

AN EVENING IN JUNE



JANET BALFOUR had got the dishes washed and the kitchen tidied up after tea; her mother was away to the Big House with the sewing they had just finished that afternoon, and would not be back till late; and now the evening was her own for reading and knitting. After a long day's sewing, knitting was a relief, if not something of a pastime, for one could read and knit at the same time. Leaving the door ajar she made her way down to the foot of the garden, where there was a seat fashioned from the root of a plane-tree. Looking at her as she walked, one would have noticed first the sheen of her ruddy brown hair, and the sweet serenity of expression that gave character, if not even beauty, to a homely face. Perhaps it was this light of peaceful happiness that made her look older than her years, for it seemed to speak of the sweetness that comes through suffering, of joyousness that had been tempered in patience and pain. And this suggestion a second look would certainly have confirmed. There were lines about the mouth and under the eyes, come before their time, and in her walk, the slightest suspicion of a limp. 'A bit dink,' the neighbours called it, 'that ye'd hardly see unless ye were telled about it.'

Sitting down, she unfolded her knitting across her knee, but appeared to be in no hurry to begin. The book lay unopened on the eis-wool shawl, and her fingers merely trifled with the needle and a ball of wool.

It was an evening in June, and the slumbrous air was heavy with the scent of roses and honeysuckle mingling with the smell of new-mown hay drying in the field beyond the garden. From the beeches rising high above the thatch-roofed cottage, and almost hiding the hill behind them, came now and again the flute-like notes of the mavis, while birds hopped about the berry bushes around her and twittered, talking to one another in whispers. On the village green girls were playing at

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jingo-ring, and their voices, sounding dreamy in the distance, seemed but to add to the restfulness of the evening.

'Down in yonder meadow
Where the green grass grows,
Where Jeanie Fairfull
She bleaches her clothes ;
She sang, and she sang, and she sang so sweet,
Come over, come over, across the deep.'

It was a time when one would sit with hands folded and gaze with wide-open eyes seeing nothing. And so sat Janet. The lazy smoke curled from the ridge of thatch roofs where the village straggled along the highway ; beyond, fields stretched to the sleepy loch nestling to the side of the distant hills. But she felt rather than saw the beauty of all. What she was seeing was the summers and winters of her own life from that day twenty years ago when she had fallen over a fence and hurt her spine. She was only four years old then, but she remembered it as it had been yesterday. There indeed was the selfsame fence, not the formidable fence it once was, but bowed and brought low with age and infirmity. Strange that a fall from such an insignificant height should have kept her an invalid so long. Yet now she was thinking not of the many years of suffering that she had known, but of the love and happiness that had been hers all through.

She thought of James Bruce, good, kind man, who had come to see her then, and had been a friend ever since. And James Bruce was the village grocer and draper, a well-to-do man, not poor as her mother was. He had brought her grapes and oranges and nice things which her mother could never have provided ; and, better than all, he had brought her books, picture-books and story-books, from which she had slowly, she hardly knew how, taught herself to read and write. That was all the schooling Janet had ever had, yet the book now lying

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on her knee was a volume of Emerson's 'Essays.' Thinking much of the kind-hearted old grocer, she thought much more of his son. She opened the book and read her name on the fly-leaf, 'Jan from Alex.' He always called her 'Jan,' as he had done that first day he came with his father to see her, bringing a great bag of sweeties and figs. He was only six years old then, and how often he had come to see her since! How he had helped her with the difficult words in her books till they had been able to read together! Then when at length she had been allowed to get out it was he who wheeled her to the fields in the little carriage his father had given her on her twelfth birthday, and there sat reading to her, or learning his own lessons. Later still it was he who had taught her to walk again, leading her, helping her over difficult places, laughing at her sometimes till she cried, and then carrying her home and talking nonsense till she laughed with him.

She laid aside the book and the knitting, and began walking up and down the garden path just for the pleasure of walking and assuring herself that she hardly limped at all now. It was all for his sake that she had taken such pains to walk without limping, and how delighted he would be when no one could speak of her lameness.

When she sat down again she folded up her knitting. 'It's ower warm for a shawl,' she explained to herself, 'an' ower bonny for readin'.' And she began dreaming again.

How happy those days had been for both! She saw again the old village wives nodding to them and smiling when Alex helped her out to the fields. 'It's braw to hae a big brother, Jenny,' they used to say. 'Deed it's no mony brothers would be so kind.' And she liked to hear them praise Alex; he had always blushed when they commended 'his thochtfu'ness.' 'She taks the place o' the little ane he canna mind o', she had heard them moralise often enough. 'Nature has a way o' her ain for fillin' a' gaps.'

But the days of their childhood passed, and the time came

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when Alex went away to an office in the town, and she had missed him sorely. But he had never forgotten her. Letters came regularly—long, interesting letters—telling of town life she did not know, of his work, of the classes he attended, and of a thousand and one things she had only read of in books. In her answers she told of all that was doing in the village; of the church choir, of the sewing she did for the Big House, of her garden, of the fields, and in her last, with tears, of the death of the green lenty he had given her in a cage. And better than letters were the days looked forward to month by month when he came home and stayed from Saturday to Monday. But best of all was the summer holiday. That was the fortnight of the year to Janet. Then the happy days of childhood were renewed. They walked, and talked, and read together just as they had done when they were boy and girl. Now he was coming home again, and this time it was to be better than ever. She took from her pocket the letter she had got that very morning and read it again.

