

**M A Y**

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BY  
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## **Table of Contents**

CHAPTER I.

CHAPTER II.

CHAPTER III.

CHAPTER IV.

CHAPTER V.

CHAPTER VI.

CHAPTER VII.

CHAPTER VIII.

CHAPTER IX.

CHAPTER X.

CHAPTER XI.

CHAPTER XII.

CHAPTER XIII.

CHAPTER XIV.

CHAPTER XV.

CHAPTER XVI.

CHAPTER XVII.

CHAPTER XVIII.

CHAPTER XIX.

CHAPTER XX.

CHAPTER XXI.

CHAPTER XXII.

**M A Y.**

## CHAPTER I.

MARJORY, as may be supposed, heard nothing of the tragic-comic commotion which she had left behind her. Her drive in the old carriage, the sight of many familiar things and places for the first time, after so much had passed which had separated her from her old world, roused her half painfully, half pleasantly. Every corner of the peaceful road, every cottage on the way, made its separate stab at her; so many remembrances which had fallen dormant in her mind, remembrances of "the boys," which from sheer familiarity and easiness of recollection had fallen out of recollection, started up in new life before her. She seemed to hear the shouts of their school time, and to see them, not men but lads, in their innocence and foolishness, about every turning. This wounded her sore, and yet gave her a sort of happiness. It was not like the drear blank of disappearance, the superseding of them, and calm passing on of the unconcerned world, which had stupefied her mind. Thus the change did her good as people say; and perhaps the sight of Miss Jean did her good, and the harsh yet true kindness which spoke so despotically and acted so gently. But when she was safely housed in the High Street, a great reaction set in. So long as daylight lasted, Marjory turned her wistful eyes along the line of the coast towards the east, where the mansion house of Pitcomlie stood out on its headland, with something of the feelings which moved her on her drive. She sat there and recalled stories of her youth, feats which "the boys" had done, hairbreadth escapes, old dead jokes of the past, pitifullest of recollections. All these came up and buzzed about her. She smiled and wondered to find herself amused by memories which ought, she felt, to have been anything

but amusing. These realizations of the past were sharp and poignant in the pain of their sorrow; but at the same time they were sweet.

It was only when night fell, when the silence of the small house fell round her, when the few people about were all asleep, and the street, upon which her room looked out, was quiet as the grave, that the pleasure of these recollections failed. She got chilled in the mournful silence. It was a still night, and the sound from the sea came very softly upon her ear, like a cadence measured and gentle. All was very still in Miss Jean's maiden habitation. The two maids slept down stairs at a distance from the other rooms. They went to bed at ten o'clock, as indeed did the little town with very few exceptions. Looking out from her window, as Marjory did by habit, being used to look out every night upon the sea, she saw opposite to her, in place of the intermittent gleam of the lighthouse to which she was accustomed, a steady glimmer in young Hepburn's window, which was opposite. That was the only sign of fellowship in all the shadowy silent little town, where there was a sense of the presence of others without any sign of friendliness from them. This light roused in Marjory a vague uneasiness in the midst of so many other heavy thoughts. What was it that it recalled to her? Some other kind of light, some other sympathy. She dropped the blind and went in, and sat down wearily. A stifling sense of loss and dreary vacancy came upon her.

All her life long Pitcomlie and its interests had been her first thought. She had become the mistress of the house at a very early age, when she was little more than a child; and through all her subsequent life this care and occupation was all to her that a man's purpose is to him, filling her mind and mixing itself with all her expectations. Marjory had never loved any man with that strong

and personal affection which overcomes all hindrances; but she had been loved and wooed, and no doubt, but for this, might have married one of her suitors or another. She had not, however, found herself able—she had not “had time” to let such an idea seize hold upon her mind. It had seemed so impossible that Pitcomlie, her father, her uncle, her baby-sister, and in the earlier period of her incumbency, “the boys,” could do without her. It was impossible, quite impossible, she had said, when any dawn of inclination seemed rising within her. Thus she set herself and her own life aside as a secondary thing, and gave herself up to duties which an illness or an accident might terminate at any moment, without help or warning, leaving her stranded high and dry upon the shore. Women are trained to make such sacrifices, and make them daily, with the reward of being smiled at as old maids a little later, by their juniors who have known no such bond of duty. Marjory was far beyond the possibility of feeling such a penalty. She was thinking nothing of the consequences, nor of what her future life should be. What she felt was that the use of her was over, that her duties were finally done, that Pitcomlie wanted her no more, nor anyone, nor any place; her work in the world seemed accomplished. She had no longer anything to do for her family whom she had served with loyal devotion for so long. She had been their servant, and yet in a certain sense their mistress; but the duties of both offices were over. She was cast adrift; look where she might, she saw in the blank world before her nothing more to be done, which in any way resembled the office she had filled all her life. The only charge remaining to her was Milly; but after all to superintend the education of a child is very different from the many and various occupations which belong to the guidance of a family, the regulation of all domestic affairs, the interests moral and material with which she had been accustomed to deal.

