

THE
QUIETHEART

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THE QUIET HEART.

CHAPTER I.

“YE’LL no ken, Jenny, if Miss Menie’s in?”

“And what for should I no ken?” exclaimed the hot and impatient Jenny Durward, sole servant, housekeeper, and self-constituted guardian of Mrs. Laurie of Burnside, and her young fatherless daughter. “Do ye think ony ane comes or gangs in the house out of my knowledge? And where should Miss Menie be but in, sitting at her seam in the mistress’s parlour, at this hour of the day?”

“I was meaning nae offence,” said meek Nelly Panton: “I’m sure ye ken, Jenny woman, I wouldna disturb the very cat by the fire if it was just me; but my mother, you see, has ta’en an ill turn, and there’s nae peace wi’ her, day or night, a’ for naething but because she’s anxious in her mind—and if you would just let me get a word o’ Miss Menie—”

“Am I hindering ye?” cried the indignant Jenny; “she’s no ill to be seen, in her wilful way, even on wandering about the garden, damp roads or dry; but for a’ the whims I’ve kent in her head, ae time and anither, I never heard of her setting up for either skill or wisdom past the common. I reckon she never had a sair head hersel—what kind of a helper could she be to your mother? and if she’s heard of a sair heart, that’s a’ the length her knowledge gangs—what good is Miss Menie to do to you?”

“I’m sure I’m no meaning ony ill,” said Nelly, disconsolately, sitting down on a wooden stool with passive resignation; “and it’s

aye kent o' me that I never provokit onybody a' my born days. I'm just wanting to speak a word to the young leddy, that's a'."

Now Nelly Panton, meekly passive as she was, had an eminent gift in the way of provocation, and kept in a perpetual fever the warmer tempers in her neighbourhood. Jenny, virtuously resolved to command herself, went out with sufficient abruptness to her kitchen door, to "fuff," as she herself called it, her incipient passion away. The visitor took no notice of Jenny's withdrawal from the field. Slow pertinacity, certain of ultimate success, calmed away all excitement from Nelly. She had taken her place with perfect composure, to wait, though it might be for hours, till the person she wished to see came to her call.

It was a day of early spring, and had rained plentifully in the morning. Light white clouds, tossed and blown about by a fantastic wind, threw their soft shadow on a clear deep sky of blue; and raindrops, glittering in the sunshine, hung upon flowers and branches, and fell now and then in a gleam from the shaken hedge or garden fruit-trees. The garden paths were wet—the road without had a flowing rivulet of accumulated rain, which almost made as much ringing with its hasty footsteps as did the burn itself under the little bridge which crossed the way—and the blue-slatted roof of this house of Burnside blazed like a slanted mirror in the eyes of the full sun.

Not the faintest shade of architectural pretensions dignified this house of Burnside. Four substantial walls of rough grey stone, a slatted roof, with but one projecting attic window to break its slope—a door in the gable where one would least have expected a door to be—and windows breaking the wall just where the builder found it convenient that the wall should be broken. The house

stood upon a little knoll, the ground on all sides sloping downward,—at one hand to the course of the burn—at the other, to the edge of the plantation which benevolently threw up a line of tall firs to screen its human neighbours from the unfriendly east. Close upon the very edge of the walls pressed the soft grass of the lawn; some spring-flowers looked out from little bits of border soil here and there; and a fairy larch stood half-way up the ascent on the sunniest side, shaking itself free of the encumbering rain with a pretty, coquettish grace, and throwing a glistening flash of little diamonds, now and then, as if in sport, over the fluttering hair and sunny face, which seem to have a natural sisterhood and companionship with the free and graceful tree.

Hair that was smoothly shaded this morning over the young, clear, youthful brow—the wind has found out scores of little curls hidden in the braids, and turns them out with a child's laughter, full of sweet triumph and delight—a face that looks up full and clearly to answer the brave smile upon the sky. Twenty years old, with warm blood flashing in her cheeks, a fearless, innocent courage gleaming from her eyes, and never a cloud over her all her life long, save some such soft, white, rounded shadow as floats yonder in our sight over the undiscouraged heavens—for it is very true that neither headache nor heartache has yet been known to Menie Laurie by any surer knowledge than the hearing of the ear.

Maiden meditation—No: there is little of this in the stir of life that makes an unconscious atmosphere about her, here where she stands in the fearless safety of her natural home. Not that Menie is notably thoughtless either, or poor in the qualities of mind which produce thought—but her mind lies still, like a charmed sea under the sunshine. There has never a ship of hope gone down yet under those dazzling waters, never a storm arisen upon them to chafe the

waves against the rocks; nothing but flecks of summer clouds, quiet shadows of summer nights, darkness all lit and glorified with mellow moonbeams—and how her heart would be if some strange ghost of tempest rose upon the sky, her heart neither knows nor fears.