“My dear Jan.” She said the words over to herself, emphasising the first, and blushing to hear them from her own lips. “I have been promoted to be cashier now. Isn’t that good news? But better news still! My holidays begin on Wednesday, and I shall be home again on Thursday.”

‘To-morrow,’ she whispered, ‘to-morrow.’

“And now, Jan, I have a great secret to tell you. I might have told you by letter, but I should much rather tell you when I see you in the dear old garden with only the roses to hear, and the birds singing because they are happy with the happiness that is mine.”

‘The mavis is singing now,’ she said, ‘and their happiness is the happiness of love.’

She folded the letter and hid it in the bosom of her dress. ‘A secret to tell me?’ She laughed; a little sob of laughter it seemed. ‘And I have a secret to tell Alex.’

Picking up the book she turned the pages, rustling them from

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the one hand to the other, but her eyes were towards the loch, full of reverie. 'To-morrow,' she repeated, 'to-morrow.' 'To-night,' said a voice almost at her ear, while a pair of hands were placed over her eyes.

'Alex!' she cried. 'I know it—I know it.'

He came round and laid himself down on the grass at her feet. 'I thought I'd give you a surprise, Jan; so I climbed over the dyke as quiet as pussy and caught you. I got away a day earlier than I expected. . . . Reading as usual, I see. An' wha's the favourite now?' he asked, dropping into his boyhood Scots. 'Emerson nae less!'

She reached and took the book out of his hand. 'Dinna begin wi' books the nicht, Alex,' she said playfully. 'I havena read a word o't: I'd better readin' than Emerson.'

'No, Jan; I didna come to speak about books.' He leaned back on his elbow and looked up in her face. 'An' what better had ye than Emerson, Jan?'

'Only a letter, Alex.'

They sat quiet for a time. A lark rose from the hayfield and they watched it, listening till it ended its song slanting down again to the earth.

'Sit down on the grass, Jan.' He spoke somewhat nervously, and was back again into English. 'It's perfectly dry and—I've something to tell you, you know.'

She came and sat down near him, yet turning her head aside that he should not see her listening eyes.

'Can you guess what I'm going to speak about, Jan?' he asked; and then again, 'Can you not guess?'

Her hand played nervously with the long silver grasses, and without turning she answered in a whisper, 'Yes, Alex; I think I know.'

'I thought you would,' he hurried on; 'and I have been looking forward to telling you. . . . O Jan, I can't tell you how happy I am! Look,' he said, reaching to place a photograph in her lap. 'Isn't she beautiful? You must tell me what you think

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of her, Jan, and you must be the first to congratulate me. You know I never had a sister but you. We have been like brother and sister always, and so—O Jan, tell me what you think of her.'

'It is a sweet and pretty face, Alex.'

What a change was in the voice all at once! But Alex was too full of his own affairs to notice.

'I'm so glad you like her. She is—— But I can't tell you what she is. I'm sure you will like her. I've told her all about my sister, and she is very eager to meet you. And do you know what she asked me, Jan? How I had never fallen in love with you! How simple she is!' He smiled happily at the notion. 'As if a brother and sister should fall in love! We only got engaged a month ago,' he rattled on; 'and now that I have a good income, I think we should get married as soon as possible.'

There was silence for a time. Alex had run himself out, and Janet sat apparently studying the face of the photograph in her lap. Gloaming was stealing over them, and a soft wind was stealing across the fields and rustling the leaves of the berry bushes. From the green came the girls' voices in their last ring before bedtime.

'You're very quiet, Jan,' he began again. 'And do you know you have not congratulated me yet? Come now, do wish me happiness.'

She handed him the photograph, turning and smiling wistfully in his face. 'Am I quiet, Alex? I didn't know. But you do know I wish you all happiness.'

'How formal that is, Janet, and—— What's wrong, Jan? You're as pale as death. Are you ill? What a fool I am, to be sure—here's this grass thick with dew!'

He sprang to his feet and lifted her up. 'Your hands are like ice.'

'Yes,' she said with a shiver. 'It's a little chilly, isn't it?'

'Take my arm,' he told her as they walked away; 'I see you're

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limping badly to-night, Jan. You've been overworking yourself, I'm certain. But we'll put all that right this fortnight. Eh?' At the gate he bent to kiss her cheek in his old brotherly way, but she gave him her lips and kissed him instead. 'That's my congratulation, Alex,' she said, with a strange short laugh. 'Listen, listen! Do you remember when you used to wheel me to hear the girls singing that?—

'Where shall bonny Jenny lie,
Jenny lie, Jenny lie?
Where shall bonny Jenny lie
In the cold nights of Winter?

GABRIEL SETOUN.

