

## CHAPTER I

When Andrew Riach went to London, his intention was to become private secretary to a member of the Cabinet. If time permitted, he proposed writing for the Press.

"It might be better if you and Clarrie understood each other," the minister said.

It was their last night together. They faced each other in the manse-parlour at Wheens, whose low, peeled ceiling had threatened Mr. Eassie at his desk every time he looked up with his pen in his mouth until his wife died, when he ceased to notice things. The one picture on the walls, an engraving of a boy in velveteen, astride a tree, entitled "Boyhood of Bunyan," had started life with him. The horsehair chairs were not torn, and you did not require to know the sofa before you sat down on it, that day thirty years before, when a chubby minister and his lady walked to the manse between two cart-loads of furniture, trying not to look elated.

Clarrie rose to go, when she heard her name. The love-light was in her eyes, but Andrew did not open the door for her, for he was a Scotch graduate. Besides, she might one day be his wife.

The minister's toddy-ladle clinked against his tumbler, but Andrew did not speak. Clarrie was the girl he generally adored.

"As for Clarrie," he said at last, "she puts me in an awkward position. How do I know that I love her?"

"You have known each other a long time," said the minister.

His guest was cleaning his pipe with a hair-pin, that his quick eye had detected on the carpet.

"And she is devoted to you," continued Mr. Eassie.

The young man nodded.

"What I fear," he said, "is that we have known each other too long. Perhaps my feeling for Clarrie is only brotherly--"

"Hers for you, Andrew, is more than sisterly."

"Admitted. But consider, Mr. Eassie, she has only seen the world in soirées. Every girl has her day-dreams, and Clarrie has perhaps made a dream of me. She is impulsive, given to idealisation, and hopelessly illogical."

The minister moved uneasily in his chair.

"I have reasoned out her present relation to me," the young man went on, "and, the more you reduce it to the usual formulae, the more illogical it becomes. Clarrie could possibly describe me, but define me--never. What is our prospect of happiness in these circumstances?"

"But love--" began Mr. Eassie.

"Love!" exclaimed Andrew. "Is there such a thing? Reduce it to syllogistic form, and how does it look in Barbara?"

For the moment there was almost some expression in his face, and he suffered from a determination of words to the mouth.

"Love and logic," Mr. Eassie interposed, "are hardly kindred studies."

"Is love a study at all?" asked Andrew, bitterly. "It is but the trail of idleness. But all idleness is folly; therefore, love is folly."

Mr. Eassie was not so keen a logician as his guest, but he had age for a major premiss. He was easy-going rather than a coward; a preacher who, in the pulpit, looked difficulties genially in the face, and passed them by.

Riach had a very long neck. He was twenty-five years of age, fair, and somewhat heavily built, with a face as inexpressive as book-covers.

A native of Wheens and an orphan, he had been brought up by his uncle, who was a weaver and read Herodotus in the original. The uncle starved himself to buy books and talk about them, until one day he got a good meal, and died of it. Then Andrew apprenticed himself to a tailor.

When his time was out, he walked fifty miles to Aberdeen University, and got a bursary. He had been there a month, when his professor said good-naturedly--

"Don't you think, Mr. Riach, you would get on better if you took your hands out of your pockets?"

"No, sir, I don't think so," replied Andrew, in all honesty.

When told that he must apologise, he did not see it, but was willing to argue the matter out.

Next year he matriculated at Edinburgh, sharing one room with two others; studying through the night, and getting their bed when they rose. He was a failure in the classics, because they left you where you were, but in his third year he woke the logic class-room, and frightened the professor of moral philosophy.

He was nearly rusticated for praying at a debating society for a divinity professor who was in the chair.

"O Lord!" he cried, fervently, "open his eyes, guide his tottering footsteps, and lead him from the paths of folly into those that are lovely and of good report, for lo! his days are numbered, and the sickle has been sharpened, and the corn is not yet ripe for the cutting."

When Andrew graduated he was known as student of mark.

He returned to Wheens, before setting out for London, with the consciousness of his worth.

Yet he was only born to follow, and his chance of making a noise in the world rested on his meeting a stronger than himself. During his summer vacations he had weaved sufficient money to keep himself during the winter on porridge and potatoes.

Clarrie was beautiful and all that.

"We'll say no more about it, then," the minister said after a pause.

"The matter," replied Andrew, "cannot be dismissed in that way. Reasonable or not, I do undoubtedly experience sensations similar to Clarrie's. But in my love I notice a distinct ebb and flow. There are times when I don't care a hang for her."

"Andrew!"

"I beg your pardon. Still, it is you who have insisted on discussing this question in the particular instance. Love in the abstract is of much greater moment."

"I have sometimes thought, Andrew," Mr. Eassie said, "that you are lacking in the imaginative faculty."

"In other words, love is a mere fancy. Grant that, and see to what it leads. By imagining that I have Clarrie with me I am as well off as if I really had. Why, then, should I go to needless expense, and take her from you?"

The white-haired minister rose, for the ten o'clock bell was ringing and it was time for family worship.

"My boy," he said, "if there must be a sacrifice let the old man make it. I, too, have imagination."

For the moment there was a majesty about him that was foreign to his usual bearing. Andrew was touched, and gripped his hand.

"Rather," he cried, "let the girl we both love remain with you. She will be here waiting for me--should I return."

"More likely," said the minister, "she will be at the bank."

The banker was unmarried, and had once in February and again in June seen Clarrie home from the Dorcas Society. The town talked about it. Strictly speaking, gentlemen should not attend these meetings; but in Wheens there was not much difference between the men and the women.

That night, as Clarrie bade Andrew farewell at the garden gate, he took her head in his hands and asked what this talk about the banker meant.

It was no ignoble curiosity that prompted him. He would rather have got engaged to her there and then than have left without feeling sure of her.

His sweetheart looked her reply straight his eyes.

"Andrew!" was all she said.

It was sufficient. He knew that he did not require to press his point.

Lover's watches stand still. At last Andrew stooped and kissed her upturned face.

"If a herring and a half," he said anxiously, "cost three half-pence, how many will you get for elevenpence?"

Clarrie was mute.

Andrew shuddered; he felt that he was making a mistake.

"Why do I kiss you?" he cried. "What good does it do either of us?"

He looked fiercely at his companion, and her eyes filled with tears.

"Where even is the pleasure in it?" he added brutally.

The only objectionable thing about Clarrie was her long hair.

She wore a black frock and looked very breakable. Nothing irritates a man so much.

Andrew gathered her passionately in his arms, while a pained, puzzled expression struggled to reach his face.

Then he replaced her roughly on the ground and left her.

It was impossible to say whether they were engaged.