The window is open behind you, Menie; Mrs Laurie fears no draughts, and it is well; but our mother's patience, like other good things, has a limit, and having called you vainly three times over, she closes behind you this mode of return. No great matter. See what a little sparkling shower this poor brown-coated sparrow has shaken from the thorny branch he has just perched upon; and as your eyes wander in this direction, your ear becomes aware of a certain sound, a quick impatient breath sent hard through the expanded nostrils, which is the well-known token in the house of Burnside of Jenny's "fuff;" and straightway your eyes brighten, Menie Laurie—one could not have fancied it was possible a minute ago—and smiles half hidden break over all your face, flushing here and there in such a kindly suffusion of playfulness and mirth, that even Jenny herself is not angry when she sees how this fuff of hers makes excellent sport for you.

"What ails our Jenny now?" said Menie, turning the angle of the wall to enter by the kitchen door.

"Lassie, dinna drive folk doited," answered Jenny. "I'm thrang at my wark—gang in yonder and speak to her yoursel."

Nelly Panton sits mournfully upon the wooden stool. If you take her own word for it, no one is more contemptuous of "fyking" and "making a wark" than Jenny of Burnside; but the kitchen—woe be to the hapless stranger who ventures to commend it!—is

quite resplendent with brightness and good order. The fire, cheerfully burning in the grate, finds a whole array of brilliant surfaces to dance in, and dances to its heart's content. Glittering metal and earthenware, Jenny's looking-glass at one side, and the dark polish of Jenny's oak table with its folding leaf at the other, line all the walls with warmth and light; and the fire, repulsed and defeated only by this one obstinately opaque body before it, besets the dark outline of Nelly Panton with a very tremble of eagerness, seeking in vain for something, if it were but the pin of her shawl, or the lifting of her eye, to repeat its kindly glimmer in. There is no pin visible in Nelly's doleful shawl, so closely wrapped about her person, and Nelly's pensive glances seek the floor, and the light falls off from her figure foiled and baffled, finding nothing congenial there. Come you hither, Menie Laurie, that the friendly fireside spirit may be consoled—playing in warm rays upon your hair, which the wind has blown about so pleasantly that the bright threads hang a hundred different ways, and catch a various glow of reflection in every curl—leaping up triumphantly under the raised lids of these sunny eyes—catching a little ring upon your finger, a little golden clasp at your white neck. No wonder Nelly draws her shawl closer, and turns her back upon the light, as she rises to speak to you.

“My mother's ill and anxious in her mind, Miss Menie; and no to say *that* its lane, but thrawn and perverse as onybody could conceive. I'm sure ye'll hear nae character of me in the haill countryside for onything but being as harmless a person as could gang about quiet wark in ony house; but she's ta'en a turn that she canna bide even me; and aye for ever, night and morning, keeping up a constant wark about her son. I like Johnnie weel enough mysel—but what's the guid o' seeking letters as lang as we ken

he's weel?—and that's what I'm aye saying, but she'll no hearken to me.”

“Does Johnnie write so seldom?—but I'm sure nothing ails him, or we should have heard,” said Menie. “Tell her she's to keep up her heart—he'll do very well yonder. You should make her cheery, Nelly, now when you're at home the whole day.”

“I do what I can, Miss Menie,” said Nelly, shaking her head mournfully. “I tell her a lad's just as safe in the toun as in the country, and that it's a real unbelieving-like thing to be aye groaning even on about Johnnie, and her has mair bairns. But someway she gets nae satisfaction, and I think she would be mair pleased if you could get a line from Mr Randall saying when he saw him, and whether he's doing well or no, than a' the reason I could gie her if I was preaching frae this to Martinmas. I came away from my wark anes errant to bid ye. Will you ask Mr Randall about Johnnie, Miss Menie, that I may get some peace wi' my mother?”

The breath comes quickly over Menie Laurie's lip—a little flutter of added colour—a momentary falling of the eyelids—a shy, conscious smile hovering about the mouth—and then Menie nods her head assentingly and says, “Yes, Nelly, I will.”

“Yes, Nelly, I will,” repeated Menie, after a little pause of blushing self-communion. “Tell her I'll come and let her hear as soon as there is any news; and say I think she should be cheery, Nelly, now she has you at home.”

