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A Strange Message

BY

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CHAPTER III.

ALICK FRASER.

MRS. JOCK FRASER, having crossed the misty loch in safety, arrived at Rossmore, and was warmly welcomed by Leonora, who liked this stalwart, sterling dame.

"And where do you think I have been, my dear?" asked Mrs. Jock, after she had kissed Leonora on both cheeks, shaken hands in a somewhat cool fashion with Mrs. Conway-Hope, and nodded to the two young girls, whom she had interrupted practicing a duet at the piano.

"Indeed, I can never tell where you have been," smiled Leonora.

"I have been calling on your neighbor, Mr. Biddulph;" and Mrs. Jock was quite quick enough to note the deep blush that spread over Leonora's face at the unexpected mention of Mr. Biddulph's name.

"And did you see him," she asked, nervously.

"I saw him, and I got him to buy a pig, and I have invited him to dinner next Tuesday."

"A whole host of business, then?"

"And, moreover, I like him," continued Mrs. Jock; "he is good looking and gentlemanly. I wonder if any one knew anything about him before he came here?"

"I think," said Mrs. Conway-Hope, who hated to be left long out of a conversation, and had not forgiven Mr. Biddulph, nor Nora either, for preferring the moonlight to her society, "that Mr. Biddulph looks like a man who had a past."

"We all have a past, Mrs. Conway-Hope," replied Mrs. Jock, "only a good deal depends on how we have spent it."

"Yes, indeed!" And Mrs. Conway-Hope looked down and sighed, thinking with satisfaction of the exemplary nature of her own life.

"However, there he is, as we find him," continued Mrs. Jock, in her downright way, "a pleasant, good-looking man—an addition to the neighborhood; and I want all you good people to come and meet him at dinner next Tuesday. What do you say, Nora, my dear?"

"I shall be very pleased, for one," answered Nora.

"And you, Mrs. Conway-Hope?"

"I have just one question to ask," answered that lady, with a curious little snorting sound, which she deemed a laugh, "how are we to get there?"

"By boat, to be sure!" said Nora.

"It will be dark. Nora, my dear, I am sure Mrs. Fraser will think it rude of me to advise you, but I do advise you not to go."

"I am sorry I can't take your advice," answered Nora, with a smile, "I mean to go."

"Then you will leave one of your guests at home," said Mrs. Conway-Hope, sinking back into her chair; "but it is no matter."

"If you young people come, it will be all right," said Mrs. Jock unfeelingly. "And now, Nora my dear, will you buy one of my pigs?"

Then Mrs. Jock repeated the sad story she had told Mr. Biddulph, and Leonora listened with quick sympathy.

"Oh, how dreadful, Mrs. Fraser!" she said. "Of course I will buy one of them; but what else can I do for the poor woman?"

"We must think of that afterwards, my dear; at present I want just a nice little sum to help the poor creature in the first brunt of her trouble. I am going to Alick Fraser's after I leave you, though Jock does not believe I shall screw a sixpence out of him; but I mean to try."

Leonora laughed. "You must have lunch first, at any rate," she said, and Mrs. Jock was nothing loath, for the mountain air had whetted her appetite.

But she was soon ready to start again on her travels, and after an affectionate parting with Leonora, and a friendly one with her young half-cousin's three guests, Mrs. Jock left Rossmore; having, however, wounded Mrs. Conway-Hope's susceptible vanity by not asking her again to dine at Airdlinn on the following Tuesday, though Mrs. Conway-Hope had already declined to do so.

"She is very nice, isn't she," said Leonora, as she re-entered the room, after seeing Mrs. Jock safely away from the hall door.

"Yes, she is very nice," answered Mrs. Conway-Hope, her tone contradicting her words, "but don't you think she is rather loud, my dear?"

"Loud? Not in the least; she is a good, warm-hearted, motherly woman. How can she be called loud?" replied Nora, indignantly.

"She struck me as being so, but I may be mistaken."

"I really think you are mistaken," said Leonora; and Mrs. Conway-Hope gave a little pensive movement of her head. She was thinking what a pity it was that dear Nora's temper was so quick.

A moment later Leonora left the room and went upstairs to her own bedroom and stood looking out over the misty loch. She was thinking of what Mrs. Fraser had told her of Mr. Biddulph; for Mrs. Jock had half whispered to her, as they left the dining-room together, of Mr. Biddulph's generous gift to the poor, bereaved woman at Airdlinn. And she was thinking, too, of that conversation relating to his past life; wondering about the mysterious warning that yesternight had reached her band.

What could it mean? Again Leonora read and re-read the strange message that had come to disturb the dawning days of a new sweet hope. And suddenly a blush, a tide of color, dyed the fair and clear skin of Leonora's face. She had thought last night, when they had stood together in the moonlight, of telling Mr. Biddulph of this secret enemy that had been so swift to stab his reputation in the dark. But now, looking again at these mysterious words, she remembered that she could never do this, for they implied what did not really exist, except in the deep-hidden feelings of her own heart.