A general deprived of his command, a sailor with his ship taken from him, could not have been more at a loss than this young woman, suddenly deprived of the occupations which had given character and meaning to all her past existence. She sat down drearily in Miss Jean's best room, amid all the dark old furniture, leaning her elbows upon an old escritoire which had belonged to her great-grandfather, and fixing her eyes unaware upon a portrait of that great-grandfather's mother. All around her was old, shadowy, still. It seemed to her that she herself had glided into the midst of those shadows to take a permanent place among them. The long silent procession of ancestors and ancestresses seemed to take possession of her, to draw her, a silent follower into their silent train. The very house and room seemed to exercise a certain fascination over her. They seemed to put their veto upon all change, novelty, movement of every kind. The High Street of Comlie, grass-grown and silent, the monotonous continued cadence of the sea, the little round of occupations which were no occupations, the position of spectator, sometimes bitterly, always disapprovingly critical of everything that went on at the house she had once ruled—was this all that remained for Marjory Hay-Heriot at twenty-five, as it was all that had fallen to the lot of Jean Hay-Heriot, and of many a proud silent gentlewoman besides, who had lived and died so, and scorned to complain?

Perhaps a milder and meeker woman would have seen a point of duty still remaining, which Marjory did not recognise. I am aware that, especially in books, there are sisters who would have devoted themselves to the self-denying task of watching over the new household at Pitcomlie, guiding the young widow in the way in which she should go, and helping to train up a new and worthy representative of the family in the person of little Tommy, the



future Laird. This, however, was an aspect of the matter which did not occur to Marjory. The fact that these new people were Charlie's wife and connections, I am afraid, exercised a repelling rather than attractive effect upon her. Their existence seemed almost a wrong to Charlie. Marjory made haste to separate his memory, poor fellow, from that of the strangers who had come in by accident, as it were, and snatched the home of her fathers out of her hands. She was too proud to say a word of complaint, and too sensible not to recognize fully the right of the new-comers. Nay, she was even impartial enough to compel herself to understand how Matilda's impatience to take possession of her new rights might be justified. But the reason often recognizes what the heart does not admit; and to range herself on the side of Mrs. Charles was utterly impossible to Charlie's sister. The best thing she could now do was to forget Pitcomlie altogether, she said to herself. The worst thing, and unfortunately the most likely, was that she should become, like Miss Jean, the critic of Pitcomlie, half-consciously on the outlook for its follies, and judging it severely, perceiving all its mistakes, and scarcely sorry for them. Marjory, who was no model of womankind, felt within herself all the capability for doing this. She felt that it was possible to her, and shrank with dismay from the thoughts.

Thus her heart was sick with more than grief—with the sense as of a heavy curtain which had fallen over her life, an ending put to all that was worthy of being called life in it. Her existence had stopped, but she continued. How many of us have felt this! and what poor expedients some are put to, to invent for themselves such excuses for living as may cheat the vacancy into some reasonable semblance! This cannot happen, fortunately, at twenty-five; but Marjory felt, as was natural, that twenty-five was a great

age, and that she had outlived all the new openings, all the possibilities of youthful existence. Miss Hay-Heriot, of the High Street of Comlie, like her great-aunt Jean, and many great-aunts before that, with all the use died out of her, and nothing to do but live. If she had been brought up to it, Marjory thought to herself, she would have minded less; but what a strange and dismal contrast from the life she had been brought up to—the busy existence full of care which she had lived only a fortnight since, appealed to on every side, found fault with, looked up to, with so many disagreeable offices thrust upon her, and work which she would gladly have got rid of! Now she had got rid of all her work at a stroke, and the cares seemed happiness to her in comparison with the blank which their absence left.

