepburn, that I had no dealings with my neighbours?" she asked harshly. "Wait till we have breakfasted, and I will point out the different places to you, so that you may not trouble me with any more questions."

Not a little discomfited I devoted myself to my breakfast, and said no more.

When we had finished, Miss Baxter walked over to the window and desired me to join her there. I did so, and raising her hand she pointed with her thin finger down the road leading to the left.

"That is the way you came from Selkirk, which is seven miles distant. Yonder house, lower down on the opposite bank of the river, is Honeyburn, the abode of my kinsfolk the Pringles. They are my kinsfolk in nothing but name, and you

need not expect to see or become acquainted with them," she said in a hard, quiet, cold voice. "That hill directly facing us is on the Duke's estate of Bowhill, and the house sheltering beneath its western side is Hartrigge, which has been the dwelling-place of the Scotts for generations. The river, and the road with it, winds up to the manse and kirk of Yarrow, and on again until the river finds its source in St. Mary's Loch. That," she said, pointing to the grey old house which had interested me before, "is Wolflee, as I told you, the family seat of the Olivers. They were wont to be a goodly stock before love of gain poisoned the best impulses of their hearts. In times gone by the Baxters and the Olivers were as one family, but that has not been these many years."

"What brought about the difference, Miss Baxter?" I felt compelled to ask. She looked with darkening brow.

"I suppose it is the way of youth to be ever questioning," she said grimly. "Well, Magdalen Hepburn, old Walter Oliver of Wolflee did me a grievous wrong. He stole part of the lands of Broadlands from me—that park which separates the two dwellings, and which pertained to the Baxters from time immemorial."

"Stole it, Miss Baxter!" I exclaimed, in a vague way, my thoughts reverting to the old Border raids and feuds of which I had read so much.

"It was stolen, though the law said it was his. But it is a thing admitted on all hands that the honour and truth of the law of Scotland has become a thing of the past. Might is right now, and so, because my Laird of Wolflee was the intimate friend of all the judges and lawyers in the Court of Session, and because he was abler to bribe than I, a poor weak woman, the Knowe Park was severed from Broadlands and unrighteously added to the lands of Wolflee,"—with a bitterness which told that these morbid fancies had become convictions. "That wicked and grasping old man went to his account last year, and his son abides in Wolflee. They say he is a goodly young man, but he is too near-of-kin to the former laird to be all they say. Because of his father's sin his inheritance will never be blessed to him. I hope and pray that I may live to see the downfall of proud Wolflee and the scattering of the Olivers to the four winds of heaven." She drew her tall figure to its full height, her eyes flashed, her wasted fingers pointing to the battlements of Wolflee seemed to invoke a curse upon it and its solitary inmate. I was sore afraid, for amid the blessedness and peace of my father's home I had never dreamed of feelings so revengeful and passionate, of a hate so bitter as this. I laid my hand on Miss Baxter's arm. I lifted my fearless eyes imploringly to her face.

"Oh, Miss Baxter, hush! We all need to be forgiven. God does not bid us hate our fellow-creatures,

we are to do good to those who despitefully use us," I said tremblingly. The outstretched cold arm fell, and slowly Miss Baxter turned herself about from me and went away over to the fireplace. Though the room was warm to closeness she was shivering—the outburst of passion would tell sorely on her enfeebled frame.

"I forgot myself," she muttered; "think no more of it. Magdalen Hepburn, you look at me with rebuking eyes, but what do you know of it? Bairn, may the God you speak of, and in whom I used to believe, preserve you from such tribulations as mine! Now, get your bonnet and take a walk out of doors. I have not brought you here to coop you up in the house. I shall have recovered myself when you return."

I had no more to say. I went away slowly out of the room, got my hat and plaid, and went forth into the cool sweet freshness of the day. I have ever loved the morning, because, to my thinking, a body's heart is pure and clean and fresh before the dust and cobwebs of the day gather about it. I walked slowly along the avenue a little, pondering chiefly upon the miserable woman I had left. Surely no ordinary sorrows had thus changed to gall the milk of human kindness in her heart. One sentence repeated itself over and over in my mind, and would not be put away: "The God you speak of, and in whom I used to believe." I shuddered as the words rang their changes in my ears. If Miss Baxter had let go the anchor of the soul she

was desolate indeed. My heart overflowed with pity. I could have knelt down where I was and prayed that the spirit of God's peace would come again and dwell with her, that she might in the last days turn her thoughts from the sorrows of earth and find hope and comfort in the contemplation of that which was to come

My somewhat sombre meditations were interrupted by a short deep bark, and the next instant a magnificent mastiff bounded out of the thicket, and stood in rather a menacing fashion before me. It was not my usual to be afraid of dogs, but he was such a lion of a fellow, and his heavy jaws were so threateningly exposed, that involuntarily I shrank back. Just then a shrill whistle, followed by the call "Reiver! Reiver!" caused my rather formidable-looking companion to bound through the thicket from whence he had come. Then I saw, standing just beyond a low hedge to my right, the figure of a gentleman attired in a rough grey tweed suit, with a deer-stalker cap pushed so far back on his head that I saw the full breadth of a noble brow, beneath which gleamed a pair of honest eyes, which were smiling then in a reassuring manner upon me. He lifted his cap and spoke, and his tones were as pleasant as his eyes.

"I am sorry if Reiver alarmed you. I assure you his appearance is most deceitful. He is as quiet as a lamb."

"I was scarcely alarmed, sir," I answered. And then, somewhat to my discomfiture, I perceived that I had wandered from the beaten way, and that I now stood in the veritable Knowe Park which had proved the bone of contention betwixt the houses of Broadlands and Wolflee.

"I beg pardon, sir," I hastened to say. "I was thinking of other things, and so have become an unwitting trespasser upon your lands."

The latter part of my sentence slipped out unawares, and yet it was correct, for I had no doubt in my mind but that I was speaking to the Laird of Wolflee.

"No apology is necessary, madam," he said very courteously, and I wondered why his eyes never for a moment left my face. "May I inquire to whom I am speaking, in order that *I* may apologise for my dog's rudeness?"

"My name is Magdalen Hepburn. I am staying at Broadlands," I said simply and frankly, for, accustomed as I was to the free untrammelled ways of country life, I saw nothing out of the common in his question.

He looked surprised.

"My name is Oliver, Douglas Oliver of Wolflee," he said. "Good morning. Come, Reiver."

Again he lifted his cap and strode away across the Knowe Park, his dog following closely at his heels. And I? The face of Douglas Oliver occupied my thoughts as I slowly retraced my steps to Broadlands. How strange that we should meet on this the very

first morning of my sojourn on the banks of Yarrow! Strange indeed, but not so strange as what was yet to come. When I had taken off my things I went down to the drawing-room, and found Miss Baxter there, lying on a couch, reading the morning paper. She laid it aside when I entered, and looked keenly, I had almost written affectionately, into my face.

"You have got some red in your cheeks, Magdalen," she said kindly. "Have you had a pleasant walk?"

"Very. Guess whom I encountered in my stroll, Miss Baxter?" I asked, for I could not conceal my meeting with Douglas Oliver from her.

She shook her head.

"The Laird of Wolflee," I answered fearlessly. "I was walking so absorbed in thought that I wandered through your shrubberies into the Knowe Park without knowing where I was going. Then a big dog questioned my right to trespass, and then I saw the Laird himself."

"That was most indiscreet of you, Magdalen," she said harshly. "Did—did the young man speak?"

"He only apologised for his dog, and told me his name. I thought him a very manly fellow, Miss Baxter," I said boldly.

"Ay, ay, the young are easily deceived, and the Olivers ever had smooth false tongues and winning ways. Beware of Douglas Oliver, Magdalen Hepburn, he comes of a bad stock."

I kept unspoken my inmost thought, which was that the soul which had looked out from Douglas Oliver's grey eyes was incapable of deceit. I have ever proved the eyes to be the mirrors of the soul, and they cannot lie.

"Shall I read to you, Miss Baxter?" I asked, drawing my chair closer to the couch.

"No; talk to me. Tell me of your home, of your father's parish and work," she said, and slipping her arm under her head she lay back wearily and fixed her tired eyes on my face. A great rush of pity swept across my heart. I knelt down by her, I put my strong arms under the feeble shoulders, and bade her rest awhile upon them, for I was strong and willing, and glad to do even so little a thing for her.

"My dear, you are very good. I like you," she said, and a gentler softer expression stole across her face. "You are frank and fearless and true. *You* will not serve me as others have served me; I can trust you. I wish I had known you sooner."

"We will make the best of it now I am here," I said cheerily. "Now tell me how you occupy your days. Are there no duties I could perform for you? I am accustomed to work, and am miserable when I am idle."

"I have no occupation," she said drearily. "I rise in the morning wondering how the day is to be put in. I count the hours till night, and when night comes,

lying on my sleepless couch, I count the hours till morning."

"How awful!" I exclaimed, for I could not help it. To me it seemed truly awful to spend such a life when all around there was so much to do and so few to do it.

"Have you no social duties nor enjoyments? no church work—nothing?" I asked blankly.

"I hold no intercourse with my neighbours, as I told you," she said quietly. "I give liberally to the church, which I never attend. I head charitable lists with considerable sums, and I never turn the needy from my door."

"But, Miss Baxter, why live such an isolated and dreary life? I am sure you could be the centre of a happy social circle, beloved and honoured by all," I said impulsively; "and with your means what personal good you could do! There are a thousand things which might interest you and make your life happier than it is."

"I was disappointed in my youth, Magdalen Hepburn," she said, shaking her head. "What good or kindly impulses I may have had once have been poisoned by the treachery of friends, the unkindness of neighbours, and the coldness of the world. I will die as I have lived, unmolested and uncared for by any."

