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SEVENTY YEARS SINCE

The last representatives of our grandfather's generation having passed away, there is no reason why the following true stories of an old Scotch house should not be made public, for the entertainment of others besides those members of the family to whom only they have hitherto been known. I have slightly changed the names of persons and places, but not a detail of the stories has otherwise been altered from the first-hand accounts given us by those who were themselves their heroes and heroines.

On a winter's afternoon in the year 1816 three young officers were riding 'within a mile of Edinboro' toun;' they were pushing on in advance of their regiment, which was that day marching into new quarters, hoping to reach the city in time to choose lodgings for themselves, to whom rooms in barracks had not been allotted. Suddenly a gaunt gipsy woman of the Meg Merrilies type darted out upon them, and laid her detaining hand upon the bridle of Lieutenant T – (my grandfather). He tried to shake his rein free, but without effect, and the little cavalcade was brought to a halt by her persistence; then addressing the gentlemen collectively, but keeping her eyes upon my grandfather, she offered to tell their fortunes. The young men laughed at the suggestion, and the gipsy wife waxed angry. 'Ye'll do little good in Edinboro' or elsewhere,' she retorted roughly to the two captains who had declined her services. 'But for ye' (speaking only to Lieutenant T –), 'there's a bonnie bride waiting in the first house ye enter!'

My grandfather threw her a shilling and galloped on with his companions, enduring for some time their good-natured raillery about the spae-wife's prediction; but when they reached the city they were too much engaged in observing the outsides of the houses which might afford them the desired lodgings, to think further of the prophecy. In the dim light, one large house with closed shutters looked as if it were untenanted and likely to suit their requirements; while a light from a lower kitchen window shewed that some one was left in charge who could attend to Lieutenant T – 's loud summons at the knocker. But the young man, accounted a gallant soldier enough, who had seen some service in the late wars, was entirely routed and discomfited by the furious reception his modest inquiry after lodgings met with from the stalwart maid-servant who answered the door. 'Lodgings! What was the world coming to when a daft young fool asked if her mistress let lodgings? The family was away in the north, and this would be a pretty tale to tell them on their return,' stormed the cross maid; and my grandfather, leaving a torrent of rough language behind him, made his escape down the steps of the house over whose threshold he had so mistakenly intruded. He remounted his horse amid the jeers of his two friends, who reminded him of his fate predicted by the gipsy, and begged him, if this were a sample of the 'bonnie bride's' usual temper, to exchange into another regiment as soon as he married. Eventually the young men found rooms to suit them, and in a few days became quite at home in the pleasant capital of the north, which was just beginning its gay winter season.

About a week after their arrival the officers were present at an Assembly ball, and Lieutenant T – lost his heart at first sight to a lovely young *débutante* of fifteen, with whom he danced the whole evening. At the close of the ball he was introduced to a grand turbaned lady, his partner's mother; and on seeing the ladies to their carriage he asked leave to do himself the honour of calling for them next day. This permission and their address were given him, and the latter noted in his pocket-book. The next morning he eagerly sought out their house, which he did not recognise as the scene of his first adventure till Ailie, the same stalwart maid, opened the door, and this time admitted him graciously.

This visit was followed by many others; and before a year had passed my grandfather won the 'bonnie bride' of the spae-wife's prediction from the very house across whose threshold he had first set foot on entering Edinburgh. They were a very young pair; he only twenty-one and my grandmother just sixteen at their marriage; and how their housekeeping might have prospered or the reverse I do not know, had not Ailie decided to take service with the young couple, and maintained their interests during the wanderings of the next thirty years as faithfully as she had previously guarded the honour of her mistress's house. She was one of the now extinct race of family servants, a sort of factotum in the house, where she did her own work and a good part of every one else's in a wonderfully indefatigable fashion, only reserving to herself the privilege of keeping every one in order, from the master and mistress down to the kitchen wench.