Therefore she was tongue-tied; she must meet Mr. Biddulph as though this thing had not been; she had best try to forget it. But Leonora knew this was all but impossible. Still she must try, and, having decided to do this, she presently rejoined her guests, though her mind wandered again and again to the new owner of Dunbaan, who was at this moment in a terrible state of mind, in which perplexity, rage, and bitter anger at his own conduct by turns held sway.

For James Biddulph knew well, as he read those freshly carved letters on the tree, that the mad folly of his youth must be known to the hand that cut the bark. And he had hoped to escape the consequences of this folly; to hide himself away in this lonely Highland home, where everything was new to him. But here was that hateful name "Natalie," commonly called "Natt," again before him with its grim significance, its shameful memories and disgrace.

And as he looked at it, a sudden passion, an uncontrollable fury, as it were, seized on this ordinarily calm, collected man. Snatching his penknife from his coat-pocket, he began hastily, with muttered curses on his writhing lips, to destroy the letters, to render the name illegible; and long after he had done this he hacked and cut at the tree, as though physical labor were some relief to his perturbed and angry heart.

In the meanwhile Mrs. Jock was arriving at the house of her brother-in-law, Mr. Alick Fraser, who was the rich man of the family, and as such was naturally regarded with consideration.

When old Mr. Fraser of Airdlinn died he left two sons, Jock and Alexander; Jock, the elder son, inheriting the family estate, and Alexander a modest portion of £2,000. But during the thirty-three years which had elapsed since the father's death a great change had taken place in the fortunes of the two brothers. Jock, the laird, had shot on the hills and fished in the streams; had married, and his children had grown up around him, but he had got poorer every year. But Alexander, the younger son, had carried his £2,000 to Glasgow, had become a ship-builder there, and gradually had amassed a large fortune, and now, finally, had become a laird too; at least, he had bought an estate on the opposite side of the loch to Airdlinn and had built himself a brand-new house there, double and more the size of the grey old roof under which he had been born.

He was walking up and down on the terrace of his new house, smoking, and mentally calculating the profits of his last investment, when his sister-in-law, Mrs. Jock, appeared through the mist.

"Ah, Jennie, is that you?" said Alick Fraser, in a loud cheery voice, going forward to meet her. "And how is Jock? and where have you sprung from this misty morning?"

"I've been wandering over hill and dale, on business bent," answered Mrs. Jock, with her ready laugh.

"And what's up? What have you been about?"

"Let me go into the house and I will tell you," and Alick Fraser led the way into his well-furnished house, where everything was new and everything was good.

And the master of the house was good to look on also. A tall, stalwart, clear-skinned man of about fifty-three years was Alick Fraser, with a shrewd, well-featured face, and humorous dark eyes, like his brother Jock's. But there was this difference in the expression of their eyes: In Jock's the humor was kindly, in Alick's it was hard. All the same, Alick was the better looking of the two, and had also a cheery manner, a long head and a close hand.

"I've just come from Nora Stewart's," said Mrs. Jock, as she seated herself in one of Alick's comfortable arm-chairs.

"Ah, a fine girl—a very fine girl!"

"And as good as she's bonny, I believe. She and two young girls that are staying with her, and our new neighbor, young Biddulph, are going to dine with us next Tuesday, Alick," continued Mrs. Jock diplomatically. "Will you come too?"

"Next Tuesday? Don't know anything to prevent me. So you've made young Biddulph's acquaintance, then?"

"Yes; I called on him this morning—called on him about a little business. Malcolm and Minnie met him last night at Nora Stewart's, and he's a gentlemanly man; yes, certainly a gentlemanly man."

"That's all right, then."

"I went to see him because we've had a sad business at Airdlinn, Alick," said Mrs. Jock, cautiously approaching the real object of her visit. "Jock would have been to see you about it before, but he's laid up with frightful toothache."

"Should have 'em out."

"That's what I tell him, but I can't persuade him to go through the wrench. But to go back to what I was saying. Poor Nichols—you remember the red haired stable-man?—fell from the hay-loft last Wednesday morning and broke his neck. He was killed on the spot, and he's left a widow and four small children, and nothing worth speaking of, besides, except a litter of five little pigs."

There was no pity in Alick's eyes.

"They must eat the pigs," he said, with his hard smile.

"That would not feed them long. No, Alick; I am trying to sell these pigs to the neighbors round. I have sold one to young Biddulph, one to Nora Stewart, and now I have come to you."

"It's a pity you gave yourself the trouble, Jeanie; I've a splendid litter of pigs—black pigs."

"Yes, but then this is for charity, Alick. I want a pound a piece for them, to make up a little sum for the poor widow. Young Biddulph gave me two pounds for his."

"A fool and his money are soon parted, my dear."

"Ah, but Alick, do buy one," pleaded Mrs. Jock, quite earnestly. She wanted the money, for one thing, and she wanted the triumph, for another; for Jock had told her she would fail. But Alick only laughed, and shook his head.