Before I could reply a visitor was announced. It was a relief to me to think that even one stranger set

foot within the walls of Broadlands. The intruder was the Reverend Mr. Dryburgh, minister of the parish. My heart warmed to the kindly old man, and I felt more at home in Broadlands while he was there than I had done yet. Miss Baxter talked to him courteously but coldly, I thought; but always when his eyes rested on her face I saw them glow with a tender and deep compassion.

"I hope your young friend will brighten for you the winter solitude of Broadlands," he said when he rose to go. "I trust you will permit her to visit us at the manse. My wife and my girls will make her truly welcome."

"Magdalen has fullest liberty here, Mr. Dryburgh," said Miss Baxter; then she turned and requested me to show the minister downstairs.

"My dear, this will be a strange quiet life for you," he said, as I helped him on with his overcoat in the hall. "But if you can brighten the present or the future for the poor lady upstairs yours will be a blessed ministry."

"I will try, Mr. Dryburgh," I said, and somehow my eyes suddenly overflowed. At that moment my dear home seemed very far away, and I felt indeed a stranger in a strange land.

"She has had many sorrows in her life, doubtless, but she has made many for herself, my child. I remember her well in youth, a proud, haughty, self-

willed maiden, who would brook no contradiction. She has been tried in the furnace, but the proud spirit is unbroken still, I fear. May it be yours to infuse a little of human love and kindness into her heart; and through that lead her into the presence of Divine love itself."

Then he went away, but the memory of his words remained.

CHAPTER IV.

IN YARROW KIRK.

UPON the Sabbath day I was driven in dreary state to the parish kirk of Yarrow. As the carriage was closed owing to the cold and dampness of the weather, I could not delight my eyes with the pastoral beauty of the surrounding scene, only I could discern through the mist-obscured window that we never for a moment lost sight of the pensive Yarrow, which flowed swiftly upon its course, without a murmur or a ripple to mingle with the sighing of the winter wind. How different the silent flowing of the gentle stream from the rush and roar of our tumbling mountain torrents at home! I felt, without knowing wherefore, a subdued yet pleasant melancholy steal over my heart—it was but my deep and silent sympathy with Yarrow. The sweet irregular tinkling of a bell warned me at length that we were coming near to the place of worship. Also I saw some stragglers on the road, decent country folks in their best attire, reverently wending their way to the house of God. Very shortly

afterwards the carriage stopped, and the coachman jumped down and opened the door for me. When I alighted and looked about me I felt suddenly and strangely moved. What a vast and boundless solitude was this! what peace and beauty seemed to rest upon the vale! what majesty crowned the solemn hills, which seemed almost like the limit of the world! What a place wherein to worship God, I said inwardly, and turned to look at the quaint old church which stood in the middle of its little burying-ground, reminding me very much of our own kirk at home. I entered the gate and was about to occupy myself for a little in reading some of the inscriptions on the tombstones when I saw the figure of a young girl emerge from the door of the manse, which was close by. She came towards me and spoke with a truly pleasant smile on her winsome face.

"You are Miss Hepburn? I am Katie Dryburgh. Mamma bid me come and ask you to come in to the manse for a little while. It is quite ten minutes yet till service begins."

I smiled and thanked her, and we walked together to the manse. Who could resist the sweet and winsome ways of that pleasant bairn?

She took me into the dining-room, a wide and pleasant family room, where I found the minister's wife, his elder daughter Janet, and the youngest boy, a lad of fourteen. I felt at home with them at once,

and my heart went out in no ordinary way to Janet Dryburgh, for she was as true and kindly a woman as I had seen for many a day. How different the pleasant homelike freedom of the manse from the dreary loveless splendour of Broadlands! I felt glad that this opportunity was given me to make the acquaintance of the minister's folk.

"I think we had better go now, mamma," said Katie. "There 's the Laird of Wolflee riding by, and he 's aye last, and it is a long time since papa went to the vestry."

"Yes, we shall go," said gentle Mrs. Dryburgh. "If you do not care to sit alone in the Broadlands pew, Miss Hepburn, you are very welcome to a seat beside us. There is an empty space since Jamie went to college."

I thanked her, and said I would very willingly sit with them. So we went away in together, and took our seats in the minister's pew on his right hand, and then was I not at home indeed? The kirk was tolerably well filled, considering the scattered nature of the parish and the long distances many had to come. I very heartily enjoyed the service, only I was rather taken aback at the loud and clear sound my own voice had in the praise — evidently there were no great singers in Yarrow. Looking up once while I sang I met the earnest gaze of the Laird of Wolflee, who sat in the front pew in the gallery, and, not of my free will, a distinct tremor shook my voice. I could not under-

stand this inward shaking which came upon me at sight of the man, in the kirk too,—I, who had been set down as the old maid of the family long ago. However, all these thoughts vanished while listening to the sermon, which was indeed calculated to waken the godless and to strengthen and uphold God's people in the paths of peace. I felt the better for the service altogether, and I said so to Mrs. Dryburgh, who looked well pleased thereat. While the kirk was emptying, Katie Dryburgh pointed out to me the pew where the Ettrick Shepherd had been wont to sit on the rare occasions when he attended the house of God. It was of great interest to me to look thereon, and also to read some of the old and quaint writings on the tombs. Mrs. Dryburgh again desired me to come to the manse while Adam Scott got the horses into the carriage, but I preferred to linger outside. When we reached the gate we found the Laird of Wolflee waiting there. After his greetings to Mrs. Dryburgh she introduced him to me, and so we were placed upon the footing of acquaintances.

Before I went away Mrs. Dryburgh made me promise to come to my tea at the manse on the Wednesday afternoon, which I very willingly promised, upon condition that it was agreeable to Miss Baxter.

"Will there be a cup for me too, Mrs. Dryburgh?" asked the Laird of Wolflee, his eyes smiling rather entreatingly upon her.

"What a question, Douglas Oliver, when you know

there is a cup in mamma's press sacred to you," laughed Katie, and there was no more said. He shook hands with us all, sprang to his saddle, and galloped off. How noble he looked upon his beautiful horse, I thought, as we watched him ride away.

"He is a dear lad that, Miss Hepburn," said Mrs. Dryburgh with a tear in her eye. "His mother was my dearest friend, and a son of Mary Oliver's must needs be all that is truest and best in a man, because she was an angel on earth. Well, good-bye, my dear; we will look for you on Wednesday without fail."

Miss Baxter seemed pleased to see me come back again.

"I missed you when you were away, Magdalen," she said. "I fear you will become so necessary to me that I shall be for keeping you altogether."

I smiled in a well-pleased way, for if I could win her heart, might I not be able to soften it towards all those against whom she was so embittered now? To my thinking it was an unspeakably sad thing to see one so near the brink of the grave nursing such feelings, for it was not the spirit of revenge and bitterness which would sustain her in the hour of death. I never lay down in my bed any night without praying very earnestly that her heart might be changed, and that she might ere long come to see that the law of love is best. We spent the evening in quietness together, and I read for a little aloud from one of my own favourite

books, which I had brought with me from home. I do not remember the name of it now, only I know it spoke much of the love of God in relation to ourselves and our human relationships, and showed how the spirit of Christ can make even the hardest, poorest, unloveliest life a thing of wondrous beauty and power and peace. Miss Baxter made no remark upon my reading, nor did I, but I was very agreeably surprised next day to come upon her poring earnestly over its pages. She seemed rather ashamed at being caught.

"I was looking over one or two sentences which you read last night, and which I did not quite understand," she said, as if in apology. "It is a clever and rather interesting book, but theory and practice are two very different things."

"I have seen the theories you find in its pages put into practice, Miss Baxter," I said, "and it is all true, every word."

That was all we said about it then. Miss Baxter was quite pleased for me to go to the manse on Wednesday, and she was very particular that I should look well. She was greatly taken up with my brocade gown, and expressed the utmost astonishment when I told her how I had come by it, and that I had made it myself. She also showed me a great quantity of jewellery, and desired me to choose what I would put on, but I just shook my head and said I would rather wear my gold and pebble brooch, made in the shape of

a thistle, which I had got from father and mother on my twentieth birthday.

"Well, perhaps you are right. You look very well, and I am proud of you, Magdalen Hepburn," she said, whereat I laughed very heartily, not feeling a bit vain, for I had been accustomed to think myself a very plain person, and so I was, in comparison with Lindsay my sister, who, as I told you, was very beautiful to look upon.

I was to walk to the manse, by my own desire, and the carriage was to come for me at eight o'clock in the evening. I wish I could write down all the enjoyment I had of my walk by the banks of Yarrow that clear and pleasant afternoon. I felt as if I was upon enchanted ground, and my heart was so light and so overflowing with gratitude to God for His goodness in permitting me to look upon this beautiful portion of His earth that I could have sung aloud for joy. When I neared the manse the sun was just setting, and the mystery of light and shade blending upon hill and dale, and mirrored in the stream, was just more than I could bear, and so I arrived at the manse with my eyes wet, and my whole soul stirred within me.

