

M E R K L A N D
OR
SELF SACRIFICE

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CHAPTER XXXI.



The Prodigal's Solemn Pledge in Mrs. Catherine's little room.



**“Lord, look upon mine offering—I bring thee back seven-fold.
Lord
of Mercy! cast me not away for evermore!”**

CHAPTER I.

“BUT may not Mrs. Catherine’s visitor belong to another family? The name is not uncommon.”

“You will permit me to correct you, Miss Ross. The name is by no means a common one; and there was some very distant connexion, I remember, between the Aytouns and Mrs. Catherine. I have little doubt that this girl is his daughter.”

“Mother! mother!” exclaimed the first speaker, a young lady, whose face, naturally grave and composed, bore tokens of unusual agitation. “It is impossible; Mrs. Catherine, considerate and kind as she always is, could never be so cruel.”

“I am quite at a loss for your meaning, Anne.”

“To bring her *here*—to our neighborhood,” said Anne Ross, averting her eyes, and disregarding her step-mother’s interruption, “where we must meet her continually, where our name, which must be odious to her, will be ringing in her ears every day. I cannot believe it. Mrs. Catherine could not do anything so barbarous.”

Mrs. Ross, of Merkland, threw down her work, and pushed back her chair from the table:

“Upon my word, Anne Ross, you turn more absurd every day. What is the meaning of this?—*our* name odious! I should not like Lewis to hear you say so.”

“But Lewis does not know this terrible story,” said Anne.

“And never shall,” replied Mrs. Ross. “Neither can your brother’s crime make my son’s name odious to any one. I fancied you knew that Norman was called by your mother’s name; and this Aytoun girl, if she knows anything of it at all, will have heard of him as Rutherford, and not as Ross.”

“But Mrs. Catherine—she at least cannot be ignorant, cannot have forgotten: who could forget this? and my mother was her friend!”

“The friendship has descended, I think,” said Mrs. Ross, with a sneer, “as you seem to imagine feuds should. I suppose you think this girl’s brother, if she has one, would be quite doing his duty if he demanded satisfaction from Lewis, for a thing which happened when the poor boy was a mere infant? But be not afraid, most tender and scrupulous sister. People have better sense in *these* days.”

Anne Ross turned away, grieved and silenced; her conversations with her step-mother too often terminated so: and there was a long pause. At last she said, timidly, as if desirous, and yet afraid of asking further: “And my father never knew how he died?”

Mrs. Ross glanced hurriedly at the door: “He did not die.”

Anne started violently. “Norman, my brother? I beseech you to tell me, mother, is he not dead?”

“Ah, there is Duncan back, from Portoran,” said Mrs. Ross, rising. “Letters from Lewis, no doubt. How slow they are!” And she rang the bell vehemently.

The summons brought in a maid, struggling with the buckle of Duncan's letter-bag, which was opened at length, and gave to Mrs. Ross's delighted eyes the expected letters from her only son: but Anne sat apart, shivering and trembling with a great dread—a secret, most sad and terrible; a tale of dishonor, and crime, and misery, such as might chill the very heart to hear.

“And there's a letter from the Tower, Miss Anne,” said the maid, giving her a note. “Duncan got it at the Brig, from Johnnie Halflin, and Johnnie was to wait, till Duncan got back with the answer, if there was to be any.”

“There is no answer, May,” said Anne, glancing over the brief epistle; and May withdrew reluctantly, having obtained no news of Maister Lewis, or his wanderings, wherewith to satisfy her expectant audience in the kitchen.

The letter of Lewis was a long one, and Anne had time to travel listlessly again and again over the angular and decided characters of her ancient friend.

“My friend,” said the singularly-folded black letter-looking note, “you will come to the Tower to-morrow. I am expecting Alison Aytoun at night; and seeing the world has gotten two new generations (to keep within the truth) since I myself was done with the company of children, I am in need of your counsel how we are to brighten the bed-chamber and other apartments, so as will become the presence of youth. For undoubtedly in this matter, if I am like any mortal person, it is like Issachar in the prophecy (not to be profane,) for there is Elspat Henderson, my own woman, that would have out the old red satin curtains (that are liker black than red now, as you will mind,) to put upon the bed, and Euphan

Morison, her daughter, is for no curtains at all, for the sake of health, (pity me, Anne, that have doctors among my serving-women!) and Jacky, Euphan's daughter (bethanked that she has but one!) has been gathering dahlias and sunflowers, and such other unwholesome and unyouthful things, to put in the poor bairn Alison's room, wherewith I have near brought a fever upon myself, first with the evil odor of them, and then with flying upon the elf Jacky. So mind you come to the Tower, like a good bairn, as you are, and have always been, as early in the day as you can; and before twelve of the clock, if possible, seeing that I have many things to say to you.