"It's no good, Jeanie," he said, "I never throw away money, and I won't to please you or any one else. And this is throwing it away. Suppose you collect a few pounds; it won't keep the woman and her children. They must go to the place the law provides for them, and which we all help to support; and the sooner they go the better for them and you."

Mrs. Jock did not speak. She was a kind-hearted woman, and she felt her anger rise hot within her; but she was prudent withal. Alick Fraser had much in his power. He was unmarried, and she had children, and for their sakes she suppressed her wrath.

"Then you won't give anything?" she said.

"Not a sixpence, my dear," answered Alick cheerfully.

"At all events, you'll come to dine on Tuesday?"

"Yes, if you promise not to name your interesting litter of pigs," said Alick with a laugh. "There's a good woman, don't let us hear anything more of them."

"Very well," said Mrs. Jock; and she rose with a smile, and held out her hand to her brother-in-law. "I won't come begging any more to you, Alick."

"Not, if you are wise," he said with some significance; and then they parted in friendly fashion, and Mrs. Jock returned to her poor husband, who looked up from his armchair and his woolen comforter with some interest as she entered the room.

"Well," he said, "and did you get anything out of Alick?"

Mrs. Jock shook her head.

"He was too much for me" she answered; and she could not resist a laugh at her own defeat.

"I told you so," answered Jock, subsiding back into his comforter with some satisfaction. "My firm belief is, when Alick departs from this life he'll contrive somehow to carry his money along with him, or he'll bury it. No one will ever benefit a penny by it."

CHAPTER IV.

MRS. JOCK'S DINNER PARTY.

No one would have ever thought that the calm, rather haughty-looking gentleman who entered Mrs. Fraser's drawing-room, on the evening of her dinner party, was the same James Biddulph who, with pale lips and a countenance distorted with rage and shame, had stood hacking at the tree in his avenue long after the name, which for him possessed such hateful recollections, had been utterly erased from the bark.

Yet it was so. We change our moods like our garments, and one day put on our best and another our worst. And it had been a bitter day for James Biddulph, yon dreary, misty one, when he had been suddenly confronted by a past he would fain have forgotten, and all the evil of his nature had for the time held possession of his soul.

But his brow was smooth now, and his smile as ready as if no secret weighed upon his heart. He had a natural grace of manner, and Jock Fraser, whose face by this time had once more renewed its ordinary proportions, as he advanced to meet his guest, was struck (as his wife had been) by Mr. Biddulph's remarkably good looks.

"Glad to see you," said the kindly Jock, warmly shaking his hand. "Your poor uncle was a great stranger among us, but I hope you mean to be a good neighbor."

"You are all very kind to receive me as you do," answered Biddulph, "and I hope to be a good neighbor," and he smiled.

"You know my wife," continued the master of the house, in his pleasant way as Biddulph was shaking hands with Mrs. Jock and her daughter; and this is my brother, Alick Fraser, and my boy Malcolm."

The uncle and nephew—the good-looking man of fifty and the handsome young man of twenty-one—now both exchanged greetings with the new owner of Dunbaan. Alick Fraser fixing his keen, observing eyes for a moment on Biddulph's face.

"Glad to make your acquaintance," he said; and then he looked at Biddulph again. It struck him he had seen him before, though at the moment he could not remember where.

"And do you mean to take up your abode amongst us," continued Alick still eyeing the stranger.

"For some months in the year, at all events, I hope," replied Biddulph.

"Ah, not a true Scot," said Alick. "The mists will drive you away," and he laughed aloud.

But as he did so there was a little stir at the door of the room, and Nora Stewart and her two girl friends, the Lees, appeared. Nora entered first, and the eyes of every man present unconsciously followed her. For one thing, she was handsome; for another, she was a landowner, and a little heiress in her way; and this last consideration, no doubt, materially added to her charms.

"How are you, my dear?" said Jock Fraser, kindly shaking her hand.

"Well, young lady, how are you getting on?" asked Alick.

"Nora, how late you are!" said Malcolm Fraser, with his blue eyes fixed on Nora's face.

Only Mr. Biddulph said nothing; these two shook hands in silence, and during the dinner which followed were placed far apart, Jock Fraser taking in Nora and Mr. Biddulph Mrs. Jock, and somehow Nora found it very hard to keep her attention fixed on the laird's jokes and pleasant, homely talk.

"She is a fine girl, and the land joins," Alick Fraser sat thinking, as he ate his dinner with appetite and satisfaction.

"She is beautiful," sighed poor Malcolm, who did not feel as hungry as usual, and did not see why Miss Maud Lee should always expect him to amuse her.

And he felt also a strange dislike growing within him to the good-looking man at the head of the table, who was talking so agreeably to his mother with his fluent tongue. This young Highlander, with his stalwart length of limb and breadth of muscle, his straight features and blue eyes and bright, crisp, curling chestnut hair, had been on pretty good terms with himself until the last few weeks, when Mr. Biddulph had arrived at Dunbaan to disturb his equanimity. But now, with that subtle knowledge which comes to us unsought, which tells us grim truths against our vanity, our hopes, Malcolm Fraser knew that this stranger was preferred before him, and that Nora Stewart's dark eyes seldom met his own.