To three out of the four generations of our family whom she served, she was 'old Ailie;' and her flowered chintz bedgown and mob-cap survived unaltered far into the era of crinoline and chignon. What stories she had to tell of Madam our great-grandmother, a very grand dame indeed, and well-known card-player; and of a certain Mistress Jean, her favourite heroine, whom some of us recollect as Aunt Moir, a little soft-faced, pink-and-white lady, not so imposing to look upon as the miniature of her powdered mamma, but a beauty nevertheless in her day. She lived at a time when it was the acknowledged fate of all Edinburgh belles to fall a prey to dyspeptic old East Indians, who having been drafted off as raw lads to India, were heard of no more till they returned as nabobs half a century later, to take their pick of the blooming lassies for whom the Scottish capital has ever been justly celebrated.

Aunt Moir would describe how she and her mother went every Sabbath morning to 'sit under' Dr M' – ; and how, as they mounted the high steps to the entrance of the place of worship, the beaus young and old – some in blue swallow-tailed coats buttoned tight across the chest, and frilled *jabots* like protruding fins; others with military pigtails and riding-boots – stood on each side of the door and criticised their figures (a lady's face in those days being pretty well hidden by her telescopic bonnet), and more particularly their feet and ankles, incased in sandalled shoes and silk stockings. Aunt Moir admitted that her feet passed their examination creditably enough, though the criticism was sometimes more severe than gallant; and one of her young-lady friends went by the name of 'Flat-foot Meg.' But Aunt Jean's were evidently of a different order, and were swift and light enough to do even more than please the fastidious taste of the Edinburgh bucks. Some years after her marriage with an old and invalid husband, who had carried her away from Edinburgh to a country home, Mistress Moir, little more than a girl still, one day going over her domains started a hare from a barley-stook, and throwing all her matronly dignity to the winds, she pursued Puss through a couple of meadows, and eventually captured and brought him struggling to the house. Whether she kept maukin as a pet and proof of her agility, or converted him into the excellent soup for which she has left us her recipe, labelled in a pointed Italian hand-writing 'Mistress Moir's Hare Broth,' history does not relate. Let us hope the former fate was his, for the recipe says in conclusion, 'Without the meat of *two* hares is the broth poor and meagre.'

Aunt Moir had no children of her own; but her heart and home were always open to the numerous members of the T – family, her nephews and nieces. She found queer old ornaments, Indian beads and tartan scarfs, in her store-boxes for the girls; and the town-bred boys found rare opportunities for healthful delightful mischief when the High School released them for their holidays at Moir. One species of entertainment was specially sacred to Aunt Jean's kail-yard: to mount astride upon tall, well-grown, firm-hearted cabbages, and rock gently to and fro, with short leather-breeched, gray-stockinged legs sticking out straight like a cavalry officer's, until a warning crack in the stalk, or the sudden appearance of Aunt Jean's Tam rushing round some unexpected corner, with his climax of threats: 'I'll tell Mistress Alice,' drove the boys from their position.

A gray-headed, cross-grained old fellow was Tam, affecting to disapprove highly of the annual summer incursion of boys and girls into the Moir fruit-gardens, trampling among his strawberries

that were destined for Mistress Jean's preserves, and rifling his bushes for 'honeyblobs.' But he had a soft spot in his heart for my mother, Anna T – , who reminded him, he fancied, of his little daughter Kirsty, dead thirty years before; and many a Sunday afternoon did Tam give mother a helping hand through her portion of the Shorter Catechism, imposed as a becoming exercise for the mind by Aunt Moir on each of the children. Tam was a rigid Sabbatarian of course, and even his favourite Anna was not exempted from blame when one Sabbath evening the whole young party were discovered in pursuit of a marauding rabbit who had for days past ravaged their gardens. Ananias and Sapphira, Korah, Dathan, and Abiram were somewhat irrelevantly cited as cases in point, or at least as fellow-sinners; but he ended by muttering to himself, as he left the abashed T – children to meditate over his sermon: 'An' the Lord spare me till the morn's morn, I'll shoot that deil mysel.'