“CATHERINE DOUGLAS.”

For the third or fourth time, Anne's eyes had travelled down to that firm and clear signature, when an exclamation from her step-mother roused her. “Lewis will be home before his birthday! Lewis will be here on Friday! I believe you are more concerned about that girl coming to the Tower. Do you hear me, Anne? On Friday your brother will be home.”

There were only two days to prepare for his coming; and before Anne had finished her hasty perusal of the letter which Mrs. Ross permitted her to see, the house was full of joyful bustle and unwonted glee—for the frigid soul of its mistress melted under the influence of her son, as if his words had been very sunbeams. By nature she was neither amiable nor generous; but the mother's love, in its first out-gushing, almost made her both.

And she had known the details of that dark mystery too long, and had too little liking for her husband's unhappy son, to sympathize at all with Anne's horror and agony. And so Mrs. Ross,

of Merkland, bustled and rejoiced in her selfish gladness, while Anne, longing to ask, and yet afraid of rude repulse or angry reprimand, sat silently, with a heavy heart, beside her. At length, when they were about to separate for the night, Anne took courage.

“Mother,” she said, “I do not wish to disturb you, in so happy an occupation as this, but only one word—Norman, poor Norman, you said he did not die.”

“Upon my word, Anne, I think you might choose a better time for those disagreeable inquiries,” said Mrs. Ross, impatiently.

“He is my brother,” said Anne, “and with such a dreadful history. Mother, is Norman alive?”

“How can I tell?” cried Mrs. Ross. “You ought to desire most earnestly, Anne, both for his sake and your own, that he may be peacefully dead. Your father, I know, received a letter from him, secretly, after the ship was lost. He had escaped the wreck; but that is seventeen years ago.”

“And did he confess?” said Anne, eagerly.

“Confess! Criminals do not generally do that. No, no, he professed his innocence. I may find you the letter sometime. There, will not that do? Go to your room now.”

“And will you not tell Lewis?” said Anne.

“Tell Lewis!” exclaimed Mrs. Ross, “why should I grieve my boy? He is but his half-brother.”

Anne turned away without another word and went quietly up stairs—not to her own apartment first, but to a dusty attic lumber-room, seldom entered, except by herself. In one dark corner stood a

picture, its face to the wall. Anne placed her candle on the floor, and kneeling down turned the portrait—a frank, bold, generous face, half boy, half man, with its unshadowed brow and clear eyes, that feared no evil.

“Lewis is but my half-brother also,” said Anne Ross, replacing the picture with a sigh; “but Norman was my mother’s son.”

The house and small estate of Merkland were situated in one of the northern counties of Scotland, within some three or four miles of a little post-town which bore the dignified name of Portoran. The Oran water swept by the side of its small port, just before it joined its jocund dark-brown waters to the sea, and various coasting vessels carried its name and its traffic out (a little way) into the world. The parish in which Merkland stood, boasted at least its three Lairds’ houses—there was Strathoran, the lordliest of all, with its wide acres extending over three or four adjacent parishes. There was the Tower, with its compact and richly-cultivated lands, the well-ordered property of Mrs. Catherine Douglas; and, lastly, there was Merkland—the home of a race of vigorous Rosses, renowned in former generations for its hosts of sons and daughters, and connected by the spreading of those strong and healthful off-shoots, with half of the families of like degree in Scotland. The children of the last Ross of Merkland had not been vigorous—one by one, in childhood, and in youth, they had dropped into the family grave, and when the infant Anne was born, her worn-out mother died, leaving besides the newborn child, only one son. His mother’s brother long before had made this Norman, his heir. At the same time, in consideration of his independent inheritance, and his changed name, he had been excluded from the succession to his father’s lands. So Mr. Ross of Merkland, in terror lest his estate should have no worthier proprietor than the sickly