Need I write down that I was warmly welcomed to the manse? Janet Dryburgh took me to her bedroom to take off my things, and we stayed a little talking there, feeling drawn together as if we had known each other for years. Of all the women I have met, there is

none I love and honour more than Janet Dryburgh, and she remains to this day my dearest and most steadfast friend. When we went down to the drawing-room we found the minister and Mrs. Dryburgh there, talking to two ladies, at whom I looked with interest, being much prepossessed by their appearance. They were both elderly, and both looked as if they had had much tribulation in their lives, and yet their faded faces were most sunshiny and pleasant to look upon, telling of that inward peace which passeth all understanding, but which can still every tumult in the heart of poor humanity. They looked most thorough gentlewomen, and though their attire was in the fashion of a bygone day, it seemed so much in keeping with their appearance that nothing could have been more agreeable to look upon. What was my utter and almost speechless astonishment when Mrs. Dryburgh, taking me by the hand, introduced them to me as Miss Pringle and Miss Elizabeth Pringle of Honeyburn? It required all my energy to enable me to return their greetings courteously, and then I sat down rather helplessly in a chair. It seemed ordained that I should meet and learn to love all Miss Baxter's enemies—but there, what am I saying? Surely there could not be any thought of love in my heart for the Laird of Wolflee. Listening to the talk of the ladies, which seemed to overflow with love and kindness towards every human being, I was more and more astonished. Oh, how sad for Miss

Baxter herself, that she should thus isolate herself from those who might so materially have brightened her lonely life. My thoughts made me somewhat distracted in my manner I believe, and it was not till I heard Mrs. Dryburgh asking me to sing that I recovered myself. I rose and went to the pianoforte at once, for we had been taught at home that it was our duty to use whatever talent God had given to us for the pleasure of those about us. I suppose it is the outcome of that early training that to this day I have no patience with those affected young women who, though they possess the ability, require so much coaxing and flattering before they will sing or play in company. I never sang anything but Scotch songs, and so I began "The Flowers o' the Forest," as it was the first that suggested itself to me. I do not know whether I sang it well or ill, only I know that when I ceased my own eyes were full of tears, so powerful is the effect of music upon my soul. No one said anything for a little, but I saw that mine were not the only wet eyes in the room. Great was my astonishment then to perceive the Laird of Wolflee standing with his back to the door. He must have slipped into the room while I was singing, seeing he was not there when I began. Mrs. Dryburgh rose and shook hands with him, and he apologised for not coming to tea, as he had been detained at home by his neighbour of Philiphaugh. He came last to my side, and in a low voice thanked

me for my song. I know not why I could not look up into his eyes—truly I had never felt thus in the presence of any man before. Presently he went away to speak to the minister, then Miss Elizabeth Pringle crossed the room and sat down on the sofa beside me. When I looked into her face I seemed to see the spirit of my Aunt Agnes, my Uncle Donald's wife, looking out upon me, and I could scarcely speak.

"My dear Miss Hepburn, we may be friends, I hope, for the sake of my sister Agnes. She had ever a great talking of Margaret's bairns, as she called you and your sister," said Miss Elizabeth gently, and she laid one of her mittened hands almost entreatingly on mine; "my heart warmed to you whenever I saw you and heard your name."

"Thank you, Miss Elizabeth," I said, and pressed the hand which touched mine. There was a little shame in my heart, for was it not my Uncle Donald, my father's own brother, who had by his ne'er-do-weel ways and long neglect broken his wife's gentle heart, and been the cause of her early death?

"And are you to like the Lowlands, think you?" she asked presently in a more cheerful voice, seeing that I was a bit overcome.

"I never saw any place so beautiful as all about Yarrow, Miss Elizabeth," I made answer, and she smiled well pleased.

"We are of your mind also," she answered; "but we

have lived by Yarrow all our days. Is Miss Baxter well?" she added after a moment's pause, and I saw the gentle eyes cloud as if there was a sorrow in her heart about Miss Baxter.

"No; far from it," I answered, but said no more. Fain would I have spoken some of the innermost thoughts of my heart to Miss Elizabeth, but something kept me back.

"There is a sore gulf betwixt Broadlands and Honeyburn now," said the old lady in a lower voice. "Often the hearts of my sister and me are 'wae' for Susan Baxter. If you could tell her that we still feel towards her as in the pleasant days of our youth, she might take a thought either to come and see us with you or to send you by yourself."

"I would like to see the home where Aunt Agnes spent her young days," I said impulsively. "I can remember how she used to talk about Honeyburn."

"Ay, we never forget our bairn's hame, where our fathers and mothers dwelt, Miss Hepburn," said Miss Elizabeth; and then we got no more private talk, for the Laird of Wolflee came up to the sofa, and standing by my side began asking me questions about my opinion of the south country. And shortly Miss Elizabeth went back beside Mrs. Dryburgh and her sister, and the Laird and I were left in the corner alone.

"Do you think Miss Baxter would let me in if I were to venture to Broadlands?" he asked suddenly.

"Truly I think not," I answered hastily, for the very idea called up a picture of Miss Baxter's wrath.

"Look here, Miss Hepburn, has she been making me out a reprobate in your eyes?" he continued with such earnestness that I could not but laugh at him.

"There is a gulf betwixt Broadlands and Wolflee as wide as betwixt Broadlands and Honeyburn, Mr. Oliver," I said, just to quiet him.

"And all about that wretched bit of land my father disputed with Miss Baxter about. I believe it *did* belong by right to Wolflee, but my father ought to have left the thing alone. It was just a crotchet he took, and he would have his way. I assure you I would very gladly restore it to my neighbour if it would make peace between us."

"Perhaps there will be peace some day," I answered, not thinking very much of what I was saying.

"I hope so; perhaps *you* will make it, Miss Hepburn," said the Laird, and I felt sore angered with myself that the red should rise so foolishly in my cheeks.

"How long are you going to stay at Broadlands?" he asked presently.

"I don't know; just so long as Miss Baxter desires me to abide with her," I made answer a trifle stiffly.

"Then it is possible I may be able to redeem my character in your eyes," said the young man in the same earnest way.

"I never set myself to judge your character, Mr. Oliver, therefore it can need no redeeming in my eyes," I said.

He smiled then, and his face lit by that sunny smile was as pleasant a one as eyes could wish to see.

Just at that moment I was not sorry when a maid appeared to say that the carriage waited for me. I felt rather put about sitting beside the Laird of Wolflee, not knowing what, in his impetuosity, he might say next. And yet, though I would not admit it to myself then, I knew that it was a new and strange feeling of happiness to me to be near to him, to listen to the tones of his manly voice, and to watch the play of every varying expression on his pleasant face. I said good-bye to all the ladies before I left the room, and returned Miss Elizabeth's kind pressure of the hand with answering warmth. I felt drawn to her in no ordinary way, but I told myself it was because she reminded me so much of Aunt Agnes, my Uncle Donald's wife, who had been so dear to us all at Ardstruan Manse. When I got out to the carriage I found the minister and Douglas Oliver waiting to see me safely away. And the Laird of Wolflee with his own firm kind hands adjusted my wraps for me, and was even more solicitous than Mr. Dryburgh himself lest I should take cold. Also his close warm hand-clasp was the last which held my fingers, and his was the last good-night. Shall I write down, I wonder,

what the impetuous young man said? Well, I will, since I am writing my love-story, I may as well tell the beginning of it.

"I will risk Miss Baxter's displeasure and venture to Broadlands; I cannot 'lippen' to chance to see you again," he said, and I liked the sound of the good old Scotch word from his lips. "And after all it was my father with whom she was at war. Perhaps I may be able to make my peace with her."

I said nothing, but I think he knew that I at least would be glad to see him at Broadlands. Then Adam Scott gave the greys the rein, and we trotted away home. Truly never had two miles seemed so short a distance as they did that night. Miss Baxter was in her own room, but sent word that I was to come to her before I took off my things.

"Well, and had you a pleasant evening, and had Mrs. Dryburgh any company to meet you?" she asked.

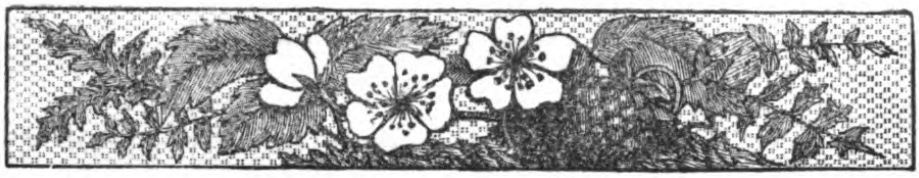
I trembled a little as I made answer, "The ladies from Honeyburn were there, Miss Baxter, and the Laird of Wolflee came later," I said.

Very dark grew Miss Baxter's brow. "That was very ill done of Mrs. Dryburgh, but I will know what to say again when you are asked to the manse," she said harshly. "Now leave me, for I am too weary to listen to your talk to-night."

I felt hurt and grieved, for it had been none of my seeking that I went to the manse, nor had I any hand

in the gathering of the company together. Nevertheless I crushed out the little bitterness which arose in my heart, and bade her a gentle and kind good-night.

When I got to my own chamber I did a very unusual thing for me. I flung off my cloak, and, standing straight in front of the mirror, I took a survey of myself. I saw a tall, straight, well-proportioned figure, a dark but clear-skinned face with very ordinary features. A pair of dark blue eyes and a broad brow, from which waving masses of dark, glossy brown hair were brushed loosely back and knotted carelessly behind. No, I was not handsome, nor even good-looking, I told myself, and actually sighed as I turned away. Then the comical side of my proceedings struck me, and I laughed and shook myself. Truly it was a new and rather significant state of affairs when plain Magdalen Hepburn was becoming concerned about her appearance. And that was not the last laugh I had over it either. Dear me, but the heart of a woman is a strange and wayward thing, especially when it begins to waken beneath the touch of love.



CHAPTER V.

MY CHRISTMAS GIFTS.

LINDSAY, my sister, wrote to me very regularly from home, and occasional letters from father and mother came to assure me I was not forgotten at the manse of Ardstruan. The December days sped away very quickly, and yet it seemed long long since I had left home. Christmas week was ushered in by a heavy fall of snow, and then indeed I saw new and boundless beauties in Yarrow. But there! a plain woman like me could never describe the mystic and wonderful effects of the snow upon the hills and dales of that lovely land, nor of the fairy beauty of the pine-crested hill which we saw so plainly from the front windows of the house.

