

THE UNJUST STEWARD;
OR, THE
MINISTER'S DEBT.

BY
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CHAPTER I.

A SUDDEN ALARM.

ELSIE and Roderick Buchanan were the son and daughter, among a number of others, of the Rev. George Buchanan, a minister much esteemed in the city of St. Rule, and occupying a high place among the authorities and influential personages of that place. They were members of a large family, and not important members, being the youngest. It is true that they were not two boys or two girls, but a girl and boy; but being so, they were as nearly inseparable as a boy and girl could be. They were called in the family the Twins, though there was quite a year, a year and a day as in a fairy tale, between them. It was the girl who was the elder of the two, which, perhaps, accounted for the fact that they were still the same height as well as so very like each other that in their infancy it was scarcely possible to know them apart, so that the name of the Twins was quite appropriate. Elsie was fourteen, and Roderick, better known as Rodie, according to the Scotch love of diminutives, just thirteen. Up to this age, their lessons and their amusements had gone on together,—the girls in St. Rule's, from the beginning of time, having been almost as athletic as the boys, and as fond of the links and the harbour, while the old Scotch fashion of training them together had not yet given way before the advancing wave of innovation, which has so much modified education in Scotland. They were in the same class, they read the same books, they had the same lessons to prepare. Elsie was a little more diligent, Rodie more strong in his Latin, which was considered natural for a boy. They helped each other mutually, he being stronger in the grammar, she more "gleg" at construing. She went all wrong in her tenses, but jumped at the meaning of a thing

in a way that sometimes astonished her brother. In this way, they were of great assistance to each other in their school life.

The other side of life, the amusements and games, were not nearly of so much importance, even with children, then as now. It was the object of his elders and masters rather to curb Rodie's enthusiasm for football than to stimulate it, notwithstanding his high promise as a player; and the gentlemen who played golf were exceedingly impatient of laddies on the links; and as for girls presuming to show their faces there, would have shown their disapprobation very pointedly; so that, except for a few "holes" surreptitiously manufactured in a corner (even the Ladies' Links being as yet non-existent), the youngsters found little opportunity of cultivating that now all-important game. They turned out, however, sometimes early, very early, of a morning, or late in the afternoon, and in their hurried performances, Elsie as yet was almost as good as her brother, and played up to him steadily, understanding his game, when they two of a summer evening, when all the club was at dinner, and nobody about to interfere, played together in a single. Lawn-tennis was still far in the future, and it had not been given to the children to do more than stand afar off and admire at the performance of the new game called croquet, which had just been set up by an exclusive society on the Castle Green. Who were the little Buchanans to aspire to take part in such an Olympian contest among the professors and their ladies? They looked on occasionally from a pinnacle of the ruins, and privately mocked between themselves at the stiffness of a great man's learned joints, or the mincing ways of the ladies, sending confusing peals of laughter over the heads of the players at any mishap, till the indignant company used the rudest language in respect to the Buchanan bairns, along, it must be allowed, with the Beaton bairns

and the Seaton bairns, and several more scions of the best families, and threatened to put them out of the Castle ruins altogether: though everybody knew this was a vain threat, and impossible to carry out. It was strictly forbidden that these young people should ever adventure themselves in a boat, the coast being so dangerous, a prohibition which Elsie did not resent, having distinguished herself as a very bad sailor, but against which Rodie kicked with all his might. The reader will therefore see that they were not encouraged to spend their strength in athletics, which is so much the custom now.

Perhaps this encouraged in them the delight in books which they had shown from a very early age. It was always possible to keep the Twins quiet with a story-book, their elders said, though I confess that Rodie began to show symptoms of impatience with Elsie's books, and unless he got a story "of his own kind," was no longer so still and absorbed as in early days. The stories he loved, which were "of his own kind," were, I need not say, tales of adventure, which he was capable of reading over and over again till he knew by heart every one of the Crusoe-like expedients of his seafaring or land-louping heroes. Elsie had a weakness for girl's stories, full of devotion and self-abnegation, and in which little maidens of her own age set all the world right, which perhaps, naturally, did not appeal to Rodie. But there was one series which never failed in its attraction for both. In Mr. Buchanan's library there was a set of the *Waverleys*, such as formed part of the best of the plenishing for a new household in those days when they were but recent publications, as it still continues we hope to do in every house which desires to fortify itself against the tedium of the years. The children were never tired of *Ivanhoe* and *Quentin Durward*, and the *Fair Maid of Perth*. Indeed, there was not one of them that