When her thoughts came to this point, however, they changed with a sudden start and spring. For there was something she had to do which no one now would dream of interfering with. It was late by this time, the middle of the night in Comlie, where everybody was up by six o'clock, and Marjory was half afraid to move about the old room, where every board creaked under her foot. But she opened her box, which was near her, and took from it poor Tom's little desk, in which she had found his bills and his useless treasures. From thence she took out the packet which she had made up so carefully with the list and calculations which had given her so much trouble, and which it had grieved her so much to think of explaining to her father. Her father had got off without hearing of them, without any posthumous stab from his dead son. The stab had gone into Marjory's breast to have the edge blunted, and there it remained. Surely, she thought, with some natural tears, some good angel had watched over him, to give him an easy dismissal out of this hard world. He had never known that Tom had deceived

him; he had never known that Charlie had died. But some one must always pay the penalty for such exemptions. Marjory took out her own calculations in the middle of the night, in the stillness, among all the shadows, and looked at the list ruefully enough. There was nobody now but herself to do it. Tom's memory was nothing to the new possessors of Pitcomlie, to no one, indeed, except herself, and perhaps one other, one helpless creature, who was breaking her heart it might be, somewhere, with no right to mourn, no power to vindicate. It gave Marjory, however, a little shock to feel the vulgar aspect of this sole thing which it remained to her to do for the family. It put Isabell out of her mind, so potent is the force of a bit of harsh reality over all gentler thoughts. To pay Tom's debts; that was what she had to do. She almost smiled by herself at the difference between her theoretical sense of high devotion to her own people, and the perfectly prosaic yet disagreeable form which that devotion must take. There was nothing lofty in it to swell her heart, or give her the elevating consciousness of a noble duty. It would only make her so much the poorer, abridge her capabilities, and perhaps procure for her some irritating and troublesome discussions with the "man of business," who would not understand the necessity. But still it had to be done. Marjory swept all the papers impatiently back, when this fact made itself apparent to her. She was more sick than ever of everything about her. I don't know if a little annoyance at the absolute loss of so much money had anything to do with this feeling. I doubt very much whether it had, for money was little more than a symbol to Marjory. But a certain whimsical sense of an anti-climax—of a mean necessity following a grand intention—crossed her mind, disposing her half to laugh, and half to cry. Yes, it seemed dismal beyond measure to have come to an end of all her duties, to have nothing now to do for her family, whose prime minister she had been all her life; but to be

roused from the painful depression of that thought to a consciousness of still having Tom's debts to pay! This sordid claim upon her, enveloped in a cloud of petty misery, of meanness, and unworthiness, and shifts, and falsehood, what otherwise was the mournfullest tragedy. Marjory pushed all the papers away, almost throwing them into the escritoire in the movement of her impatience—and went to bed. The most sensible thing to do, no doubt; but meaning an amount of provoked temper, annoyance, vexation, and half ludicrous despair, which we will not attempt to describe.

During the next week, the half of Fife drove into the High Street to leave cards and pay visits of condolence. Such of them as were received in Miss Jean's old-fashioned drawing-room, were edified with an account of the shortcomings of Mrs. Chairles which made it difficult for these ladies to maintain the gravity proper to the occasion. But as for Marjory, she had the cards for her share; Miss Jean concluded that for a young woman who had lost her father and two brothers in so short a space of time, to be able to see any one, was an idea which was almost indecent—not to say criminal. Miss Jean was strong on this point, though her social code was lax on others; she spoke of her niece in subdued tones, as of an invalid; she was, "poor thing, as well as you could expect—not able for much, but resigned, and trying to bear her trouble like a Christian woman." This was her old aunt's description of poor Marjory's half-stupefied, half-excited state, and of the superabundant life and energy which she felt within her. The old lady ordered her old carriage daily for a drive, which Marjory took with resignation, through the roads which were so familiar to her, where she seemed to know not only every turn, but every leaf upon every tree, and every blade of green corn which began to rise

in the fields. After taking this exercise, which was her duty, Marjory had to resign herself to remain indoors; her longing for the beach, where the measured rising and falling of the sea was soothing to her, was considered by Miss Jean an illegitimate craving not to be encouraged.

“It’s all imagination, all imagination. What good could the sea do ye? Sit at the back window, and ye’ll hear it, sometimes more than ye wish,” she said, with a shiver, thinking of the stormy wintry nights.

Sometimes, however, Marjory was permitted to stray round the churchyard, and renew the flowers which, with a weakness which Miss Jean denounced, yet gave in to, she had placed upon the graves. She did this in the evening, when Comlie was beginning to close its windows, and few people saw her glide across the road in her black dress. On one of these occasions, however, Marjory found other people before her in the churchyard. Generally it was very quiet, the loneliest place, with its old sixteenth century monuments standing up around, guarding it from the approach of anything more novel. The two figures before her attracted little attention from her at first, till she perceived that the corner which attracted them was that which contained the Pitcomlie vault. They came back again and again to that spot, the man diverging now and then, the woman ever returning. When Marjory’s attention was fully roused by this, it seemed to her that she recollected the woman’s figure. She was of the middle size, of very ordinary dress and appearance, like a hundred others who might have been met in Comlie High Street; but there was something in her outline and the little gestures she made as she called back her companion, which attracted Marjory’s attention.