And the young man's natural sunny nature had grown changed. He had become more silent, sometimes sullen, and only his fond mother's eyes guessed the cause. She was looking at him now—her handsome boy—and Mrs. Jock gave a little sigh, and Mr. Biddulph heard it, and, glancing at her face, wondered what cross this seemingly prosperous, happy woman could have on her path of life.

"And you mean to live here?" she said, looking at Biddulph curiously, in the interest of her son.

"How can I tell, Mrs. Fraser? We are driven hither and thither by opposing currents in the stream of life, and know not where they will land us. Six months ago Dunbaan was but a name to me, and my poor uncle never entered my mind. Now, you see, I sit by his hearth stone, and his friends have become mine."

"Poor man, he sought few friends."

"Yet I believe for Mr. Stewart of Rossmore—Miss Stewart's uncle—he had a very strong regard."

"Rossmore saved his life, you know. Nora showed me the magnificent necklace he left her. It was a strange thought of the old man. I wonder where he got it? Perhaps there is some romance connected with it." And Mrs. Fraser laughed.

"I believe in every man's life, who is worthy of the name, there is some romance. I sometimes think, as I sit alone at Dunbaan, of the grim old colonel, shut away there, as it were, from communion with his kind. No doubt he had his romance—some lost love—to keep company with his memory in his lonely hours."

"And you must find it lonely, Mr. Biddulph?"

"In a way; but I am used to being alone, and I am writing a book."

"Indeed! This is interesting. May I ask what sort of a book?"

"On men and manners," answered Biddulph, with a laugh. "It serves to amuse me, it it will not amuse the world."

"I expect you will put us all in. What do you say, now, to my brother-in-law, Alick Fraser, for a good character?"

Biddulph turned his gray eyes in the direction of Alick Frazer, and looked for a moment or two steadily in his face.

"There are all the indications there," he said thoughtfully, "of a successful man."

"Well, he is one, you know."

"No inconvenient soitness of heart; no opposing sentiments or sensations; one absorbing idea—the main chance." He was sure to succeed."

"That's just about his character. All the same,"—Mrs. Jock was thinking of her children—"I should not like him to know I think so."

"I do not suppose he would be offended. I believe, by the expression of his face, he respects his own character and despises the weakness and folly of those around him. He has a keen head, and not a big heart. A happy man, I call him," and Biddulph laughed softly.

Leonora Stewart, at the other end of the table, heard that laugh, and her dark eyes met Biddulph's and she smiled.

"And how do you like your neighbor, Nora?" the next moment asked Jock Fraser at her side.

"Mr. Biddulph, what I have seen of him I like very much."

"A remarkably good-looking fellow, isn't he?"

"I think he is good-looking."

"Ah, ah, Miss Nora!" and the kindly laird shook his head; "you only think, do you? I call it suspicious when a handsome young lady speaks with such reserve of a handsome young man."

Nora laughed.

"You always have your joke, Mr. Fraser," she said, good-naturedly.

"What is his joke about?" asked Alick Fraser from the opposite side of the table, who had been trying to hear what his brother and Nora were talking of.

"Never you mind, Alick," said Jock, with a twinkle in his merry dark eyes; "it's about a young man, and so can have nothing to do with old fogies like you or I."

There was a general laugh, in which Alick joined, though it was plain by his expression he did not like it.

"All right, old boy," he said; but there was a resentful look in his eye, as he glanced at his brother's face.

And when the dinner was over, and the men rejoined the ladies in the drawing-room, the idea of his age was still rankling in Alick Fraser's mind.

"So my brother Jock had a stupid joke at my expense at dinner?" he said, addressing Nora with his hard smile. "But the fellow forgets he is ten years my senior and more."

If for ten Alick had said two he would have been very much nearer the truth.

"It is Mr. Fraser's fun," smiled Nora.

"Rather bad fun for me, though," answered Alick, now trying to hide his discomfiture.

"I have never had a word with you the whole evening," the next moment said Mr. Biddulph's voice, and Nora turned round with a blush and a smile, and forgot in an instant that such a person as Alick Fraser existed.

"I am going to ask a favor," continued Biddulph.

"Shall I say politely it is granted before I know what it is?"

"Please say it is granted?"

"Very well; it is granted."

"Then, it is that I shall be permitted to take you safely across the loch in my boat. It is moonlight and it is lovely, and I want something to soothe me, for I feel awfully irritable to-night."

"Why don't you take to smoking?" said Nora, with a little laugh.

"Smoking is all very well when one can get nothing better, but to-night I hope I can. I want you to take my mind away from myself, Miss Stewart; away from worries and troubles, and all evil things."

"And have you many worries and troubles?" asked Nora softly, looking at him as she spoke.

"My share; perhaps my deserts."