had not its lasting charm, though perhaps the preponderance of a lassie in the *Heart of Midlothian*, for instance, dulled Rodie's enthusiasm a little; while Elsie, more catholic, was as profoundly interested in Harry Bertram's Adventures, and followed Rowland Graem through all that happened in the Castle of Lochleven, with as warm interest as heart could desire. They thought, if that wildly presumptuous idea could be entertained, that Sir Walter was perhaps mistaken about bloody Claverhouse, but that, no doubt, was owing to their natural prejudices and breeding. One of their most characteristic attitudes was over one of these books (it was the edition in forty-eight volumes, with the good print and vignettes on the title-pages), spread out between them (they broke all the backs of his books, their father complained) their heads both bent over the page, with faint quarrels arising now and then that Elsie read too fast, and turned the page before Rodie was ready, or that Rodie read too slow and kept his sister waiting, which furnished a little mutual grievance that ran through all the reading, manifested now and then by a sudden stroke of an elbow, or tug at a page.

The place in which they chiefly pursued their studies was a little round corner, just big enough to hold them, which adjoined their father's study, and which, like that study, was lined with books. It was really a small turret, the relic of some older building which had been tacked to the rambling house, old-fashioned enough in its roomy irregularity, but not nearly so old as the little ashen-coloured tower, pale as with the paleness of extreme old age, which gave it distinction, and afforded a very quaint little adjunct to the rooms on that side. There was scarcely more than room enough in it for these two to sit, sometimes on an old and faded settle, sometimes on the floor, as the humour seized them. They

were on the floor, as it happened, at the special moment which I am about to describe. The inconvenience of this retreat was that it was possible from that retirement to hear whatever might be said in the study, so that the most intimate concerns of the family were sometimes discussed by the father and mother in the hearing of these two little creatures, themselves unseen. There was nothing in this to blame them for, for it was well known that the turret was their haunt, and Mr. Buchanan, when reminded of it by some little scuffling or exchange of affectionate hostilities, would sometimes be moved to turn them out, as disturbing his quiet when he was busy with his sermon. But in many other cases their presence was forgotten, and there were not many secrets in the innocent household. On the other hand, Elsie and Rodie were usually far too much occupied with their book to pay any attention to what the rather tedious discussions of father and mother—usually about money, or about Willie and Marion the two eldest, who were about to be sent out in the world, or other insignificant and long-winded questions of that description—might be about.

And I cannot tell for what exquisite reason it was, that on this particular day their minds were attracted to what was going on in the study; I think they must have been reading some scene in which the predominance of lassies (probably the correspondence of Miss Julia Mannering, what I have always felt disposed to skip) had lessened Rodie's interest, but which Elsie, much distracted by the consciousness of his rebellion, but for pride of her own sex pretending to go carefully through, yet was only half occupied with, occasioned this openness of their joint minds to impression. At all events, they both heard their mother's sudden entrance, which was hurried indeed, and also flurried, as appeared a thing not quite common with her. They heard her come in with a rapid step, and

quick panting breath, as if she had run up-stairs. And “William,” she said, standing by the writing-table, they felt sure, which was also a usual thing for her to do—“William, have you heard that old Mr. Anderson is very bad to-day, and not expected to live?”

“Old Mr. Anderson!” he said, in a surprised and troubled tone.

“So they say. The Lord help us, what shall we do? Willie’s outfit just paid for, and not a penny to the fore. Oh, my poor man!”

“It’s very serious news,” their father said; “but let us hope that both for his sake and our own it may not be true.”

“Ill news is aye true,” said Mrs. Buchanan, with a sound of something like a sob.

Why should mamma be so troubled about old Mr. Anderson, the children said to themselves, giving each other a look?

“That is just want of faith, my dear,” he replied.

“Oh, I’ve no doubt it’s want of faith! it’s all in God’s hands, and He can bring light out of darkness, I know; but oh! William, it’s not always that He thinks fit to do that! You know as well as me. And if this time it should not be His will?”

“Mary,” he said, “let us not forestall the evil; perhaps it will never come; perhaps there will be a way out of it—at the worst we must just bear it, my dear.”

“Oh, I know that, I know that!” she cried, with a sound of tears in her voice. “You gave your word to pay it if he died, immediately thereafter, that there might be no talking. Wasn’t that the bargain?”

“That was the bargain,” he said.

