

The Half-Hearted

by

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1. Evening In Glenavelin

From the heart of a great hill land Glenavelin stretches west and south to the wider Gled valley, where its stream joins with the greater water in its seaward course. Its head is far inland in a place of mountain solitudes, but its mouth is all but on the lip of the sea, and salt breezes fight with the flying winds of the hills. It is a land of green meadows on the brink of heather, of far-stretching fir woods that climb to the edge of the uplands and sink to the fringe of corn. Nowhere is there any march between art and nature, for the place is in the main for sheep, and the single road which threads the glen is little troubled with cart and crop-laden wagon. Midway there is a stretch of wood and garden around the House of Glenavelin, the one great dwelling-place in the vale. But it is a dwelling and a little more, for the home of the real lords of the land is many miles farther up the stream, in the moorland house of Etterick, where the Avelin is a burn, and the hills hang sharply over its source. To a stranger in an afternoon it seems a very vale of content, basking in sun and shadow, green, deep, and silent. But it is also a place of storms, for its name means the "glen of white waters," and mist and snow are commoner in its confines than summer heats.

On a very wet evening in June a young man in a high dogcart was driving up the glen. A deer-stalker's cap was tied down over his ears, and the collar of a great white waterproof defended his neck. A cheerful bronzed face was shadowed by the peak of his cap, and two very keen grey eyes peered out into the mist. He was driving with tight rein, for the mare was fresh and the road had awkward slopes and corners; but none the less he was dreaming, thinking pleasant thoughts, and now and then looking cheerily at the ribs of hill which at times were cleared of mist. His clean-shaven face was wet and shining with the drizzle, pools formed on the floor of the cart, and the mare's flanks were plastered with the weather.

Suddenly he drew up sharp at the sight of a figure by the roadside.

"Hullo, Doctor Gracey," he cried, "where on earth have you come from? Come in and I'll give you a lift."

The figure advanced and scrambled into the vacant seat. It was a little old man in a big topcoat with a quaint-fashioned wide-awake hat on his head. In ill weather all distinctions are swept away. The stranger might have been a statesman or a tramp.

"It is a pleasure to see you, Doctor," and the young man grasped a mittened hand and looked into his companion's face. There was something both kindly and mirthful in his grey eyes.

The old man arranged his seat comfortably, buttoned another button at the neck of the coat, and then scrutinised the driver. "It's four years--four years in October since I last cast eyes on you, Lewie, my boy," he said. "I heard you were coming, so I refused a lift from Haystounslacks and the minister. Haystounslacks was driving from Gledsmuir, and unless the Lord protects him he will be in Avelin water ere he gets home. Whisky and a Glenavelin road never agree, Lewie, as I who have mended the fool's head a dozen times should know. But I thought you would never come, and was prepared to ride in the next baker's van." The Doctor spoke with the pure English and high northern voice of an old school of professional men, whose tongue, save in telling a story, knew not the vernacular, and yet in its pitch and accent inevitably betrayed their birthplace. Precise in speech and dress, uncommonly skilful, a mild humorist, and old in the world's wisdom, he had gone down the evening way of life with the heart of a boy.

"I was delayed--I could not help it, though I was all afternoon at the job," said the young man. "I've seen a dozen and more tenants and I talked sheep and drains till I got out of my depth and was gravely corrected. It's the most hospitable place on earth, this, but I thought it a pity to waste a really fine hunger on the inevitable ham and eggs, so I waited for dinner. Lord, I have an appetite! Come and dine, Doctor. I am in solitary state just now, and long, wet evenings are dreary."

"I'm afraid I must excuse myself, Lewie," was the formal answer, with just a touch of reproof. Dinner to Doctor Gracey was a serious ceremony, and invitations should not be scattered rashly. "My housekeeper's wrath is not to be trifled with, as you should know."

"I do," said the young man in a tone of decent melancholy. "She once cuffed my ears the month I stayed with you for falling in the burn. Does she beat you, Doctor?"

"Indeed, no," said the little old gentleman; "not as yet. But physically she is my superior and I live in terror." Then abruptly, "For heaven's sake, Lewie, mind the mare."

"It's all right," said the driver, as the dogcart swung neatly round an ugly turn. "There's the mist going off the top of Etterick Law, and--why, that's the end of the Dreichill?"

"It's the Dreichill, and beyond it is the Little Muneraw. Are you glad to be home, Lewie?"

"Rather," said the young man gravely. "This is my own countryside, and I fancy it's the last place a man forgets."

"I fancy so--with right-thinking people. By the way, I have much to congratulate you on. We old fogies in this desert place have been often seeing your name in the newspapers lately. You are a most experienced traveller."

"Fair. But people made a great deal more of that than it deserved. It was very simple, and I had every chance. Some day I will go out and do the same thing again with no advantages, and if I come back you may praise me then."