Whether it was the snow or the nipping frost I know not, but as December wore to its close it seemed to me that Miss Baxter grew feebler and feebler, and when she came downstairs at all it was only to lie for an hour or so upon the sofa in the drawing-room. I was much with her, reading and talking to her,

but though it was often in my mind to plead that the ladies from Honeyburn might be asked to come and see her, I never dared mention either their names or that of the Laird of Wolflee, lest it should agitate her—a thing to be avoided in her weak state of health. We were sitting together in her dressing-room one afternoon, just a day or two before Christmas, when she suddenly interrupted my reading and bade me bring her small writing-desk from the little table in the window. I did so, and unlocked it for her, when she took from thence two five-pound notes and laid them in my palm.

"Thursday will be Christmas day," she said; "take these, and go down the town and see if you can get anything to buy for those at home; nay, nay, take them—they are little enough payment for what you do for me every day," she added with a smile, for I drew myself up in rather an offended way. The bit pride that was in me made me want to decline her money, but she would not let me. Then, thinking of what I could get for the dear ones at home, of the fur-lined cloak for mother, and a certain expensive book father had been wanting for a long time, and of the silver bracelets Lindsay my sister so coveted for her fair arms, I lifted them with thankfulness of heart, and bending my head kissed Miss Baxter's brow.

"Are you wearying to get away from this dreary place, Magdalen?" asked the old lady wistfully.

"No; so long as you need me I will gladly stay," I made answer out of the sincerity of my heart.

"You are a good bairn, you take after your father; you have taught me, old woman though I am, some things I did not know before," she said drowsily. "There now, while I take my afternoon nap, go and bid Adam Scott get out the carriage, and get you away down to Selkirk to spend your money. If you have not enough there is plenty more here."

I went away gleefully as a bairn to do her bidding. I never had so much money to spend before, and I was quite excited over it and over the luxury of buying things for those I loved. I got mother's cloak, for which I paid four pounds ten, and I smiled to myself as I put it about my own shoulders, it was so snug and warm and such a handsome and goodly article besides. Then I bought the bracelets for Lindsay my sister, and pictured the bairn's delight over the pretty baubles when she should be clasping them on her arms. Last of all I went to the bookseller's, and though I hardly expected it in a country town, I got the book for father, also a big print Bible for Marjory, and then my money was all gone. How rich I felt as I saw all my purchases lying on the carriage seat! I could just have sung out in the exuberance of my delight.

It was gathering dark when we drove away out of the town again, but just as we reached the corner of

the Yair road I heard the clatter of hoofs, and then Adam Scott pulled up his horses, and the next minute the carriage window was pulled down from without and the Laird of Wolflee, bending down from his saddle, looked in upon me.

"Excuse my want of ceremony," he said blithely, "but when I heard you were in the carriage I could not resist asking what had become of you this long time; you have not even been at the kirk on the Sabbath days. I feared you had gone away home."

It never occurred to me to think it strange for the man to question me thus, as if he had a right to do so; only I know my heart grew glad within me at the very sound of his voice.

"Miss Baxter has been, and is, very poorly, and I have never been out of doors much," I answered simply.

"But you are keeping well I hope, and not thinking of leaving Selkirk for a while."

"Yes, I am well, and I shall likely be here so long as Miss Baxter needs me," I said, and then there was a moment's silence.

"Miss Hepburn, will you permit me to come to Broadlands to see you, since there is no other way?" asked the Laird of Wolflee presently in his blunt impetuous fashion.

"Miss Baxter——" I said faintly.

"Is she as bitter against me as ever?" he asked a little impatiently.

"Truly she never says your name. She is too far spent to be bitter against any mortal now," I answered sadly.

"I will risk it," he said, "for I must see you again."

I said nothing, and was glad that the night shadows hid my changing face.

"I wish I could see your face, Miss Hepburn. Why do you say nothing? If *you* will not make me welcome to Broadlands, say so, and I will bide at home," said he; and oh, how quick was I to note how his voice had changed. But I would not tell him what he wished to hear.

"It is time I was away home, Mr. Oliver," said I. "It will be dark upon us directly, and what if Adam Scott drives his coach over the banks of Yarrow?"

He laughed then, and his voice had a ring in it like a melody of happiness, which made my foolish heart beat.

"Well, good-bye, I *will* come to Broadlands," he said, and held out his hand. I laid my own in it, and he raised it to his lips. I had no power to be angry, or even dignified, though I knew a discreet gentlewoman should not permit such a liberty in a man. But then did I not trust Douglas Oliver with my whole soul? and did I not know that out of our

brief acquaintance had grown the love which was to be the blessing of our lives?

Miss Baxter had had her nap and her afternoon cup of tea also when I returned, and was now sitting up for a little at the fireside in her dressing-room. I went to her there, carrying all my parcels in my arms, and opened them out before her in great glee. She looked at them all with great interest, specially admired the cloak, and then asked where my own Christmas was.

"Oh, I didn't need anything; and, you know, you said I was to buy presents for them at home," I said.

"Is there never a thought of self in your heart, Magdalen?" she asked curiously.

"Oh, many a one!" I said blithely. "Was it not to please myself I ran to spend my money, just as Lindsay and I used to run to the village to buy toffee with our pennies when we were bairns?"

"That was what it was given for," she said. "But come, tell me what *you* would like for your Christmas?"

I turned my head a little away. Did I not know well that the most blessed Christmas gift which could come to me would be to see peace restored between Broadlands and Wolflee and Honeyburn?

I swept aside all my purchases, and, kneeling down on the rug at Miss Baxter's feet, I clasped my hands on her knee and looked up into her worn face. I was all trembling as I did so, and I felt the red rising in my cheeks.

"I hid my face, and went on in a lower voice."—*p.* 65.

"Miss Baxter," I said, "I met the Laird of Wolflee just outside of Selkirk to-day."

"And what of that?" she said listlessly; and to my relief neither face nor voice hardened.

"He stopped and spoke to me, Miss Baxter, and——"

"And what?" Her voice was startled now.

I hid my face and went on in a lower voice, "He asked, did I think you would let him come to Broadlands? and he asked me would *I* let him come?" I paused, for I felt Miss Baxter's frame beginning to tremble also.

"Well?" she said, in a low, almost inaudible voice. Then I broke down, and my tears fell hard and fast on the wasted hands I held firm in mine.

"If you asked me again what I should like for my Christmas, Miss Baxter," I said, "I would say, Let there be peace between Wolflee and Honeyburn and Broadlands, and there will be no happier heart in Scotland than Magdalen Hepburn's." I feared to look up. I feared almost to move. I did not know how the words had ever passed my lips.

At last Miss Baxter spoke, and her voice was very low and troubled. "Rise up, Magdalen, and leave me for a little. See, take up the things you have bought and make them ready to be sent away, and then go down and have your dinner, and I will send for you when I want you again. I would be alone for a little. You ask a great deal, Magdalen Hepburn; it is not in

a moment that the barriers of a lifetime can be swept away."

I did as she bid me. I gathered all the things together and left her, with a yearning prayer in my heart. I ate but little dinner that night. I wandered back to the drawing-room, tried to play and sing and read, all by turns, but it was of no use, my heart and my thoughts were up in Miss Baxter's dressing-room, and I was in a perfect fever of anxiety and hope and boding fears. O God, grant the hard heart may be softened! was my inward and unceasing prayer. I had been three hours downstairs by myself, when Jessy, the house-maid, came to tell me Miss Baxter wished to see me. I, strong-minded, self-reliant Magdalen Hepburn, trembled so as I went upstairs that I had to support myself by holding on to the balustrade.

But who among us has not our weak as well as our strong moments, born of the deepest emotions of the soul? Miss Baxter was sitting where I had left her, only her head was leaning wearily back among the pillows, as if her strength was far spent. I went to the side of the chair, put my hand on her shoulder, then she looked up at me with a faint smile. I did not know how or why it was, but to me her face seemed changed.

"You have won, my bairn," she said. "Get my desk again and write down what I tell you."

I hastened to obey. I felt that pen could never keep

time with the eagerness of my heart. And this was what I wrote to Miss Baxter's dictation :—

"BROADLANDS, 23*rd December*, 1851.

"MY DEAR KINSWOMEN,—Since the coming of my beloved niece, Magdalen Hepburn, to abide at Broadlands, I have been led to see things in a new light. She has shown to me all the error and bitterness of my past life, and that without so much as speaking about it. I see now, and feel very deeply, that in acting as I have towards you, simply because your sister Agnes filled the place I expected to fill, I have been guilty of a grievous sin. For the sake of the old and pleasant days when as bairns we pu'd the gowans and thread the rowans in the dens of Yarrow, for the sake of the love which was between our forefathers when Honeyburn and Broadlands were as one, and, last of all, for the sake of my dear bairn, Magdalen Hepburn, your own sister's niece, will you let bygones be bygones and come to Broadlands, since I am no longer able to go to Honeyburn ? It will be somewhat of a solace to me in the last days of my life, which must be few now, if I can have your companionship, for there are memories between us which will awake the renewal of our youth —a very pleasant theme for us all.—I am your repentant and affectionate kinswoman, SUSAN BAXTER."

I folded up the letter, addressed it to Miss Pringle, and then looked inquiringly at Miss Baxter.

"Adam Scott will take it over to Honeyburn in the morning; and as for the Laird of Wolflee," she added, with a tender yet humorous smile, "we will let him come when he is bold enough; and if he is very long about it we will send Adam Scott for him likewise."

I could not speak for the tears running down my cheeks, but I put my arms about Miss Baxter's neck and kissed her. I think she understood.

"Now, get away downstairs, bairn, for I must go to bed," she said, with a gentleness which did me good. "Eh, Magdalen Hepburn, you have a deal to answer for. You have done what I thought no power on earth could do. Soldered again the parted houses of Broadlands and Honeyburn and Wolflee." It was long ere I slept that night, so eager was I for the morning light.