"I suppose there is no life without them?"

"None," said Biddulph abruptly, almost passionately; "our evil deeds, and their black train, come back to us as surely as we live."

"And our good deeds?"

"I have none."

"Ah! I do not believe that;" and again Nora glanced at Biddulph's handsome face, which, at this moment, looked gloomy enough.

But they had no time for any further private conversation. Mrs. Fraser insisted upon their joining a round game which the young people were getting up, and again Biddulph found himself separated from Nora. It was not until the party was breaking up, and hats and wraps were being called for, that Biddulph rather pointedly joined her as they quitted the house at Airdlinn, though on her other side young Malcolm Fraser was walking with his stalwart steps.

They were not five minutes' walk from the loch, and, as they quitted the sombre shade of the trees in the avenue, a scene of wondrous beauty was spread out before them. The moon was at the full, and the great mass of water, the huge mountain range beyond, the steep overhanging rocks on either side, were all alight with the white shining beams, which showed them as plainly as the sun.

"Are you an artist, Miss Stewart?" asked Biddulph in rather a low tone.

"No. Nature is too beautiful; I cannot portray it."

"You mean," said Biddulph, smiling, "you have tried and failed."

"That is about the truth," answered Nora, smiling also.

"No one can portray nature as it is," said Biddulph slowly; "just as no author can give a perfect picture of a human heart. We catch the salient points; this man's characteristic; the dip of yon mountain or yon hill. But the million hidden things; the changing shadows of the earth and sky; the teeming changing thoughts of each human soul, were never written in ink or painted on canvas."

"You think that no mind, then, can perfectly understand the other?"

"I am sure of it. Are we not mysteries to ourselves?"

"Perhaps—"

But now they had reached the pebbly marge on which the boatmen and the boats were waiting to convey them across the water.

"I claim your promise," said Biddulph, taking Nora's hand and leading her toward his boat.

And as Malcolm Fraser saw this action a flush came to his cheeks and a frown to his brow.

"Are you not going with us, Nora?" he said. "Mr. Biddulph does not cross the loch, you know."

"But Mr. Biddulph does," answered Biddulph, with a little laugh, as Nora paused a moment. "I mean to see Miss Stewart safely to Rossmore.

"Then," said Malcolm, almost rudely, "our boat need not go too; there is plenty of room for the three ladies in one."

Yet the moment after he had made this speech he repented it, for he had shortened the time he could be near Nora by his own rashness.

"Very well," said Mr. Biddulph quietly; I shall take charge of the three ladies. If you will help us to push off, Mr. Fraser, that is all we shall require."

Poor Malcolm! He stood there in the moonlight and watched them glide away with a burning, aching heart. He heard the dip of the oars, and the soft laughter of the girls; and then the snatch of a song came floating on the night wind, but it had no sweetness nor music to the young man's ears. He was angry; he was jealous, and the pleasant things of earth were all as gall and bitterness to his soul.

CHAPTER V.

AN UNWELCOME GUEST.

An hour later, still in the gleaming moonlight, Mr. Biddulph landed at the little pier at Dunbaan. He had seen Miss Stewart and her friends safely home, and then had returned across the loch, and, having quitted his boat, walked on alone toward the house.

As he entered the avenue he frowned when he saw the disfigured tree where his own hand had so rudely cut and hacked the bark. The moonlight showed this very plainly, for it lit each fading leaf and bough, the shadows of the tree falling with extraordinary distinctness on the mossy, soddened sward.

He frowned, and his thoughts went from the sweet woman he had just quitted, from gay words and mirth, to a woman who was sweet no longer, and whose memory was baneful to his heart.

He gave an impatient gesture and a sigh, and then a sudden start. Good heavens! was he mad? On this tree, on that tree, on seemingly half a dozen trees, the same name that he had erased the other day was now freshly carved:

"NATALIE,
COMMONLY
NATT."

The letters seemed to swim before his eyes; the weird shadows to shift and change, as he stood there staring blankly before him. But he did not draw out his penknife this time. With a muttered curse he walked straight and quickly on to the house, and rang the door-bell violently when he reached it.

The old serving-man, who had lived with his uncle, quickly opened it.

"Donald, who has been destroying the trees in the avenue during my absence?" he asked in a loud angry voice.

"Destroying the trees, sir?" repeated Donald, in utter astonishment. "I never heard of such a thing."

"Some one has," went on Biddulph sternly—"carving some tomfoolery or other on half a dozen of them. Unloose the deer-hounds; I'll make an end of this."

The old man hesitated for a moment.

"Nero is very savage, sir," he said, "but still——"

As he spoke, his master's angry eyes fell, and some shame came into his face.

"I forgot they are savage," he muttered. "No, don't loose the dogs; I will see about it to-morrow;" and he turned away.

But, hour after hour, when all the rest of the household were asleep, Mr. Biddulph was walking up and down the library, his heart full of anger and bitter, bitter pain.

"I will make an end of this," at last he decided. "I will see Nora again, and then I will go away; I am best away.