Tam had been with Aunt Moir's parents at Portcorry before they migrated southwards to Edinburgh, to settle the boys in life and the girls in marriage. She had a queer story to tell us of her childhood connected with Tam's wife Kirsty, who lived as nursery-maid in her father's house, and had somewhat indifferently, and in the spirit of the lass who sang, married Tam the 'gairdner lad,' and retired with him to the lodge. When her little Kirsty was born, however, she gladly accepted the post of wet-nurse to the contemporaneous baby just arrived at the house, and returned to her old position in the nursery, bringing all her newly awakened maternal love, as well as her boundless devotion and respect for 'the family,' to lavish upon little weakly Uncle Donald. Baby Kirsty at the lodge flourished upon oatmeal porridge administered by Tam's clumsy hands, and was soon 'creeping' about everywhere with the big collie dog as her sole attendant; while up at the house Master Donald took all the devotion of two mothers to rear him, and was all-sufficient to Mrs Kirsty, who forgot husband, child, and home in her tendance of her foster-son.

If it's ordained I maun tak him,
Wha will I get but Tam Glen?

At last, almost a year afterwards, the boy being weaned and fairly strong, it was thought time to dismiss the foster-mother to her home duties; and accordingly, after a violent and distressing parting, she tore herself away from the child and returned to the lodge for good. That same night Aunt Jean, a child of nine, who slept in the same room occupied by the head-nurse and the baby brother, woke suddenly without any particular reason, and saw by the dim light of the nursery lamp, Kirsty's well-known figure walking to and fro through the room with the little white bundle of a Donald in her arms. Presently she laid the quieted child down in his cot again; and then catching the wide-open eyes in the next bed, she made a sign to be silent, turning her head in the direction of the sleeping head-nurse. Aunt Jean, well aware of various little nursery jealousies between Mrs Macnab and Mrs Kirsty, gave a nod of acquiescence, and lay quite still, watching Kirsty as she softly bent over the little boy, settled him comfortably, and kissed him again and again. She was still there hovering round the cot with noiseless footsteps when the little girl fell asleep again.

Next morning, the first news that came to the house was that poor Mistress Kirsty had died suddenly in the night in her own bed of a sudden attack of heart complaint; brought on, the doctor said, by the excessive grief to which she gave way on parting from her adopted son. Tam and little Kirsty did not miss her much, I believe; nor, sad to say, did the little lad for whom she had spent her strength so willingly; but Aunt Jean held persistently to her story of the 'vision;' and the tale of 'faithful Kirsty' is still a beloved tradition in our nursery. Thanks to her care, Uncle Donald grew up a strapping lad, and when only fifteen served at the battle of Waterloo, and was present at the entry of the allied powers into Paris. There is still extant a funny etching, executed by some wit of the regiment, in which Ensign Donald is represented 'looting' a confectioner's shop, with drawn sword in one hand and immense half-demolished *brioche* in the other; the young ladies of the counter, attired

in the classical costumes of the First Empire, flying every way from the onslaught of this hero from the Land o' Cakes.

They were a kindly race these Scotch relations of ours; less extravagant in their habits, customs, and ways of thought than their descendants of the present generation; handsomer and healthier too, perhaps, if we judge from the bright eyes and rosy smiling faces of the portraits they have left us; though even in these degenerate days, a return to the early hours, simple habits, and oatmeal porridge of the last century might yet make our lads and lassies, who inherit the friendly Scottish nature, as handsome, healthy, and happy as their grandfathers and grandmothers were seventy years since.