Immediately after breakfast, Adam Scott, greatly to his own astonishment, was despatched with the letter to Honeyburn. He was told not to wait an answer, and upon his return I set myself to watch for the coming of the ladies. The forenoon passed, however, without bringing them. My heart began to sink. What if they, conscious of their own blamelessness in the long estrangement, should be careless or indifferent about making up now? But remembering their kind faces, and also Miss Elizabeth's peaceable words, I tried to banish my fears. After lunch Miss Baxter began to get very uneasy, and, unable to witness the eagerness with which her eyes would turn ever and anon to the

window, I left her alone and stationed myself on the broad ledge of the library window, from whence I could see right down the avenue to the gate. About three o'clock, greatly to my delight, I beheld two figures enveloped in grey cloaks, which I recognised as pertaining to the Misses Pringle, enter the gate. Poor ladies! I did not know then that these old-fashioned garments, which were ridiculed by some of the rising generation, were only worn because money was lacking for the purchase of more modern attire. I did not run and tell Miss Baxter. I waited patiently till the two figures came up to the door, and then I went down myself to admit them. Each of them wrung my hand, and I could see in their faces traces of deep emotion.

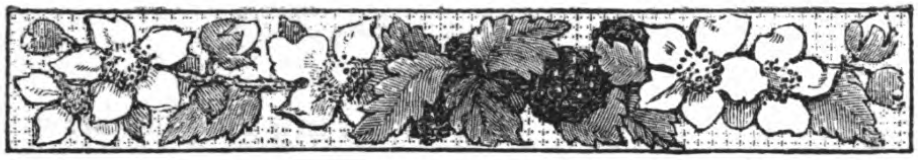
"This is a happy and unlooked-for day for us, my dear," said Miss Elizabeth. "God bless you, you have done great good in Broadlands."

"Hush, Miss Elizabeth," I said deprecatingly. "Will you come upstairs at once? I think it better that you should. She has looked for you all day."

They nodded, and silently we three went upstairs, and I opened the door. Miss Baxter, sitting alone in the soft blending of firelight and daylight, sharply turned her head.

"The ladies are here, Miss Baxter," I said, and then I shut the door and went away. For I was not of them, and it was better that these three lonely women, whose hearts, in spite of long estrangement, were knit to-

gether by the bonds of a past which reached the time when they had clasped their childish hands in love, should meet unhindered and unobserved by any strange eyes, even though these eyes, like mine, should overflow with sympathy and love.



CHAPTER VI.

PEACE.

THEY sent for me by-and-by, and I went upstairs, I looked rather anxiously at Miss Baxter, for I had greatly feared the agitation of this meeting for her. But to outward seeming she was calm and self-possessed, though there were traces of tears on her cheeks. The ladies sat a little apart, and they had been weeping too. Miss Baxter stretched out her hand and drew me to her side. "This is the witch who has wrought the charm. Who would ever have thought that a Hepburn bairn would make peace between Broadlands and Honeyburn?" she said with a tremulous smile. "As you know these ladies already, Magdalen, my dear, I need not introduce them to you. And now do you go and order a cup of tea to be brought up, and we will drink it together before they go, and they will come again to-morrow."

"It is ready, dear Miss Baxter; I thought you would all like it," said I, and Miss Baxter exchanged glances with the ladies.

"Did I not tell you what a willing helpful bairn she is?" she said triumphantly, and I was glad to escape from these praises of myself.

What a cosy pleasant tea-drinking that was! and though I said little, it did me good to hear their talk of old times, folks and things. Though their world was not my world, I could enter it with them and sympathise with the memories in which I had no part. It was quite dusk when they went away, and when I took them downstairs they bade God bless me, and said a great many kind and generous things which I must not write down. When I got back to Miss Baxter I found her lying among her pillows with an expression of deep peace on her face.

"Come here, my blessed bairn," she said to me, and the very tones of her voice sounded different somehow in my happy ears. "Come and let us talk over all this wonderful change together."

I sat down beside her, and she took my hand in hers.

"They are kind Christian women, Joan and Elizabeth Pringle," she said. "It wonders me that they came so ready to forgive me—ay, it wonders and humbles me indeed."

"It is better, is it not, dear Miss Baxter, to be at one with them again?" said I.

"Ay, far far better. My poor cousins! They are so poor, Magdalen Hepburn, that they have to work at sewing and fine lace for their daily bread. They have

nothing in the world but the roof-tree of Honeyburn, Magdalen, and I with thousands lying useless in the bank."

"That can be remedied now," I said soothingly.

"Ay, ay, so it can, and will. To-morrow you will go or send Adam Scott to Selkirk for Mr. Farquharson, the lawyer, and I will make everything right. Sitting wearing themselves over sewing and lace-work for daily bread, at their time of life," she added mournfully, "and I with thousands in the bank."

Next day I thought Miss Baxter not so well, and pleaded with her to delay sending for the lawyer lest it should unduly excite or weary her. But she seemed restless, and anxious that no time should be put off, so early in the forenoon Adam went off on horseback to Selkirk. I bade him call in at the doctor's on his way and ask him to come up to Broadlands in the evening. Mr. Farquharson arrived about half-past two, and was alone with Miss Baxter in the drawing-room for more than two hours, after which he came down to take a bit of dinner with me before returning to the town. I thought he looked at me curiously several times in the course of our conversation, which did not flag, though we were strangers to each other, for he was a very affable man and a fluent talker. Miss Baxter did not feel much inclined to talk when I joined her upstairs, only she told me what a relief it was to her mind now that she had seen Mr. Farquhar-

son and made everything right. It was a wise and prudent step, for after that there was no day upon which poor Miss Baxter's mind was clear enough to fix itself upon the intricate formalities ever inseparable from any dealings with the law. And then began an anxious and mournful time for me, watching and nursing the old lady, never sure of how soon the end might come. The ladies from Honeyburn came to my assistance, and very grateful was I for their kindness. Their gentle ways, noiseless movements and soft footfalls were invaluable in a sick-room. But though I am sure they were better adapted for nursing than I, Miss Baxter liked my hands best about her bed. Though she was unable to speak much, I learned to read every expression of her face, and to know the meaning of the satisfied look when I did anything for her. The Dryburghs were most kind also, and the minister came every day to Broadlands. And I must not forget to write down that the Laird of Wolflee came very often to ask for his neighbour. I only saw him on one occasion, in the library, for a few minutes, and then our demeanour towards each other was strangely stiff and constrained, probably because the impulses of both our hearts were so tightly held in curb. And truly it was better so, for it was not fit nor seemly that there should be any love-making in the house of sickness. But though I did not see him again, I was kept in mind of him by constant gifts of fruit and flowers from

the rare hothouses of Wolflee, and very pleasant it was to me to know in my inmost heart that I was so much in his thoughts. So January wore away, and there was not like to be much betterment for poor Miss Baxter, although she did not appear to grow any worse. She was not able to talk much, as I said, but I remember one afternoon, early in the month of February, she seemed to acquire a sudden strength, for she spoke out to me in a loud clear voice, which rather startled me, and brought me over from my reading in the window to her bed.

"What kind of a day is this, Magdalen?" was the question she asked.

"Quiet and fine; there has been no breath of air stirring," I made answer. "Do you feel better to-day?"

"Yes, like my old self; only I am not deceived. Go away over to the window, Magdalen, and tell me all you see. Tell me how Yarrow and Bowhill and all the countryside looks to-day."

In no small astonishment I obeyed. Once or twice that day, looking out, I had been struck by the strange boding stillness in the air, the motionless aspect of nature, and the sky, though bright and clear, had a strange unsettled look upon it I did not like to see. I forgot to say that a sudden thaw had melted all the snow, except on the colder hill-tops and in deep clefts and by sheltered dykesides which the sun could not reach.

"The snow is all gone from the hills, Miss Baxter," I answered, "but there are white caps yet on Wheathope and Pilmuir. And the pastures are all bare again, but they have a 'blae' look, as if the snow had chilled them through and through. The only green thing is the firs on Bowhill, and it is so still a day that there is not a branch or a leaf stirring from base to summit. Yarrow is not like itself. It is a turbid muddy stream overflowing its banks in a very sullen fashion, not like our winsome Yarrow. It is like the wild and roaring Ettrick to-day."

"You describe it well; I see it all," said Miss Baxter in a satisfied tone. "Now, come and sit down here, I have many things to say."

When I had sat down by her bedside Miss Baxter turned her eyes eagerly on my face. They seemed to have grown larger somehow, and had a brightness very different from the look which had been in them for many days.

"This is the last illness, Magdalen," she said; "I know that I shall never rise again, and that in a few days, perhaps a few hours, I shall meet my Maker face to face."

I said nothing, for I could not contradict her. Dr. Turnbull had apprised me but yesterday that it was but a question of days now.

"Dear Miss Baxter, what of that if you are prepared?" said I very low and softly. "You have lived

many years and known many sorrows, your rest is coming soon."

"How do I know that?" she asked sharply. "The rest remaineth *only* for the people of God. I am not one of His people. I have lived a narrow, selfish, barren life. I have never served Him. I have lived a good moral life, perhaps, but have I not broken, not once, but always, the two commandments, 'Thou shalt love the Lord thy God,' and the second like unto it, 'Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself'? Has the spirit of malice and revenge and bitterness I have nursed for half a lifetime prepared me for this change?"

I laid my soothing hands on hers. I prayed for help, trembling at the responsibility which lay upon me.

"Miss Baxter," said I, "in the mercy and love of God there is pardon for sins more heinous than those. Christ Jesus died to save sinners, *not* the righteous."

"I know, I know; but think of my wasted life, of my neglected opportunities," she groaned; "of the good I might have done, but which I wilfully passed by. Hoarding riches when my fellow-creatures starved, shutting my heart against every good impulse, neglecting to worship God either on my own hearthstone or in the courts of His house. What punishment can be too great for such sins as these, Magdalen Hepburn?"