Making a meek inclination of her person, neither a bow nor a curtsy, but something half-way between them, in answer to this speech, Nelly goes away; and almost encountering her on her

outward passage over the threshold, enters Jenny fuffing at a furious rate, and casting her head up into the air with wrathful contempt, like some little shaggy Highland pony whose pride has been wounded. For Jenny's wrath has nothing of the dignity conferred by superior stature or commanding person, and it is hard to restrain a smile at the vigour of her "fuff."

"Twenty years auld, and nae mair sense than that!—the lassie's daft! I would like to ken how it's possible for mortal woman to be cheery with Nelly Panton within half a mile o' her! If they flit to the Brigend at the next term, as they're aye threatening, I'll gie the mistress her leave mysel."

"I think I'll run away if you're aye so crabbed, Jenny," said her young mistress. "What has everybody done?"

"Everybody's done just a' the mischief they could do," said Jenny, pathetically: "there's no an article ever happens in this house that mightna be mended if some ither body had the guiding o't. There's a' the gangrels o' the countryside coming and gaun with their stories—there's the mistress hersel, that might have mair sense, ta'en a cauld in her head, and a hoast fit to waken a' the toun, standing at the door hearing Bessy Edgar's clavers about a no-weel wean—and there's yoursel the warst of a'. Do you think if onybody had ever askit me, that *I* would have gien my consent to let a lassie o' your years plight her troth to a wandering lad away to seek his fortune, like Randall Home? But you'll never ken the guid friend you've lost in Jenny till the puir body's out o' the gate, and in her grave; and I wouldna say how soon that might be if there's nae end o' on-gauns like thir."

And with a loud long sigh Jenny sallied out through the paved passage, from which you could catch a gleam of sunshine playing in chequers on the strip of coloured matting and the margin of stones, to deliver just such another lecture to the mistress in the parlour.

While Menie stands alone, her head thrown forward a little, her hair playing lightly on her cheek, in a pause of pleasant fancy—yes, it is true, Menie is betrothed. Calm as her heart lies in her pure girl's breast, Menie has seen the sky flush out of its natural summer beauty with the warmer passionate hues of this new love; and many a tint of joyous changeful colour plays about the bright horizon of Menie's fancy, and throws a charm of speculation into the future, which never spectre has risen yet to obscure. It would need a sermon heavier than Jenny's to throw a single vapour of doubt or distrust upon Menie Laurie's quiet heart.

CHAPTER II.

MRS LAURIE of Burnside sits alone in her sunny parlour. The fire in the grate, quite discountenanced and overborne by the light which pours in from the west window, keeps up a persevering crackle, intent to catch the ear, and keep itself in notice by that means if by no other. It is the only sound you can hear, except the hum of the eight-day clock in the passage without, and Jenny's distant step upon the kitchen floor;—Menie is out again on some further explorations about the garden—Mrs Laurie sits and works alone.

You might call this room a drawing-room if you were ambitiously disposed—it is only the parlour in Burnside. Every piece of wood about it is dark with age and careful preservation; rich ancient mahogany glimmering clear in the polish of many a year's labour—little tables with twisted spiral legs and fantastic ornaments almost as black as ebony—and here in the corner a fine old cabinet of oak, with its carved projections of flower and berry burnished bright, and standing out in clear relief from the dark background. On the table lies some “fancy-work,” which it irks the soul of Mrs Laurie to see her daughter employed on; but what is to be done with Menie's fingers, when our mother feels the household necessities of sewing scarcely enough to supply herself?

Go lightly over the rich colours of this well-preserved carpet, which is older than yourself most probably, though it wears its age so well, and we can look out and see what lies beyond the Burnside garden before Mrs Laurie is aware. The west window is all fringed and glittering with rain-drops lying lightly on the pale green buds

of these honeysuckle boughs, and now and then one of them falls pattering down upon the grass like a sigh. Do not believe in it—it is but a mock of nature—the counterfeit wherewithal a light heart enhances to itself its own calm joy; for in reality and truth there is no such thing as sighing here.