little girl whose birth had cost her mother's life, married hastily again. When Lewis and Anne were still only infants, Norman Rutherford left his father's house to take possession of his own—and then some terrible blight had fallen upon him, spoken of in fearful whispers at the time, but almost wholly forgotten now. A stranger in the district at the time our history begins would only have learned, after much inquiry, that Norman, escaping from his native country with the stain of blood upon his hands, proved a second Jonah to the ship in which he had embarked, and so was lost, and that grief for his crime had brought his father's grey hairs in sorrow to the grave. But the difference of name, and the entire silence maintained by his family concerning him, had puzzled country gossips, and restrained the voice of rumor, even at the time. Now his remembrance had almost entirely passed away, and in another week Lewis Ross, Esq., of Merkland, would be of age.

But the whole dreadful tale in all the darkness of its misery had been poured into Anne's ears that day. She had known nothing of it before. Now, her stepmother thought, it was full time she should know, because—a reason that made Anne shrink and tremble—Mrs. Ross felt convinced that the girl who was so soon to be a visitor at the Tower, could be no other than the daughter of the murdered man.

“The south room, May—he had it when he was a boy,” said Mrs. Ross, as Anne entered their breakfast-room the next morning. “I wish there had been time to get some of the furniture renewed; but I dare say Lewis will like to see it as he left it. Do you not think so, Anne?”

“He was always such a kindly heart,” interposed May.

Mrs. Ross looked dubious.

“You must remember, May, that my son is no longer a boy. This day week he will take the management of his affairs into his own hands. He left us a youth, but he returns a man.”

“And I was just thinking that myself, ma’am,” said May; “and Duncan says it behoves us to call the young Lord by his own name, Merkland,—and not Mr. Lewis; but I always think the old way’s the kindest.”

“Lewis will be changed, if he does not like the kindest best,” said Anne.

“Ah, that may be,” said Mrs. Ross; “but there is something due to—Well, where were we. Ay, the south room. I know you keep it in good order, May, but we must have it on Friday shining like—”

“Like a new pin, ma’am,” said May, as Mrs. Ross paused for a simile; “and so it shall, and you may trust that to me.”

“Yes, Lewis will be quite a man,” said Mrs. Ross, leaning back in her chair with a smile. “I should think he would be a good deal browned, Anne—I have been thinking so all the morning.”

“Oh! and he’ll have a lordly presence,” said May, “like his father before him. The Rosses have always been grand men to look upon. They say the young Laird—”

“Was not in the least degree like what my son will be,” said Mrs. Ross, stiffly, while Anne grew pale. “You will see that my orders are strictly attended to, May, and let Duncan come to me whenever we have had breakfast. Take your place, Anne.”

Discomfited by her abrupt dismissal, May took her departure, muttering between her teeth:

“One would think it was a crime to speak a good word of the old lady’s bairns! Well, if one but knew what became of him at last, I would like to see the man in all Strathoran like the young Lord.”

“Anne,” said Mrs. Ross, somewhat sternly, as May withdrew, leaving Anne’s heart vibrating painfully with her indiscreet reference; “was it to-day that Mrs. Catherine expected her visitor?”

“Yes, mother.”

“And to-day you are engaged to go to the Tower?”

“Yes,” said Anne. “But I can send Duncan with an apology, if you wish it. I did not know that Lewis was likely to arrive so soon when I received Mrs. Catherine’s note.”

“Send Duncan! no, indeed!” said Mrs. Ross. “There would be little profit in wasting *his* time to save yours. Duncan is the most useful person about Merkland.”

“And I the most useless,” said Anne, sighing. “It grieves me deeply, mother, that it should be so.”

Mrs. Ross threw back her head slightly, expressing the peevish scorn which she did not speak, and Anne returned to her tea-making; and so they sat till their joyless meal was ended: each the sole companion and nearest connexion of the other, and yet so utterly separated in all that constitutes true fellowship.

The clear light of the October sun was shining on the waters of Oran, and its tinted, overshadowing leaves, when Anne emerged from among the trees that surrounded Merkland, and took her

solitary way to the Tower. Her heart was heavy within her, her step irregular, her brow clouded. The great secret of the family had fallen upon her spirit with all the stunning force of a first grief, and vainly she looked about her for comfort, finding none.

