

CHAPTER XVI. MY MOTHER'S DIARY.

THERE is something repellent to me, even at this distance of time, in looking back at the dreary days, of seclusion which followed each other monotonously in my Highland home. The actions of my life, however trifling they may have been, I can find some interest in recalling: they associate me with my fellow-creatures; they connect me, in some degree, with the vigorous movement of the world. But I have no sympathy with the purely selfish pleasure which some men appear to derive from dwelling on the minute anatomy of their own feelings, under the pressure of adverse fortune. Let the domestic record of our stagnant life in Perthshire (so far as I am concerned in it) be presented in my mother's words, not in mine. A few lines of extract from the daily journal which it was her habit to keep will tell all that need be told before this narrative advances to later dates and to newer scenes.

"20th August.--We have been two months at our home in Scotland, and I see no change in George for the better. He is as far as ever, I fear, from being reconciled to his separation from that unhappy woman. Nothing will induce him to confess it himself. He declares that his quiet life here with me is all that he desires. But I know better! I have been into his bedroom late at night. I have heard him talking of her in his sleep, and I have seen the tears on his eyelids. My poor boy! What thousands of charming women there are who would ask nothing better than to be his wife! And the one woman whom he can never marry is the only woman whom he loves!

"25th.--A long conversation about George with Mr. MacGlue. I have never liked this Scotch doctor since he encouraged my son to keep the fatal appointment at Saint Anthony's Well. But he seems to be a clever man in his profession--and I think, in his way, he means kindly toward George. His advice was given as coarsely as usual, and very positively at the same time. 'Nothing will cure your son, madam, of his amatory passion for that half-drowned lady of his but change--and another lady. Send him away by himself this time; and let him feel the want of some kind creature to look after him. And when he meets with that kind creature (they are as plenty as fish in the sea), never trouble your head about it if there's a flaw in her character. I have got a cracked tea-cup which has served me for twenty years. Marry him, ma'am, to the new one with the utmost speed and impetuosity which the law will permit.' I hate Mr. MacGlue's opinions--so coarse and so hard-hearted!--but I sadly fear that I must part with my son for a little while, for his own sake.

"26th.--Where is George to go? I have been thinking of it all through the night, and I cannot arrive at a conclusion. It is so difficult to reconcile myself to letting him go away alone.

"29th.--I have always believed in special providences; and I am now confirmed in my belief. This morning has brought with it a note from our good friend and neighbor at Belhelvie. Sir James is one of the commissioners for the Northern Lights. He is going in a Government vessel to inspect the lighthouses on the North of Scotland, and on the Orkney and Shetland Islands--and, having noticed how worn and ill my poor boy looks, he most kindly invites George to be his guest on the voyage. They will not be absent for more than two months; and the sea (as Sir James reminds me) did wonders for George's health when he returned from India. I could wish for no better opportunity than this of trying what change of air and scene will do for him. However painfully I may feel the separation myself, I shall put a cheerful face on it; and I shall urge George to accept the invitation.

"30th.--I have said all I could; but he still refuses to leave me. I am a miserable, selfish creature. I felt so glad when he said No.

"31st.--Another wakeful night. George must positively send his answer to Sir James to-day. I am determined to do my duty toward my son--he looks so dreadfully pale and ill this morning! Besides, if something is not done to rouse him, how do I know that he may not end in going back to Mrs. Van Brandt after all? From every point of view, I feel bound to insist on his accepting Sir James's invitation. I have only to be firm, and the thing is done. He has never yet disobeyed me, poor fellow. He will not disobey me now.

"2d September.--He has gone! Entirely to please me--entirely against his own wishes. Oh, how is it that such a good son cannot get a good wife! He would make any woman happy. I wonder whether I have done right in sending him away? The wind is moaning in the fir plantation at the back of the house. Is there a storm at sea? I forgot to ask Sir James how big the vessel was. The 'Guide to Scotland' says the coast is rugged; and there is a wild sea between the north shore and the Orkney Islands. I almost regret having insisted so strongly--how foolish I am! We are all in the hands of God. May God bless and prosper my good son!

"10th.--Very uneasy. No letter from George. Ah, how full of trouble this life is! and how strange that we should cling to it as we do!

"15th.--A letter from George! They have done with the north coast and they have crossed the wild sea to the Orkneys. Wonderful weather has favored them so far; and George is in better health and spirits. Ah! how much happiness there is in life if we only have the patience to wait for it.

"2d October.--Another letter. They are safe in the harbor of Lerwick, the chief port in the Shetland Islands. The weather has not latterly been at all favorable. But the amendment in George's health remains. He writes most gratefully of Sir James's unremitting kindness to him. I am so happy, I declare I could kiss Sir James--though he is a great man, and a Commissioner for Northern Lights! In three weeks more (wind and weather permitting) they hope to get back. Never mind my lonely life here, if I can only see George happy and well again! He tells me they have passed a great deal of their time on shore; but not a word does he say about meeting any ladies. Perhaps they are scarce in those wild regions? I have heard of Shetland shawls and Shetland ponies. Are there any Shetland ladies, I wonder?"