Some thatched houses in a cluster, just where the green-mossed wall of the bridge breaks out of the shelter of these guarding fir-trees—one triumphant slated roof lifting itself a story higher than the gossipry of those good neighbours who lay their brown heads together in a perpetual quiet discussion of what goes on below. The light lies quietly, half caressing, upon the thatch roofs, but gleams off the wet slates, and flashes from the tiles yonder, in a sudden glow. There are some loitering firs about, to thrust their outline on the enclosing sky, and a hazy background of bare trees fluttering and glistening in the light, all conscious of the new-budded leaves, which at this distance we cannot see. Beyond the Brigend your eye loses itself on a line of road travelling away towards the hills, with two great heavy ash-trees holding their gaunt arms over it for a portal and gateway—on a level line of fields, broken hedges, scattered trees, with the blue tints of distance, and here and there the abrupt brown dash of a new-ploughed field to diversify the soft universal green—and on the hills themselves, a bold semi-circular sweep stealing off faintly to the sky on one hand—while at the other, Criffel, bluff and burly, slopes his great shoulder down upon the unseen sea.

Nearer at hand the burn itself looks through the garden's thorny boundary with glints and sunny glances, interchanging merrily with Menie on the lawn, who pays its smiles with interest. This is almost all we have to look at from the west window of Burnside.

And now, if you turn within to our mother in her easy-chair. It is not quite what you call benign, this broad, full, well-developed brow; and the eyes under it so brown, and liquid, and dewy, one fancies they could flash with impatience now and then, and laugh out the warmest mirth, as well as smile that smile of kindness, which few eyes express so well; and it is best to say at the beginning that our mother is not benign, and that it is no abstract being of a superior class lifted on the height of patience, experience, and years, who sits before us in this cushioned chair, bending her brow a little over the letter in her hand. Sorrow and experience she has had in her day; but still our mother, with warm human hands, and breast as full of hope and energy as it was twenty years ago, takes a full grasp of life.

The linen she has been mending lies on the table beside her, more than half concealing Menie's lighter occupation; and, with her elbow leant upon it, Mrs Laurie holds a letter with a half-puzzle of amusement, a half-abstraction of thought. Strangely adverse to all her moods and habits is the proposal it makes, yet Mrs Laurie lingers over it, hesitates, almost thinks she will accept. Such a multitude of things are possible to be done when one does them "for Menie's sake."

For Menie's sake—but, in the mean time, it is best that Menie should be called in to share the deliberation; and here she comes accordingly, with such an odour of fresh air about her as makes the parlour fragrant. Menie has a restless way of wandering about on sunny afternoons; there is something in her that will not compose into quietness; and very poor speed, when it is sunshine, comes Menie's "fancy-work;" so that there is nothing more common than this fragrance of fresh air in the parlour when Menie's presence is needed there.

“Your father’s aunt has written me a letter. I want your wisest thought about it. Read it, Menie,” said Mrs Laurie, leaning back in her chair, with an air of exhaustion. Menie read—

“MY DEAR MRS LAURIE,—I find I really have forgotten your Christian name; and whether I have quite a right to call you my dear niece, or whether you might not think it an uncalled-for thing in me who have not the privilege of years, or if, one way or another, you would be pleased, I cannot tell, having so little acquaintance with your mental habits or ways of thinking. Indeed I confess I had nearly forgotten, my dear, that John Laurie had a wife and a little girl in Kirklands still, till just a chance recalled it to me: and I really have no means of finding out whether I should condole with you for living so much out of the world, or wish you joy of a pretty little house like Burnside, with its nice neighbourhood and good air. I am sometimes a little dull myself, living alone; and as I have positively made up my mind never to marry, and am so particular in my society that I never have above half-a-dozen friends whom I care to visit, it has occurred to me, since you were recalled to my recollection, that we might do worse than join our incomes together, and live as one household. I have pretty reception-rooms in my house, and a sleeping-room more than I need—a very good apartment; and the advantage of being near London is very great for a little girl, for masters, and all that: besides that, I flatter myself the attention I should

make a point of paying her would be of great importance to your child; and out of what we could put together of our joint savings, we might make a very pretty marriage-portion for her when her time comes; for I have no other relations, as I fancy you know, and have very decidedly made up my mind, whatever persecution I may be exposed to on the subject, never to marry. I have one tolerably good servant, who is my own maid, and another very bad one, who has charge of all the household matters: the grief and annoyance this woman is to me are beyond description; and if you should happen to have an attached and faithful person in your house, I advise you to bring her with you;—of course you will require an attendant of your own.

“I shall be glad to have a letter from you soon, letting me know what you will do. You would have a cheerful life with me, I think. I am myself a person of uncommonly lively disposition, though I have known so many of the more refined sorrows of life; and the freshness of youth is a delightful study. I feel I shall grow quite a child in sympathy with your little girl. Pray come—Hampstead is a delightful locality; so near London, too, and within reach of society so very excellent—and I am sure you would find the change greatly for your daughter’s good.

“With much regard and kind feeling to both her and you, I am affectionately yours,

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