Two days later, about 12 o'clock, to the surprise of the ladies of Rossmore, Mr. Biddulph was announced.

"I was just wishing I could telegraph to you," said Nora, rising to welcome him with her charming blush and smile.

"We have been talking about you all this morning," cried Maud Lee, with her shrill laugh.

"After such pretty speeches, you may be sure they have a favor to ask you, Mr. Biddulph," said Mrs. Conway-Hope.

"I only hope they have," answered Mr. Biddulph, looking at Nora.

"We really have. We except you will think us all mad, though; but we want to get up a picnic—a picnic in October!"

"I do not think you mad, but I think you rash," said Biddulph, still looking at Nora.

"We know we are," she replied brightly; "but the truth is, Mr. Biddulph, that my two friends here, Maud and Alice, declare they have not seen half of our lovely loch, and they leave Scotland, to my great regret, the end of this week; so they want to sail up the loch, land on some lovely bit of scenery or other, have our lunch, and then go home again."

"After taking influenza, sore throat, or even consumption," suggested Mrs. Conway-Hope."

"Oh, cousin Margaret, do not be so horrid," said Nora.

"If you said 'sensible' instead of 'horrid,' my dear Nora, it would be more to the point," suggested Mrs. Conway-Hope.

"Then please, cousin Margaret, do not be so sensible."

Mrs. Conway-Hope resumed her knitting.

"And, to return to the picnic," continued Nora, once more addressing Mr. Biddulph; "we want your company for one thing, and to borrow your two boats for another."

"My boats and everything that I have are entirely at your command; but I called at this unseasonable hour to say good-bye."

"Good-bye!" repeated Nora, blankly.

"Yes; I intend to return to town."

"Not until after the picnic, Mr. Biddulph," said Maud Lee. "Indeed, we shall not hear of it. Nora, tell him he must stay; we can't lose one of our best men in this frivolous way;" and again Miss Lee gave her curious little laugh.

"I wish you would stay," said Nora, rather in a low tone.

Biddulph hesitated.

"I should like to stay," he said, but—"

"We shall listen to no 'buts,'" said Maud Lee; "it is settled. Nora dear, put Mr. Biddulph down on your list."

"And his two boats," smiled Mrs. Conway-Hope, raising her eyes from her knitting.

"Shall I?" asked Nora, almost shyly, looking at Biddulph.

"Very well," he answered, smiling.

"I want to ask all the neighbors," said Nora; "the Frasers, of course; poor Mrs. Macdonald, and Lord Glendoyne, whose father, curiously enough, used to be a client of my father's."

"Glendoyne!" said Biddulph. "Is that the man who has the shooting-lodge at the head of the loch?"

"Yes, it's the same man. I knew him slightly before, and he called yesterday," answered Nora.

"I think the picnic has been thought of since his arrival," remarked Mrs. Conway Hope, vigorously going on with her knitting.

Nora looked annoyed.

"You are quite mistaken," she said rather sharply; "Maud and I were absolutely talking of it when Lord Glendoyne arrived."

"And we asked him and he is coming," said Maud Lee triumphantly. "And when we have secured Mr. Biddulph, we shall have some delightful men."

"You do not give them much chance of escape, Miss Lee," suggested Mrs. Conway Hope.

"One of them at all events does not wish to escape, Miss Lee," smiled Biddulph. "It is settled, then; but you have not told me the day."

"We thought of the day after to-morrow," answered Nora.

They discussed the details of the picnic after this, and presently Mr. Biddulph left Rossmore.

"I shall say good-bye at the picnic," he thought, sadly enough, as he parted with Nora.

He returned straight home and as he entered the hall at Dunbaan, old Donald met him with a curious expression on his wrinkled, time scarred face.

"There is a lady waiting to see you, sir," he said mysteriously.

"A lady?" repeated Biddulph, and he bit his lips and grew a little pale; "where is she?"

"She is in the library, sir; she said the drawing-room was so cold."

Then Biddulph crossed the hall and opened the library door, and as he did so a little woman who was standing before the fire turned sharply around.

"Well," she said, addressing him rather in a mocking tone, "you did not expect to see me here."

"I certainly did not," answered Biddulph, sternly.

(*Continued next Week.*)

SHE WAS FROM THE COUNTRY,

But She Made the State-st. Loungers Turn and Stare at Her.