THE LAST OF THE HADDONS

CHAPTER XXIX. – PHILIP AND ROBERT

We found Robert Wentworth with Mrs Tipper, and he too, I saw, very curiously examined Philip as they were introduced to each other. Each eyed the other curiously and critically for a moment or two, as they uttered the first few words; and I think each was as favourably impressed towards the other as I could desire them to be. They were kindred spirits, and soon recognised that they were, making acquaintance in easy, undemonstrative, manly fashion. Robert Wentworth was like an elder brother of Philip's, and there was just sufficient difference between their minds to give a zest to their companionship. Philip's was a more mercurial temperament; whilst there was a vein of satire in the other, lacking in him. Lilian thought that Robert Wentworth had not the same poetical perception which Philip possessed; but that did *not* I, for whom the former had unfolded the hidden meaning, the subtle essence of some of *the* poet's most delicate imagery. Of course I could not suppose Robert Wentworth to be Philip's superior; but neither would I do him the injustice of calling him inferior. They were different.

One thing puzzled me not a little as time went on. Whether it was that my love for Philip made me shyer and more reticent with him, or whether he did not look for certain things in me, I know not; but one part of my mind, which was as an open book to Robert Wentworth, remained undiscovered and even unsuspected by my lover. Once when Philip made a little jest about Lilian's romance and enthusiasm, Robert Wentworth smilingly opined that there were graver offenders in that way than Lilian; but I knew that I was the only one to perceive his meaning. If Philip had any suspicion that the allusion was intended for me, he did not perceive its application. Would it have made any difference if I had been able to let my thoughts flow into words when alone with him? When I was his wife – when this foolish shyness, reticence, or whatever it might be, was once overcome – I knew that he would find me a much more attractive companion than now. But while I longed to give more expression to my feelings, I nervously shrank from doing so. I almost wished that he would *force* me to shew my thoughts, as Robert Wentworth used to take so much delight in doing.

What girl could love as I did? What love could be deeper and more intense than mine? Yet the consciousness that I was *not* a girl kept me silent whilst my soul vibrated to every look and word of his. Ah me – ah Philip! would it have been wiser to let you see? That night when we stood together in the moonlight – when you good-naturedly jested me about my matter-of-fact way of regarding things – would it have been better to let you see the volcano hidden beneath the snow? Ah Philip, when you feared I had caught a chill, and wrapped my shawl closer about me, would it have been wiser to let you know *why* I was trembling beneath your touch?

I have learned to say: 'No; better as it was.'

But I have been anticipating. This first evening of the meeting between Robert Wentworth and Philip, all was *couleur de rose*, and my mind was at rest. I sat more silent than usual, congratulating myself upon the prospect of the great desire of my heart being gratified. They two would be friends, even according to my somewhat *exigeante* notion of what friendship should be. Then it was pleasant to listen to Robert Wentworth's few words respecting his appreciation of Philip, so honestly and heartily spoken.

'You must not forget that it is a brother's right to give you away, when the time for giving away comes, Mary,' he said gently, as he and I stood together by the open window a few minutes, whilst Philip was turning over the music for Lilian, who was singing some of his favourite airs for him.

'Will you? It is kind to wish it,' I murmured, feeling that it was a great deal more than kind.

'Mr Dallas is, I believe, worthy of any man's sister, Mary.'

'I am glad you think so' – I paused a moment, then, as a sister should, added – 'Robert.'

He smiled, and talked pleasantly on, contriving to set me quite at ease respecting the state of his own mind. I was now able to persuade myself that he had been deceived, and that his friendship for me had never really developed into a stronger feeling. Presently he said in his abrupt friendly fashion: 'Why do *you* not sing, Mary?'

'Oh, Lilian sings that so much better than I; and it is a favourite of Philip's.'

'Well, come now and enchant our ears;' going towards the piano as Lilian ceased, and looking out a song which he always said I sang well. 'Now, do your best.'

But although Philip and Lilian were more than satisfied, Robert was not. He and I knew that it was not my best, their kind speeches notwithstanding. He seemed to have quite changed his tactics with regard to me – doing everything in his power to make me appear to advantage in Philip's eyes. But he unconsciously deprived me of the pleasant termination of the day, which I had been looking forward to. Philip and he set forth together to walk to the railway station, and of course there was no moonlight walk for me that night.

But there was the morrow – many a happy morrow to come, now, I told myself, looking after them as they went down the lane together. The more they saw of each other, the sooner they would become friends. Lilian, who stood beside me at the gate, slipped her arm round my waist, and laid her head against my shoulder in eloquent silence.