"Though they be as scarlet, they shall be as wool,"

I pleaded. "A broken and a contrite heart is very precious in God's sight, and He will not cast out even at the eleventh hour. Keep hold of the cross of Christ. It is always there for us to cling to, and God is a Father of mercy and love."

"It is a poor pitiful thing, Magdalen, to clutch hold of the cross now, just like a drowning man trying to save himself," she said slowly. "A poor, pitiful kind of thing to come to God at the end of a long life which has *not* been spent in His service, asking forgiveness and begging to be let into heaven."

The speech was characteristic of the woman. Her rugged and independent nature shrank from what appeared to her only a form of selfishness.

How could I convince her that the God of infinite love and mercy, *even* at the eleventh hour, gladly welcomes his children back to the fold?

"Dear Miss Baxter, think nothing of the past. Leave it all behind, it is blotted out of God's book of remembrance, if only you will look to Jesus now," I cried in my great and solemn earnestness. "Think of nothing but His love. Rest upon it—it is for you, waiting for you. It will sustain and comfort you in the darkest hour, and when that dark hour is past there is rest."

"Rest, rest," she repeated dreamily. "How sweet after pain! 'Come unto Me, *all* ye that labour and are heavy laden,' the Word says. Well, I am weary,

yes, and heavy laden with the burden of the past. And if it is for all, it must be for me, yes, for me."

She closed her eyes, and so restful did her face become, that I, fearing to disturb her, neither spoke nor moved. But up from my yearning heart rose a voiceless petition for the trembling soul voyaging fast towards the mystery of that which was to come. When I saw at length that she had fallen into a gentle slumber, I bent my head on my hands in thanksgiving, for it seemed like an answer to my prayer. It was so like the sleep of a little child lulled to rest by the assurance of a father's love and care.

I rose very softly at length, and walked to the window again. Then I saw that the face of nature had undergone a strange and sudden change. The cloud, "no bigger than a man's hand," I had noted above Wheathope before had spread half across the sky. There was a great stirring among the pines on Bowhill, and in the air a deep moaning sough, the warning note of the coming storm. A fierce yellow glare on the western horizon showed sharply against the black rugged edges of the cloud, and mingling with the dark shadow rapidly enveloping the earth, added to the weirdness of the scene.

A few hours later the tempest broke. May God in His mercy grant that I may not be a witness to such another. It was as if all the powers of earth and air were let loose, and were fighting for the mastery. We

womenfolk, sitting alone in the house of Broadlands, looked at each other with scared white faces while the tempest raged and roared without, shaking the old house to its very foundations. And through it all Miss Baxter slept on calmly and peacefully as a child. Towards midnight the violence of the storm somewhat abated, only to be renewed again with added force in the early morning. There was no thought of bed for any of us that night. Jessy, the housemaid, sat with me in the sick-room. Miss Baxter's maid, Christina Jeffrey, being too nervous to abide with us, joined the cook and the kitchen-maid downstairs. And so that awful night wore away. About five o'clock came the calm, and I, looking out, thankfully saw the stars of hope and promise gleam again in the firmament of heaven. Then I sent poor Jessy away to lie down for a little, and prepared the couch for my own brief repose. Still Miss Baxter slept. Although not much versed in sickness, for the manse of Ardstruan was ever a healthy house, I began to feel a trifle uneasy at that protracted slumber. And yet I feared to awake the sleeper, not knowing but that such blessed repose might be the saving of her life. Resolving that, with the first streak of dawn, I should send the maid to rouse Adam Scott to go for the doctor, I lay down, but I could not sleep. I rose again at half-past six, and as it was a clear morning the light was already breaking. I drew up the blind and looked out. The storm had

spent itself, but it had left its footprints behind. Right across the lawn lay a tall and stately oak torn up by its deepest roots. The avenue was rendered impassable by broken boughs and fallen trees, and beyond the gates there rolled a fierce wild sea swollen until it was level with the road—a mighty contrast surely to the silver thread of Yarrow.

My eyes travelled across to Bowhill. The shadows lay dark upon it yet, but I could discern what appeared to be a great confusion,—surely the beauty and the symmetry of the giant slope seemed destroyed. The broad light of day was to reveal the full destruction wrought there and elsewhere during the watches of the night. With a sigh I turned away, lifted my candle, and went over to look at Miss Baxter. Sleeping still, thought I, and a sudden dread seized upon my heart. There was a motionless stillness in that sleep which should not be. Where was the quiet respiration, the gentle heaving of the breast, we are wont to see in ordinary slumber? My shaking hand went forth and fell tremblingly upon the heart. Still, still, for evermore! Truly, "In an hour when ye think not, the Son of man cometh."

CHAPTER VII.

MY INHERITANCE.

WHEN all was over I went to my bed and slept —that heavy and dreamless sleep which so often supersedes a long vigil which death has ended. When I awoke there was a yellow glow streaming through my chamber window; and when I arose to learn its cause I found to my amazement that it came from the setting sun, and that my watch hands pointed to five o'clock. I hastily dressed myself and went downstairs. Then I learned that there had been many callers at Broadlands, among others the Laird of Wolflee and the ladies from Honeyburn. Faithful Jessy, however, had denied me to one and all, knowing I required an unbroken rest.

After I had had a cup of tea I sat down and wrote a note, which I sent Adam to deliver at Honeyburn. It contained the request that one or both of the ladies would return with the carriage and abide with me until the arrival of my father, for whom I had telegraphed before I slept. In little more than an hour Miss

Elizabeth was with me; and very comforting did I find her kindly presence in the house of death. Together we went upstairs to look at all that remained of the mistress of Broadlands. Her face was most sweet and pleasant to look upon, and the beauty of its early youth had come again. Surely, thought I, unless there had been peace within, that expression of tranquillity and peace could not have rested on the face in death.

"What hope had she, think you, as she drew near the gates of death?" asked Miss Elizabeth gently.

Then I told her something of what had passed between us before she fell into that sleep which was to know no awakening on earth.

"You have been greatly blessed and privileged, Magdalen Hepburn," said the good old lady with streaming eyes. "I doubt not but that the restless soul of poor Susan Baxter has found peace at last."

Then we went downstairs again, and, sitting by the hearth, we talked low and softly of the dead. Miss Elizabeth seemed to find no small comfort and pleasure in recalling the days of their childhood, when the three little girls at Honeyburn and the idolised child of Broadlands were sisters in heart and purpose, before the bitterness of a later day estranged them from each other. As for me, my heart was very sore, for I felt as if I had lost a friend. I had learned to love Miss Baxter in spite of her uncertain temper and somewhat unlovable ways, and her death was a real grief to me.

About half-past seven there was a knocking at the hall door, and then the noise of some one entering the house. Presently Jessy came to the dining-room door, saying the Laird of Wolflee was in the library and would speak with me a moment if I would so favour him. I rose at once and hurried away, but not before Miss Elizabeth had been witness to my tell-tale face.

The light in the library was somewhat subdued, greatly to my relief; but when I gave my hand silently to Douglas Oliver, he drew me over to the lamp and looked with searching eyes into my face. I tried to free myself and to avert my conscious face from his earnest gaze, but he only held me the firmer.

"It seems years since I saw you," he said quickly. "Do you grudge me a few minutes, Magdalen? Does it displease you that I should care to look upon the face dearer to me than any other in the world?"

I know not what I said. All I remember now is that I no longer struggled in his clasp, but that my head found a resting-place on his manly breast.

"Magdalen, my darling, my wife to be, I hope," he said passionately, "only tell me that you can care a little for me, rough-and-ready fellow though I be, and I will go away and not trouble you any more to-night."

I told him what he wished to hear and more. I said that my whole heart was his—for where perfect faith and love exist there need be no reserve. It was a strange commingling in my heart that night—grief that

I had lost my friend, joy that I had found what is, and must ever be, the crown of a woman's heart and life. I sent him away at last and went back to Miss Elizabeth, and knowing that she wondered at my long absence, I told her my secret.

"God bless you and him, my dear," she said fervently. "He is a noble manly fellow. He has the heart of his mother, Mary Oliver, who was one of the few utterly unselfish women I have ever met."

Next morning Mr. Farquharson came up from Selkirk, and he it was who made all the arrangements for the funeral. Late in the evening of the same day my father arrived at Broadlands, and great was my joy and comfort at sight of him. He seemed surprised at beholding Miss Elizabeth in the house, for in the throng of my many duties I had not had time to write fully about everything.

"Your daughter made peace between Broadlands and Honeyburn before the end," she said to him with tears in her eyes. "Is it not strange, Robert Hepburn, that you and I should meet, old man and old woman in Susan Baxter's house of Broadlands?"

"Ay, strange indeed!" said father dreamily, and I saw that his thoughts were of the past. Then they sat down together and began their old-time crack, and for the time I was forgotten.

It was seven-and-twenty years since father had been in Selkirkshire before, and then it was when he had

performed the ill-fated marriage ceremony which bound his ne'er-do-weel brother Donald to gentle Agnes Pringle of Honeyburn. My mother had been unable to accompany him then, because I was a baby in arms.

Upon the following afternoon Miss Baxter was carried to her rest in the kirkyard of Yarrow. There was a great gathering at the burying, for the name of Baxter of Broadlands was one of the oldest in the countryside, and the deceased lady was the last of her race. It is a sad and solemn thing for the womenfolk left behind to watch the slow wending of the funeral train away from the house, and an experience calculated to make them examine whether they be ready and prepared for the last summons. For no man nor woman knows how or when that summons may come. There returned to the house for the reading of the will Dr. Turnbull, Mr. Dryburgh the minister, and Captain Scott of Hartrigge; in company with my father and Mr. Farquharson the lawyer from Selkirk. There had been a talk between the Miss Pringles about specially asking Douglas Oliver of Wolflee to return also; and very thankful was I afterwards that the invitation had not been given. Mr. Farquharson, being a very dignified and proper person, had all his preliminaries to go through before he proceeded to read aloud the substance of the will itself. So briefly and concisely was it stated that I think I can recall it word for word.