The prettiest girl seen on State-st for many a day was out shopping last Thursday, says the Chicago *Herald*. She was obviously a country girl, with a country girl's curiosity concerning the shops, the show-windows, the cable cars, the women and the men on the street. She was accompanied by a plain and middle-aged woman, probably an aunt, and a young man, perhaps a lucky dog of a cousin. Her escorts were proud of her, as they had a right to be. Not that she was perfect, for she was far from it. Tall, slim, angular of body, awkward of motion, clumsily attired in a gown which neither fitted her nor, in color suited her complexion, with an ugly hat and a gawky manner, she nevertheless created a sensation wherever she went. Men and women alike paused to look at her. Her face was—where is there an adjective for this face? "Beautiful" is too commonplace; "pretty" only suggests the picture; "sublime" is too lofty; "divine"—well, it was not a divine face. It was fleshly, sensuous. The eyes were sparkling, laughing, not dreamy, angelic. The wavy, light brown hair fossed its ringlets about saucily. There was a smile on the lips which displayed, now and then, the most perfect of teeth. White and pink, each as pure and delicate as those on a babe's body, chased each other over the rounded cheek and the oval face and ran a race for the dimple in the white chin. Did this simple country maiden know she was attracting attention—was she conscious of her own beauty? Alas, yes. It seems nature has no spot secluded enough whereon to grow such flowers without womanly eyes, ears and intuition. A heart-trapper? She swept State-st. as clean of hearts as a drove of Texas steers would sweep it of petticoats. The people not only watched her, but talked about her. Even the clerks in the stores neglected their customers to eye this unframed painting in flesh. "Oh, what could she not be with $200 and a dressmaker!" exclaimed an admiring matron. "Give her some decent clothes and two years to fill them a little fuller and she'll be the beauty of the world," said another. "I could take that girl," remarked a man who owns a big restaurant, "put her behind my cashier's desk, where only her head would be seen, and make a fortune out of her." Thus the people chattered about the beautiful unknown.

THE INFLUENCE OF ALCOHOL.

Results of Interesting Experiments by French Scientists.

[Medical Record.]

Some experimental researches made by M. Mairet and M. Combemale, and just communicated to the Academy of Sciences, on the degenerative influence of the use of alcoholic liquors, are very interesting. It may perhaps be a little premature to draw conclusions from animals to man, but the facts given are very striking as to the hereditary effect of alcoholic habits. A male dog was first experimented upon, and he was kept intoxicated with absinthe for a long time until he was in a chronic state of alcoholism; he was then permitted to have connection with a perfectly healthy young bitch. She gave birth to twelve puppies, two of which were born dead, and the rest died from various pathological troubles within two months of their birth. Some had epileptic attacks, others had intestinal troubles, and several had pulmonary or peritoneal tuberculosis. Careful autopsies were made, and in all the cases lesions were found showing alcoholic degeneration, thickening of the cranial bones, adhesion between the dura mater and the skull bones, difference in weight between the two cerebral hemispheres, and fatty degeneration of the liver.

The second trial was made on a vigorous female dog, which, during the last three weeks of gestation, was kept in a state of intoxication with alcohol. She gave birth to six puppies, three of which were dead. The three living ones were not badly formed, but were not at all intelligent. The third one of them was a female, and great difficulty was found in raising her. This showed the influence of alcohol on the first generation. In order to show its effects on the second generation the same slut was kept, and in due course was impregnated by a healthy male dog, by which she had three puppies only. One of them had club-foot and an atrophy of several toes; another died of atrepsy, and had patency of the foramen ovale of the heart; the third had atrophy of the hind legs and tabes mesenterica. Strong arguments might be drawn from these experiments for temperance societies and hygienic use, but it may be well to await the final results of this form of study, which is to be followed up.

An Acute Disappointment.

[New York Sun.]

Mrs. Waldo (of Boston)—"Quickly, Penelope; come to the window."

Miss Penelope (overturning a table in her haste)—"Oh, who is it ammma?"

Mrs. Waldo (impressively)—"That gentleman, Penelope, is the Rev. Joseph Cook!"

Miss Penelope—"Oh, pshaw, mamma; from your excited manner I thought it must be either Mr. Clarkson or Mr. Kelly."

He Thought It Funny.

[New York Tribune.]

Wife (reading a letter)—"Well, this is very funny. Mother says that owing to sickness in the family she will have to give up her visit to us next week."

Husband—"Ha! ha! ha!"

Wife—"What are you laughing at, you brute?"

Husband—"Why, dear, didn't you observe that something was very funny?"

In the Market Place.

[New York Sun.]

"You have a very sour look this morning," remarked a cucumber to his neighbor, a dyspeptic strawberry.

"Yes," was the tart reply; "one is necessarily unpleasantly affected when compelled to associate with such a seedy party as you are."

"Cauliflower by any other name 'twill smell as sweet," shouted an onion near by, with a peel of laughter.

Going Without Resignation.

[Washington Critic.]

Minister (to sick official)—"You are aware, dear brother, that you are about to die?"

Sick Official—"Yes, I am aware of it."

Minister—"And do you feel that you can go with resignation?"

Sick Official—"Yes, but I'm going without resignation. We die, you know, but we never resign."

Sorely Tempted.

[New York Sun.]

"Have you spoken to my daughter, sir, upon the subject of marriage?"

"Not a word, sir," responded the young man. "I thought it would be more noble on my part to see you first. But I was strongly tempted to, sir, last evening when she kissed me good night."

NECKLACES IN ALL AGES.

They Are Ornaments for Women To-day, but Once Were Badges of Slavery.