How many times had May's admiring mention of the "young Laird" called forth upon her lips a sad smile of affectionate sorrow for the dead brother whom she never saw. How often had she marvelled at the old nurse's stern summary of his end: "He died a violent death!" How often lingered with sorrowful admiration over his picture in the attic lumber-room! And now his name had become a name of fear! The stain of blood was upon him! A Cain! a murderer!

Not dead! Anne's hasty steps passed quick over the narrow pathway, with its carpeting of fallen leaves. In what pain—what misery, must that blighted life have passed! Whither might that guilty soul have wandered, seeking, in crowd or in solitude, to hide itself from its own fearful consciousness, and from its angry God! In privation, in danger, in want in sin, unfriended and accursed, and alone, with none to speak to him of mercy, of hope, of Divine forgiveness! And this was her brother! her mother's son!

It was like some dreadful dream—but not like a dream could it be shaken off. How often in her childish imaginings, long ago, had she dreamed of the dead Norman living again, her friend and protector! Now how bitter and strong that unavailing wish, that God had indeed stricken him in his early youth, and laid him in the peaceful family grave unstained. Again and again those dark particulars rolled back upon her in bitter waves, swelling her grief and horror up to agony. And that the daughter of the slain man should come here—here, to have daily intercourse with the nearest

kindred of her father's murderer! The idea was so terrible, that it produced a revulsion. She tried to believe that it was not so—that it could not be possible.

Again and again she stopped, and would have turned back, and yet a strange fascination drew her on. There was a link of terrible connexion between herself and this girl, and Anne's spirit throbbed to bursting with undefined and confused purposes. She could not trust herself alone, therefore she put force upon her struggling heart, as she had learned to do long years ago, and passed on to the Tower.

For the step-daughter of Mrs. Ross, of Merkland, had small reason to think of this many-sided world as a place of happiness. In a household which had barely means enough to support its station, and provide for the somewhat expensive wanderings of its heir, she was the one dependent, and Anne had ripened into some three-and-twenty years, and was no longer a girl. She felt how useless she was in the eyes of her clever step-mother; she felt the lethargic influence of having no aim, and deep down in that hidden heart of hers, which few others knew, or cared to know, sorrow and pain had been dwelling long, like Truth, in the well of their own solitary tears.

She was now proceeding to the house of her most dear and especial friend: an ancient lady, whose strong will swayed, and whose warm heart embraced all who came within their influence, and whose healthful and vigorous spirit was softened in a manner most rare and beautiful by those delicate perceptions and sympathies which form so important an element in the constitution of genius. Mrs. Catherine Douglas had seen the snows of sixty winters. For more than thirty of these, her strong and kindly hand

had held absolute dominion at the Tower, yet of the few admitted to her friendship and confidence, Anne Ross, the neglected step-daughter of Mrs. Ross, of Merkland, an ill-used child, a slighted woman, held the highest place.

The Tower was a gray, old, stately place, defiant alike of storm and siege, with deep embrasures on its walls meant for no child's play, and a court-yard that had rung to martial music centuries ago, in the days of the unhappy Stuarts. Deep woods stretched round it, tinted with autumn's fantastic wealth of coloring. The Oran ran so close to the strong, heavy, battlemented wall, that in the old warlike days, it had been the castle-moat, but the drawbridge was gone, and there was peaceful access now, by a light bridge of oak. A boat lay on the stream, moored to an over-hanging rock, by which Mrs. Catherine herself was wont to make the brief passage of the Oran. It was a favorite toy of Anne's also, in her happier moods, but she was too heavy of heart to heed it now.

"Mrs. Catherine is in the library, Miss Anne," said Mrs. Euphan Morison, the portly, active housekeeper, whose medical propensities so frequently annoyed her mistress; and threading the dark passages familiarly, Anne passed on alone.

"Mrs. Catherine is in the library, Miss Anne," repeated a dark, thin, elfin-like girl, who sat on the sill of a deep window, reading, and hiding her book beneath the stocking which she ought to have been knitting, as she threw furtive glances to the door of the housekeeper's especial sanctum: "but there's gentlemen with her. It's a business day."

"I suppose you may admit me, Jacky," said Anne. "Mrs. Catherine expects me."

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