"Right, Lewie. A bare game and no chances is the rule of war. And now, what will you do?"

"Settle down," said the young man with mock pathos, "which in my case means settling up also. I suppose it is what you would call the crucial moment in my life. I am going in for politics, as I always intended, and for the rest I shall live a quiet country life at Etterick. I've a wonderful talent for rusticity."

The Doctor shot an inquiring glance from beneath the flaps of his hat. "I never can make up my mind about you, Lewie."

"I daresay not. It is long since I gave up trying to make up my mind about myself."

"When you were a very small and very bad boy I made the usual prophecy that you would make a spoon or spoil a horn. Later I declared you would make the spoon. I still keep to that opinion, but I wish to goodness I knew what shape your spoon would take."

"Ornamental, Doctor, some odd fancy spoon, but not useful. I feel an inner lack of usefulness."

"Humph! Then things are serious, Lewie, and I, as your elder, should give advice; but confound it, my dear, I cannot think what it should be. Life has been too easy for you, a great deal too easy. You want a little of the salt and iron of the world. You are too clever ever to be conceited, and you are too good a fellow ever to be a fool, but apart from these sad alternatives there are numerous middle stages which are not very happy."

The young man's face lengthened, as it always did either in repose or reflection.

"You are old and wise, Doctor. Have you any cure for a man with sufficient money and no immediate profession to prevent stagnation?"

"None," said the Doctor; "but the man himself can find many. The chief is that he be conscious of his danger, and on the watch against it. As a last expedient I should recommend a second course of travel."

"But am I to be barred from my home because of this bogey of yours?"

"No, Lewie lad, but you must be kept, as you say, 'up to scratch,'" and the old face smiled. "You are too good to waste. You Haystouns are high-strung, finicking people, on whom idleness sits badly. Also you are the last of your race and have responsibilities. You must remember I was your father's friend, and knew you all well."

At the mention of his father the young man's interest quickened.

"I must have been only about six years old when he died. I find so few people who remember him well and can tell me about him."

"You are very like him, Lewie. He began nearly as well as you; but he settled down into a quiet life, which was the very thing for which he was least fitted. I do not know if he had altogether a happy time. He lost interest in things, and grew shy and rather irritable. He quarrelled with most of his neighbours, and got into a trick of magnifying little troubles till he shrank from the slightest discomfort."

"And my mother?"

"Ah, your mother was different--a cheery, brave woman. While she lived she kept him in some measure of self-confidence, but you know she died at your birth, Lewie, and after that he grew morose and retiring. I speak about these things from the point of view of my profession, and I fancy it is the special disease which lies in your blood. You have all been over-cultured and enervated; as I say, you want some of the salt and iron of life."

The young man's brow was furrowed in a deep frown which in no way broke the good-humour of his face. They were nearing a cluster of houses, the last clachan of sorts in the glen, where a kirk steeple in a grove of trees proclaimed civilization. A shepherd passed them with a couple of dogs, striding with masterful step towards home and comfort. The cheery glow of firelight from the windows pleased both men as they were whirled through the raw weather.

"There, you see," said the Doctor, nodding his head towards the retreating figure; "there's a man who in his own way knows the secret of life. Most of his days are spent in dreary, monotonous toil. He is for ever wrestling with the weather and getting scorched and frozen, and the result is that the sparse enjoyments of his life are relished with a rare gusto. He sucks his pipe of an evening with a zest which the man who lies on his back all day smoking knows nothing about. So, too, the labourer who hoes turnips for one and sixpence the day. They know the arduousness of life, which is a lesson we must all learn sooner or later. You people who have been coddled and petted must learn it, too; and for you it is harder to learn, but pleasanter in the learning, because you stand above the bare need of things, and have leisure for the adornments. We must all be fighters and strugglers, Lewie, and it is better to wear out than to rust out. It is bad to let choice things become easily familiar; for, you know, familiarity is apt to beget a proverbial offspring."

The young man had listened attentively, but suddenly he leaned from the seat and with a dexterous twitch of his whip curled it round the leg of a boy of sixteen who stood before a cottage.

"Hullo, Jock," he cried. "When are you coming up to see me? Bring your brother some day and we'll go and fish the Midburn." The urchin pulled off a ragged cap and grinned with pleasure.

"That's the boy you pulled out of the Avelin?" asked the Doctor. "I had heard of that performance. It was a good introduction to your home-coming."

"It was nothing," said the young man, flushing slightly. "I was crossing the ford and the stream was up a bit. The boy was fishing, wading pretty deep, and in turning round to stare at me he slipped and was carried down. I merely rode my horse out and collared him. There was no danger."

"And the Black Linn just below," said the Doctor, incredulously. "You have got the usual modesty of the brave man, Lewie."

"It was a very small thing. My horse knew its business--that was all." And he flicked nervously with the whip.