It was fortunate that the day had come round for paying my promised visit to Nancy Dean. I felt that I needed some kind of reminder that I did not live in a world all flowers and sunshine. I set forth the next morning alone, thinking that Nancy might possibly feel less under constraint than if Lilian were present during our interview. Philip had some banking business to transact which would prevent his getting down to us until late in the afternoon; and I had therefore ample time for my errand before his arrival.

This time I found no difficulty in obtaining admittance; and was informed that the rules allowed me to remain an hour, if I chose so to do, with my friend Nancy Dean. That hour we were at liberty to spend in either the dining-hall or exercise-ground, as we chose. We gazed earnestly and curiously at each other as we shook hands; and I hope she was as pleased with me by daylight as I was with her.

Without being handsome or even pretty, Nancy Dean's was a face which pleased me much. If expressing a shade too much self-will and the firmness which, untrained, is so apt to degenerate into obstinacy, there was no trace of meanness, deceit, or dishonesty.

'You expected me to-day of course, Nancy?'

'I shouldn't be here if I hadn't, Miss,' she returned with a grave smile. We had elected to spend the hour in the open air; and with my arm linked in hers, we paced slowly up and down part of the old court-yard, or exercise-ground as it was called.

'In that case, I ought to be thankful that no accident occurred to prevent my coming. It might have, you know, and then poor I should have had to bear the blame for anything which followed.'

'How could you have been to blame if an accident had happened, Miss?'

'My dear Nancy, if you had fallen back, *some one* would have been in fault, since we could hardly throw the blame upon an accident.'

'You mean *I* should have been to blame, if I had gone wrong again because you did not come?'

I smiled. 'I am not altogether sure which of us would have been *most* in fault, Nancy.'

'But how could you' —

'One thing is clear. I did not succeed in giving you faith in me, although I had faith in you.' She looked dubiously at me a moment, then her eyes slowly filled with tears. 'Perhaps I haven't been ready enough to believe in people. Till now, nobody ever seemed to believe in *me*.'

'It is not for me to judge, Nancy. I can only say I am pleased that you had the strength and courage to return here and remain, under the circumstances.'

'You seem to know exactly the best thing to say to encourage me, Miss!' ejaculated Nancy. 'And even when you hit hard, as you sometimes do, I don't seem to mind it so much from you as I do from other people – it's different, somehow! You don't seem to enjoy thinking about my wickedness.'

'If I thought you wicked, I certainly should not enjoy thinking so; and if you were, you would not have come back here. Poor Nancy, I am afraid it has been rather hard for you!'

'If you could only know *how* hard it has been!' she murmured. 'Think of never being spoken to by any of the others for a week; kept in silence and solitude, and looked upon as the worst creature that ever breathed!'

'All the more credit to you for bearing it. But we will not talk about that. Let us rather think about the future. I told you I am going to be married shortly – in a month or two probably – and then we are going abroad for a time.'

'Shall I have to stay here till you come back, Miss?' she asked anxiously, her face falling at the thought.

'No; I do not wish it; that would be too much to expect. I am sure I shall be able to make some arrangement for you; possibly I may arrange for you to stay with a dear old friend of mine, who has only one young servant, until my return; but I promise you shall not remain here much longer.'

This was better; she brightened up wonderfully again, and we spent the rest of the allotted time very cheerfully. What was perhaps most cheering of all to poor Nancy was my little speech about hoping by-and-by to set things right with her relations.

'It's too late for that, Miss,' she replied sadly; 'they know I've been in prison, and poor mother's gone.'

'Too late, indeed! Why, there is almost a lifetime before you in which to prove your innocence! Besides, after you have lived with me long enough to enable me to speak from experience, I will take the matter in hand, and write to your father and sister. In the meantime, we must seek for the poor creature for whom you suffered, and if we can, get her to give evidence that she put the ring into your box.'

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.