"I, Susan Baxter of Broadlands, being in my sound

mind and judgment, do hereby, on this twenty-fourth day of December, eighteen hundred and fifty-one, dispose of my moneys and properties as follows:—

"First, to my faithful serving-woman, Christina Jeffrey, the sum of fifty pounds per annum, as long as she lives, together with that two-storey house, number nineteen in the Nethergate of Selkirk, to be her absolute property to do with whatsoever she will. Also to my coachman, Adam Scott, fifty pounds per annum, so long as he lives. Also to my maids at present with me in my house of Broadlands (here followed their names) the sum of fifty pounds, to be paid within a month of my decease. Then to my kinswomen, Joan Pringle and Elizabeth Grace Pringle of Honeyburn, the sum of three thousand pounds each, to be paid within a month of my decease. And with my bequest I would entreat them to forgive me for my long coldness towards them, which I do most truly and heartily repent this day. To my friend and kinsman, Robert Hepburn, minister of Ardstruan, the sum of one thousand pounds, and the further sum of one hundred pounds to be spent in the replenishing of his library. To his wife, whom I have never seen, I bequeath the sum of five hundred pounds, together with my amethyst and gold set of brooch and earrings, which will be found in my jewel-case. Also to her second daughter, Lindsay Hepburn, the sum of five hundred pounds, together with my pearl and ruby pendant and necklace, also to be found

in my jewel-case. Last of all, to my dear and well-beloved young kinswoman, Magdalen Forbes Hepburn, I leave and bequeath my lands and home of Broadlands, together with all furnishings and plate to be found therein, as also my entire wardrobe and jewellery. And in the event of the said Magdalen Forbes Hepburn becoming a wife and mother, I hereby will and declare that Broadlands shall become the property of her second child, when he or she comes of age. If said child should prove a son, I desire that he shall be called by the name of Donald Hepburn Baxter, but if a daughter I make no condition regarding her. And I leave with the said Magdalen Forbes Hepburn my solemn blessing and love. And I hereby declare that this is my last will and testament, for which every other document must be set aside 'and declared null and void.'"

When Mr. Farquharson ceased there was a dead silence. I sat staring straight before me, not comprehending what had befallen me. I was awakened, however, by Mr. Farquharson coming towards me with outstretched hand.

"Allow me to congratulate you very heartily, Miss Hepburn, upon your inheritance," he said in his pompous way. "It is no small satisfaction to me that my client should have left her possessions in such wise and prudent hands."

Then the ladies came and kissed me, and Captain Scott and Mr. Dryburgh congratulated me likewise,

only my father standing in the window with his back to me never moved. Unable to remain any longer, so overwhelming were the emotions which possessed me, I hastily quitted the room and ran away upstairs. Some impulse drew me towards the room which to-day was empty for the first time. I sat down there and tried to realise that I, Magdalen Hepburn, who had been so long content to rule the plain and economical household ways of Ardstruan Manse, was now a great lady, mistress of Broadlands, to whom the rightful dues of a great estate would henceforth be paid. I knelt down by the bed, I laid my face on the pillow which Miss Baxter's quiet head had so lately pressed, and prayed that I might be guided to walk humbly and wisely in this new strange path which was opened up for me. There was neither joy nor pride in my heart in that hour, only great fear and trembling, for oh! how few among us can stand prosperity, how few among us can wield the reins of wealth and high estate, and still keep unspotted from the world! My fervent petitions, my casting all my care upon God, soothed at length my troubled and fearful spirit. And my chief thought as I rose was not of the honour and dignity of my new estate, but of the opportunities thus given to me for doing good. I had never thought of riches merely for selfish gratification, but as a means for brightening life for those I loved, and beyond that for the alleviation of the burdens of others. Might I think so still! Might

I ever be found through all my life, whether that life be long or short, willing to spend and be spent in the service of the living God! With these inward yearnings in my spirit I went downstairs, to be taken to my father's heart.

"God bless you, my daughter, and enable you in your new position to serve Him as you have done since you first understood that service is the first joy and duty of a loving heart," said my father; then my heart was at rest.

That night Douglas Oliver came once more to Broadlands. I need not write down how my father, reading at a glance, that fearless, manly, upright soul, bravely stifled the natural regrets of a father's heart, and to a brief earnest question freely answered Yes. When Douglas Oliver rose to go, I put my shawl about me and went with him to the door, for I was his betrothed now, under the approving sunshine of a parent's smile.

"So it is the lady of Broadlands I am to wed now?" said my Douglas, and I fancied there was a shade of regret in his tone.

"Nay, as plain Magdalen Hepburn I was won," I whispered as I hid my face. "I will never be the lady of Broadlands to you. It is too heavy a charge for me. I give it to you, Douglas, and so the Knowe Park will be restored again when Broadlands and Wolflee are one."

"True, but I would rather have had my tocherless lass," said Douglas.

"Will you give me up because Miss Baxter made me her heiress?" I asked in rather an offended tone.

"Give you up! God forbid!" said Douglas, with an earnestness which completely satisfied my heart. After a little he added dreamily, "You will not keep me waiting long, my Magdalen? Wolflee has been a dreary house since my mother died. I wish you had known my mother; she was an angel on earth." I saw the tear start in his eye, and I honoured and loved him for it.

"I will try," I whispered, "with all my heart I will try, not to fill your mother's place, Douglas, only to make her loss less hard to bear."

"You have done that already, my darling. It was her last prayer that I would marry a wife who would help, not hinder me, in the true way. I think she guided me to you," said Douglas; and there was a far-away look on his face, which awed me and kept me very still. "I am a rough-and-ready fellow, my dearest, hasty of speech and impulsive of action, but I *want* to be and to do good, to live as *she* would have had me live. You will help me, will you not, my darling?"

"I will try, and God will help us both," I said, and my tears overflowed. For my heart was so filled with blessedness that it could hold no more. I thought so then, but I know now that there are higher heights of

bliss, a keener joy in which deep suffering commingles. But let me not dwell upon it here.

* * * * * *

It is two-and-forty years since I stood that night with my beloved upon the moonlit doorstep of Broadlands. Two-and-forty years! and I am in the house of Broadlands still, a lone woman, desolate in my autumn time. Desolate, did I say? Nay, for there is a little hand clasping mine as I write, and a childish voice begs "grandma" to leave writing, for Douglas is weary playing alone. I turn and lift him to my knee, and clasp him to my heart. Douglas Oliver—Douglas Hepburn Oliver—the little heir of Broadlands and Wolflee! Then I look beyond the Knowe Park to the house of Wolflee, where abides my one son Douglas Oliver, with his winsome girl-wife, Marjorie Fleming of Wheathope, a daughter of my old friend Janet Dryburgh of the manse. Ten years did I abide a happy wife in Wolflee, for nine summers and winters did my darling and I watch together the growth of our one son, and then the desolation of my widowhood fell upon me—my beloved was taken in his prime, to wait for me, with the angel-mother, on the other side.

Two-and-thirty years have I pursued my widowed way in this weary world. During these years I have bidden my kinsfolk farewell one by one — father, mother, Lindsay my sister (who was laid to rest with her first baby on her breast), and many others have

gone and left me behind. And I, leaving the house of Wolflee to my son and daughter, have come back to Broadlands to abide until the few shadows which lie between me and my beloved shall flee away. It will not be long. Already the little Douglas begins to wonder why grandma walks so slow, and why, even on sunny days in the pleasant garden, she grows wearied so soon and is glad to rest.

Grandma knows why it is. Others are able and willing to do the work for which she no longer has sufficient strength. Younger hearts and hands have set her aside a little in the walks of life, and so her hold upon the earth will not be difficult to loose. She is content, nay, glad and thankful that it is so, for to her heaven is *home*.

So may you feel, my little Douglas, when the years of your earthly pilgrimage are accomplished and heaven draweth nigh!