A grey house among trees rose on the left with a quaint gateway of unhewn stone. The dogcart pulled up, and the Doctor scrambled down and stood shaking the rain from his hat and collar. He watched the young man till, with a skilful turn, he had entered Etterick gates, and then with a more meditative face than is usual in a hungry man he went through the trees to his own dwelling.

2. Lady Manorwater's Guests

When the afternoon train from the south drew into Gledsmuir station, a girl who had been devouring the landscape for the last hour with eager eyes, rose nervously to prepare for exit. To Alice Wishart the country was a novel one, and the prospect before her an unexplored realm of guesses. The daughter of a great merchant, she had lived most of her days in the ugly environs of a city, save for such time as she had spent at the conventional schools. She had never travelled; the world of men and things was merely a name to her, and a girlhood, lonely and brightened chiefly by the companionship of books, had not given her self-confidence. She had casually met Lady Manorwater at some political meeting in her father's house, and the elder woman had taken a strong liking to the quiet, abstracted child. Then came an invitation to Glenavelin, accepted gladly yet with much fear and searching of heart. Now, as she looked out on the shining mountain land, she was full of delight that she was about to dwell in the heart of it. Something of pride, too, was present, that she was to be the guest of a great lady, and see something of a life which seemed infinitely remote to her provincial thoughts. But when her journey drew near its end she was foolishly nervous, and scanned the platform with anxious eye.

The sight of her hostess reassured her. Lady Manorwater was a small middle-aged woman, with a thin classical face, large colourless eyes, and untidy fair hair. She was very plainly dressed, and as she darted forward to greet the girl with entire frankness and kindness, Alice forgot her fears and kissed her heartily. A languid young woman was introduced as Miss Afflint, and in a few minutes the three were in the Glenavelin carriage with the wide glen opening in front.

"Oh, my dear, I hope you will enjoy your visit. We are quite a small party, for Jack says Glenavelin is far too small to entertain in. You are fond of the country, aren't you? And of course the place is very pretty. There is tennis and golf and fishing; but perhaps you don't like these things? We are not very well off for neighbours, but we are large enough in number to be sufficient to ourselves. Don't you think so, Bertha?" And Lady Manorwater smiled at the third member of the group.

Miss Afflint, a silent girl, smiled back and said nothing. She had been engaged in a secret study of Alice's face, and whenever the object of the study raised her eyes she found a pair of steady blue ones beaming on her. It was a little disconcerting, and Alice gazed out at the landscape with a fictitious curiosity.

They passed out of the Gled valley into the narrower strath of Avelin, and soon, leaving the meadows behind, went deep into the recesses of woods. At a narrow glen bridged by the road and bright with the spray of cascades and the fresh green of ferns, Alice

cried out in delight, "Oh, I must come back here some day and sketch it. What a Paradise of a place!"

"Then you had better ask Lewie's permission." And Lady Manorwater laughed.

"Who is Lewie?" asked the girl, anticipating some gamekeeper or shepherd.

"Lewie is my nephew. He lives at Etterick, up at the head of the glen."

Miss Afflint spoke for the first time. "A very good man. You should know Lewie, Miss Wishart. I'm sure you would like him. He is a great traveller, you know, and has written a famous book. Lewis Haystoun is his full name."

"Why, I have read it," cried Alice. "You mean the book about Kashmir. But I thought the author was an old man."

"Lewie is not very old," said his aunt; "but I haven't seen him for years, so he may be decrepit by this time. He is coming home soon, he says, but he never writes. I know two of his friends who pay a Private Inquiry Office to send them news of him."

Alice laughed and became silent. What merry haphazard people were these she had fallen among! At home everything was docketed and ordered. Meals were immovable feasts, the hour for bed and the hour for rising were more regular than the sun's. Her father was full of proverbs on the virtue of regularity, and was wont to attribute every vice and misfortune to its absence. And yet here were men and women who got on very well without it. She did not wholly like it. The little doctrinaire in her revolted and she was pleased to be censorious.

"You are a very learned young woman, aren't you?" said Lady Manorwater, after a short silence. "I have heard wonderful stories about your learning. Then I hope you will talk to Mr. Stocks, for I am afraid he is shocked at Bertha's frivolity. He asked her if she was in favour of the Prisons Regulation Bill, and she was very rude."

"I only said," broke in Miss Afflint, "that owing to my lack of definite local knowledge I was not in a position to give an answer commensurate with the gravity of the subject." She spoke in a perfect imitation of the tone of a pompous man.

"Bertha, I do not approve of you," said Lady Manorwater. "I forbid you to mimic Mr. Stocks. He is very clever, and very much in earnest over everything. I don't wonder that a butterfly like you should laugh, but I hope Miss Wishart will be kind to him."

"I am afraid I am very ignorant," said Alice hastily, "and I am very useless. I never did any work of any sort in my life, and when I think of you I am ashamed."

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