A beautiful necklace of any of the many different kinds which one can see in the jewelers' stores, when around the neck of a handsome woman, must be said to improve her looks greatly. The advantages which the neck, both from its position and shape, possesses as a point for adornment were early seen by the human race, and the necklace is one of the oldest of human ornaments. From the very first a broad distinction was drawn between the necklace which could be removed and the collar which could not; the first being the sign of the free, the second of the slave. Collars of metal were twisted or riveted upon the necks of captives or house born slaves, and upon them the name of the owner or conquerer was rudely cut. This usage survives to-day in the dog collars which are placed upon household pets.

The necklace, however, could for many years only be worn by the freeman. In primitive states of society it was the badge of the warrior and was often made of distinctive spoil of the chase or of war. To this day one of the most valuable and coveted possesions of the western Indian is the necklace of the grizzly bears' claws, a proof that he has met and conquered the gray terror of the mountains. Among the Tartars of the time of Genghis Khan the necklace was often made of human teeth, strung together upon wire. This peculiar form of ornament is found in South America in the graves of the Indians.

The earliest known form of necklace outside of such primitive types as shells and bits of colored stone comes from Egypt. They were of two kinds, ornamental and what may be called, for the lack of a better word, superstitious. The former were composed of small stones, of which blue was apparently the favorite color, set in silver or gold and joined together in a chain. The latter, the amulets, were made of figures of gods, from three to seven inches long. Three or four of these were hung in a chain of beads.

The sacred images were believed to ward off danger of infection, misfortune or bad luck. Sometimes these amulets had no gods on them, but were composed of cowries, or bits of stone arranged in the forms of locked horns, fish or crescents, emblematic of their supposed powers. This superstitious power of the necklace is widely spread to-day among people who are not very high in civilization. In South America there are found necklaces of a peculiarly marked seed which belongs to a plant growing only on the mountains, along the snow line. These seeds when first gathered are blue in color, and are strung on strings. They are highly valued, not only for their beauty, but because of the great difficulty in obtaining them. In the old graves which are found now and then strings of these seeds are often discovered, and they are supposed to bring the greatest possible luck, especially to children.

But one does not have to go among the peons of South America or the negroes of Africa with their gee gee necklaces to find evidence of superstition. Thousands of people place necklaces of coral beads around the necks of babies, with the belief that they will assist the children in teething, and there are many persons who wear necklaces all the time thinking that they bring luck. The Southern negroes constantly wear their bead necklaces, looking upon them as genuine charms, and they are very particular about keeping them intact, holding that the charm is broken if even the relative positions of the beads should be altered when wear makes a new string necessary. The common practice among some religious sects of wearing a medallion around the neck hung to a chain or string is akin to this necklace idea, and in fact is a variant of it.

Among men who have worn the necklace must be ranked the warriors of ancient times. The gold torques of the Celts, the massive gold necklaces of the Medes, Etruscans and Egyptians which form the most valuable insignia of the warrior class have come down to us through the pictures in the tombs and the actual specimens in the tombs themselves. Some of these were enormously costly. They were bestowed as rewards of valor and as marks of civic distinction. The latter survive to-day in the gold chains of office worn by the mayors of cities in the old world.

All orders of knighthood had the necklace or collar as a principal insignium, and this custom of decoration with the necklace dates back at least as far as the time of Joseph, for as a mark of his authority in Egypt Pharaoh "put a gold chain about his neck." The women of antiquity rarely wore them except as brides, when to mark the respect in which they were held necklaces were placed upon them. The necklace, however, was a prominent adornment of the statues of the gods.

The ornament of the necklace was so valued that when the Saxon dynasty was overthrown by the Normans all persons below a certain rank were forbidden to wear them under heavy penalties. In the reign of Henry VIII., that king celebrated both for his wives and his revolt against Rome, anyone who had not £200 per year income could not wear a necklace. At that time, however, they became the common ornament of women, and in the Elizabethan dramatists there are many allusions to them. In England amber has always been one of the favorite materials for the necklace.

Even in the barrows of the early Britains amber beads are found, and the specimens of necklaces from the reign of Charles I. have amber set in gold. The Puritans abolished them as they abolished everything they laid their hands on which savored of ornament, but the necklace was revived again under the merry monarch more extravagantly than before. It gradually came to consist of several chains hung around the neck, each reaching further down than the one before. To the longest was hung the whistle of gold or silver used as a call for servants. These necklaces were of all materials—gold, silver, amber, beads, jewels or medallions. Some of them cost very large sums of money.

Old-Time Missouri Courtship.

[St. Louis Post-Dispatch.]

"When I was a young man," said the politician, I travelled in the Southwest considerably, selling saddles, etc. On one of my trips I stopped over night in a settler's cabin in Southeastern Missouri. The settler and his family were mighty cordial, gave me the best they had and made me welcome to a bunk on the floor with them. The oldest daughter was sixteen or seventeen years old and a perfect beauty for her situation. She was the kind