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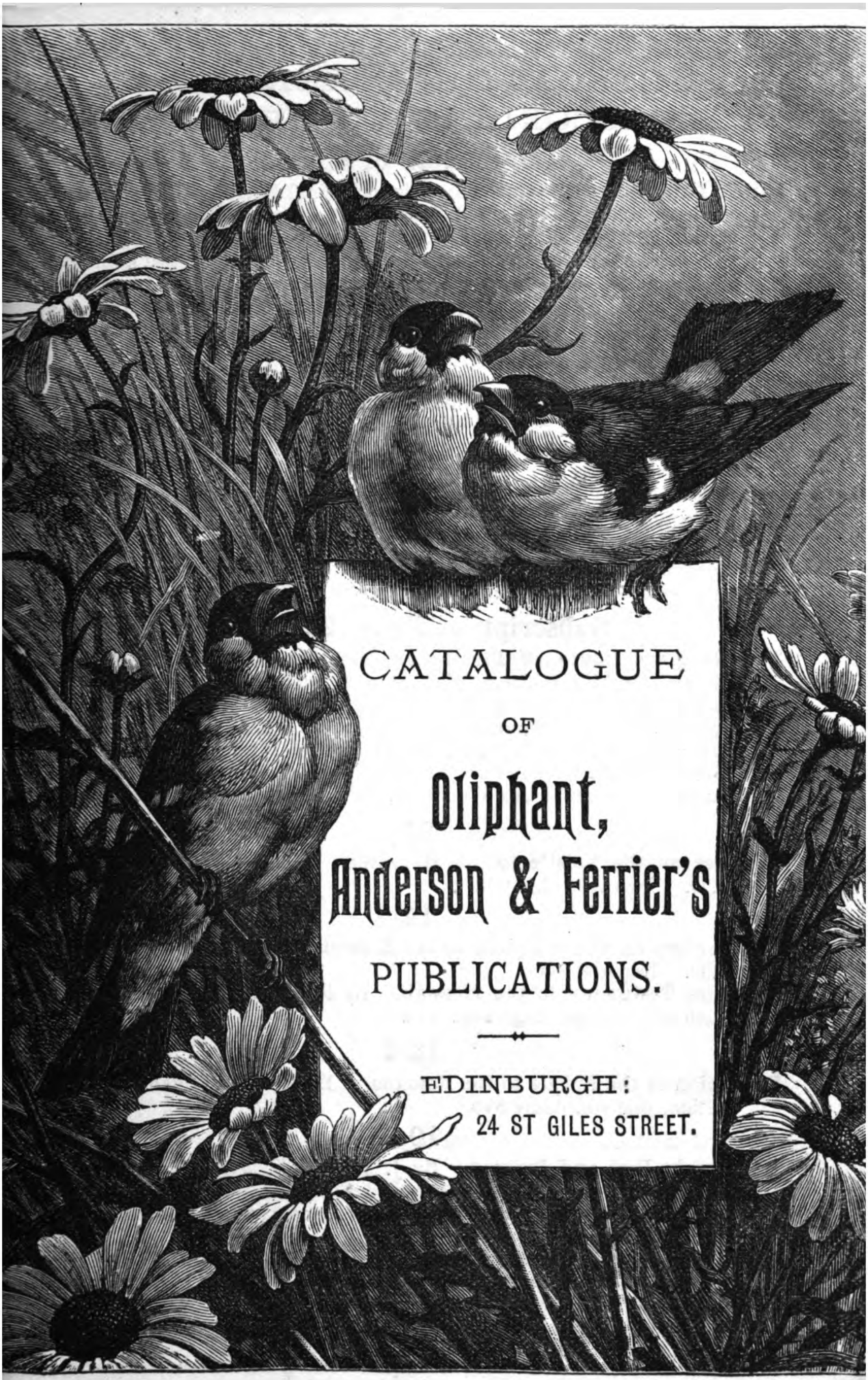

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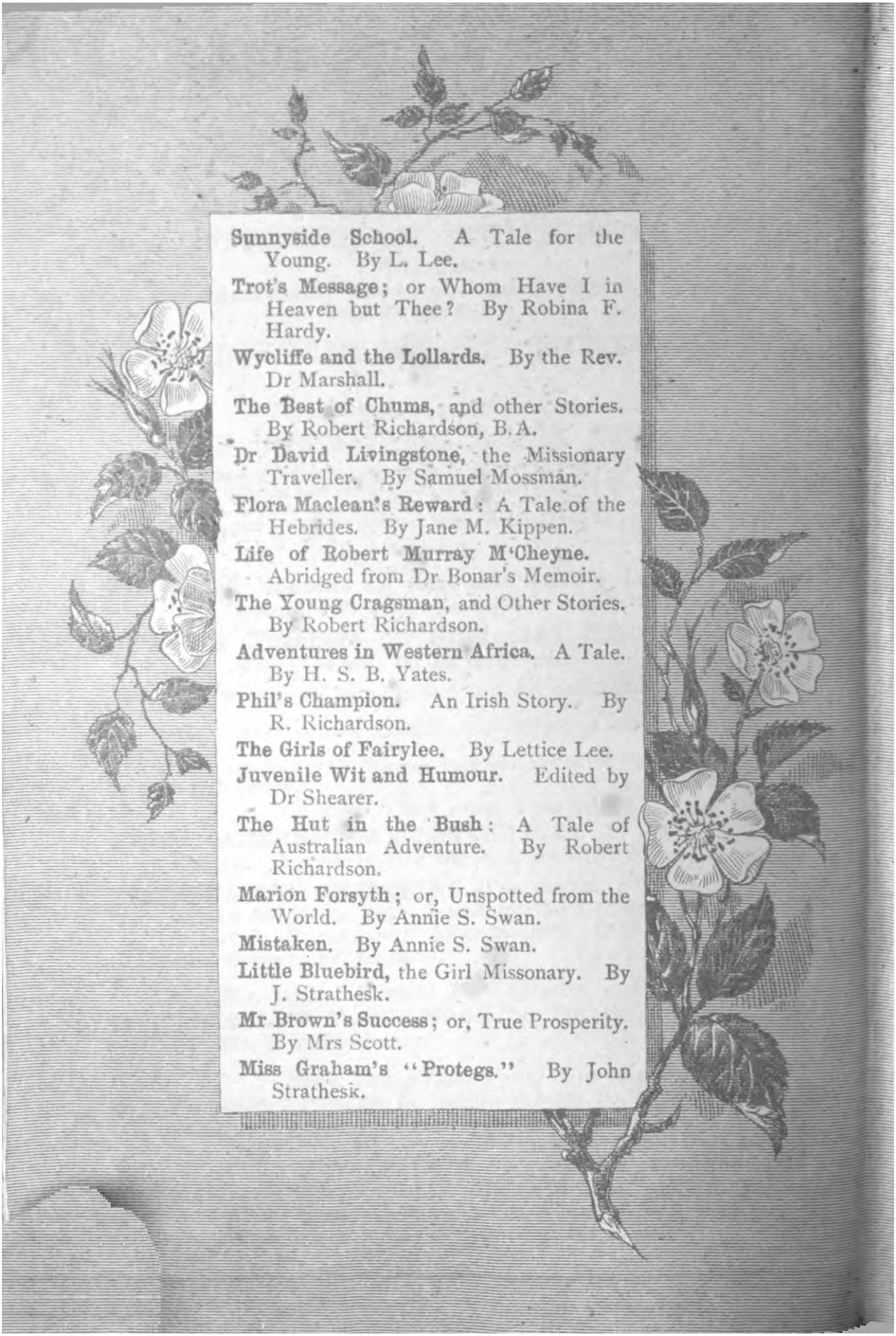

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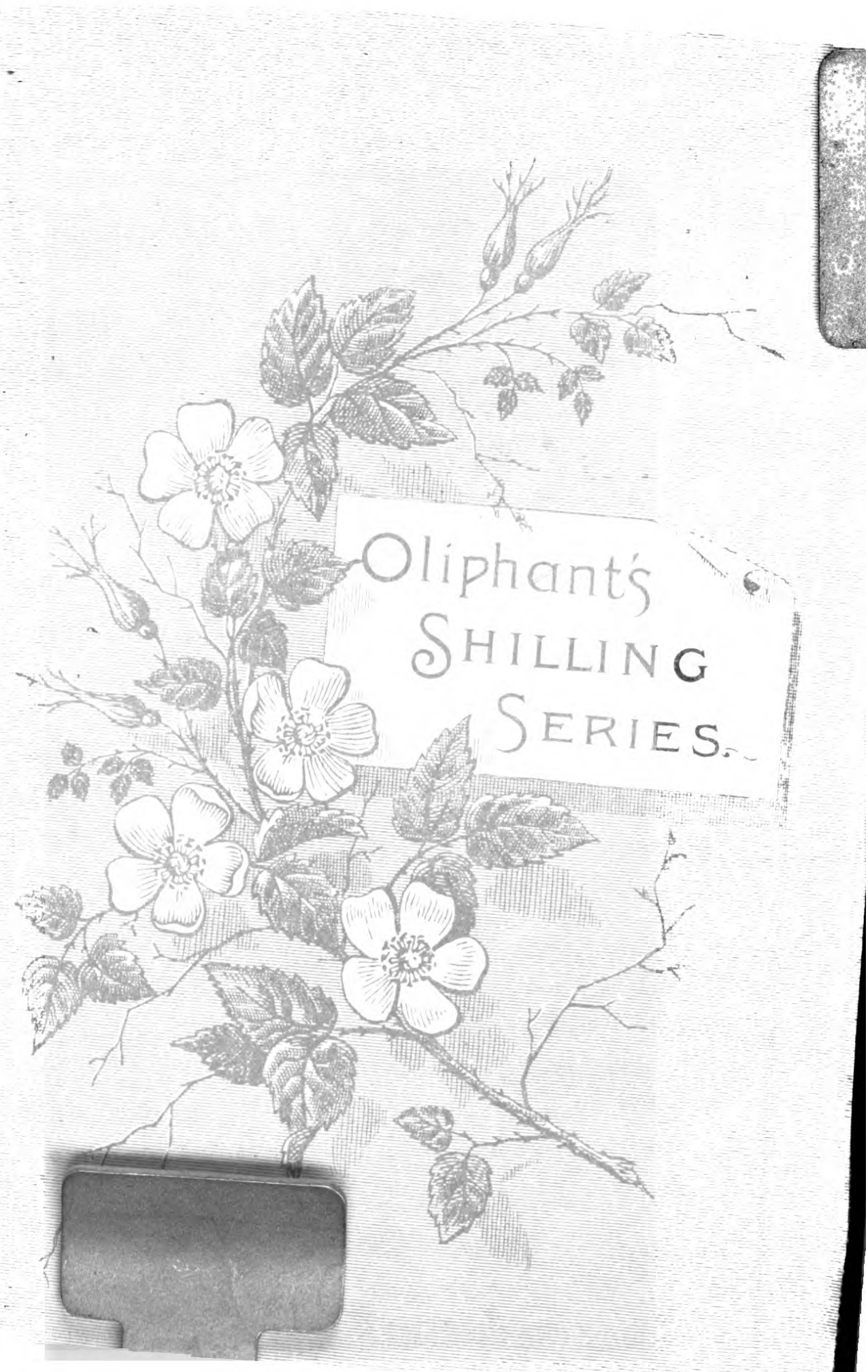
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