“Come back, John, come back; there is nothing I care for here but one thing,” she said, leaning upon the very railing where Miss Heriot’s own steps were bound. Marjory went up to her lightly and swiftly, and laid her hand on her shoulder. She turned round with a suppressed cry. It was the same young woman, round, ruddy, and commonplace, but with a serious look in her eyes which gave her a certain dignity, whom Marjory had spoken with at Pitcomlie the night before her father’s funeral. The girl gave a visible start, changed colour, and called again, “Come back, John!” with an air of something like fright. Then she made an effort, and recovered command of herself. She made Marjory a slight curtsey, and confronted her steadily. “Were you wanting something with me, mem?” she said.

“I want to know what you have to do at my brother’s grave?” said Marjory, breathless; “what you have to do with him? Won’t you tell me? There is nothing I would not give to know. Oh! tell me! I do not blame you. I mean no harm of any kind; but I want to know.”

“Wha said I had anything to do with either him or his grave?” said the young woman.

Her companion, attracted by the voices, drew near suddenly, and stood as if to stop further conversation between the two. The stranger gave one indifferent glance up at him, and then went on:

“I’ll no pretend I don’t know ye. You’re Miss Heriot, and I’m but a poor lass; but I’ve a right to walk in a place like this, if I like—to read the gravestones, if I like.”

“Oh, tell me!” said Marjory, too much excited to notice the air which her companion attempted to give to the discussion. “I mean no harm; tell me only who you are, and if you belong to Isabell.”

“What does the lady know about Isabell?” asked the man, interrupting suddenly.

“Nothing but her name,” said Marjory; “nothing but her name! and that she cared for my brother. I am not blaming her, or you. I mean no unkindness. I only want to know—to see her—to find out—”

“Miss Heriot,” said the young woman, “you’ll find out nothing with my will; you’re naething to us, and we’re naething that I ken of to you. If ever there was anything to tell, you would hear, like others. But dinna interfere with us. Poor folk have rights as well as their betters. I will answer nae questions, and neither shall any that belongs to me.”

She turned away abruptly; but the man hesitated. He brought her back, plucking at her shawl.

“The lady means no harm,” he said. “She says so; and if there’s nothing to be ashamed of—”

“Oh, hold your tongue!” cried the girl, in a tone of exasperation. “It is me that has to judge, and I’ve made up my mind. Hold your peace, man! You would believe whatever was told you with a soft voice and a pleasant look. She stands up for her ain, and we stand for ours. There’s nae fellowship nor friendship between us. Good night to ye, mem; we’ll disturb you no longer. Man! cannot you hold your tongue?”

“If there was just reason—” he said, still hesitating.

The young woman clutched at his arm, and turned him away almost violently. Marjory watched them with a tumult of feelings which she scarcely understood. It seemed to her strange that she, too, could not turn to some one—tell some one what had happened. But there was no one to tell; and for that matter, nothing had happened. She watched them as they withdrew hastily, driven away by her presence. She stood with her hand upon the rail that encircled the family vault, with all the tablets inscribed with kindred names glimmering behind her. An imaginative observer might have supposed her to be guarding these graves from profanation. She stood as if she had driven off an attack upon them; but what attack was it? who were they? what did it mean? To these questions she could give no answer. She stood and leaned upon the cold rail, and shed a few dreary tears on the marble beneath. There seemed to be nothing left to her but that marble, the iron railing, the chill graves that gave no response.

When she went in again, she had to close up her tears, her wondering pangs of curiosity, her dreary sense of loneliness, within herself. Was there no one in the world, no one left to whom ever again she could say all she was thinking; whom she could consult, who would help her even in such a hopeless inquiry as this? Not Miss Jean, certainly, who looked up with her keen eyes from the tea-table, and said something about wet feet, and needless exposure, and the need to be resigned; nor little Milly, who was ready to cry and kiss her sister, but could do no more to aid her; nor even Uncle Charles, who had arrived suddenly with news of his own to occupy him, and who was impatient if she did not give him her entire attention for his particular business. These were all who belonged to Marjory, now, here or anywhere. Had she dreamt



somehow? had she seen a vision? had there been revealed to her in  
a break of the stormy clouds—some one else?

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