“But we never thought it was to come like this, at the worst moment, just after the siller is gone for Willie’s outfit.”

“Mary, Mary, it is worse for him than for us.”

“Do you think so, do you think so?” she cried, “and you a minister! I do not think that. He is an old man, and a good man, and if all we believe is true, it will be a happy change for him. Who has he to leave behind him? Na, he will be glad to go. But us with our young family! Oh, the power of that filthy siller; but for that, what happier folk could be, William, than just you and me?”

“We must be thankful for that, Mary,” said the minister, with a quiver. “We might have had worse things than the want of money; we might have had sickness or trouble in our family, and instead of that they’re all well, and doing well.”

“Thank God for that!” mamma said, fervently, and then there was a pause.

“I will have to go at once to the man of business, and tell him,” father said; “that was in the bargain. There was no signing of paper, but I was to go and tell; that was part of the bargain.”

“And a very hard part,” his wife cried, with a long sigh. “It is like sharpening the sword to cut off your own head. But, maybe,” she said, with a little revival of courage, “Mr. Morrison is not a hard man; maybe he will give you time.”

“Maybe our old friend will pull through,” papa said, slowly.

“That would be the best of all,” she said, but not in a hopeful tone. And presently they heard her shut the door of the study, and

go down-stairs again, with something very different from the flying step with which she came.

The children did not stir, they did not even turn the leaf; they felt all at once that it was better that their presence there should not be known. They had heard such consultations before, and sometimes had been auditors of things they were not desired to hear; but they had never, they thought, heard anything so distinctly before, nor anything that was of so much importance. They were very much awe-stricken to hear of this thing that troubled father so, and made mother cry, without understanding very well what it was—old Mr. Anderson's illness, and Willie's outfit, and something about money, were all mixed up in their minds; but the relations between the one and the other were not sufficiently clear.

Presently they heard papa get up and begin to walk about the room. He did this often when he was deep in thought, composing his sermon, and then he would often say over and over his last sentence by way of piecing it on, they supposed to the next. So that it did not trouble, but rather reassured them, to hear him saying something to himself, which gave them the idea that he had returned to his work, and was no longer so much disturbed about this new business. When they heard him say, "no signing of papers, no signing of papers, but to go and tell," they were somewhat disturbed, for that did not sound like a sermon. But, presently, he sat down again and drew a book towards him, and they could hear him turning over the leaves. It was, there could be no doubt, the large Bible—large because it was such big print, for father's eyes were beginning to go—which always lay on his table. He turned over the leaves as they had so often heard him doing; no doubt it was some reference he was looking up for his sermon. He must have found what he wanted very soon, for there was a little silence,

and then they heard him say, with great emphasis—“Then the Lord commended the unjust steward.” He said it very slowly, pausing upon almost every word. It was the way he said over his text when he was pondering over it, thinking what he was to say. Then he began to read. It was to be a long text this time; Rodie tried to whisper in his sister’s ear, but Elsie stopped him, quietly, with emphatic signs and frowns.

“He called every one of his Lord’s debtors and said unto the first, How much owest thou unto my Lord? And he said an hundred measures of oil. And he said unto him, Take thy bill and sit down quickly and write fifty.” Then there was another pause. And again father spoke, so clearly, with such a distinct and emphatic voice that they thought he was speaking to them, and looked at each other fearfully. “The Lord commended the unjust steward.” There was something awful in his tone: did he mean this for them, to reprove them? But they had done nothing, and if the Lord commended that man, surely there could be nothing to be so severe upon.

Elsie and Rodie missed everything that was pleasant that afternoon. It was thought they were on the hills, or on the sands, and nobody knew they were shut up there in the turret, now thoroughly alarmed, and terrified to change their position, or make themselves audible in any way, or to turn a leaf of their book, or to move a finger. In all their experience—and it was considerable—father had never been like this before. After a while, he began again, and read over the whole parable: and this he repeated two or three times, always ending in that terrible tone, which sounded to the children like some awful sentence, “The Lord commended the unjust steward”—then they would hear him get up again, and pace about the room, saying over and over those last words; finally, to

their unspeakable relief, he opened the door, and went slowly down-stairs, so slowly that they sat still, breathless, for two minutes more, until his footsteps had died away.

Then the two children sprang up from their imprisonment, and stretched their limbs, which were stiff with sitting on the floor. They rushed out of the room as quickly as possible, and got out into the garden, from whence there was an exit toward the sea. The one thing which, without any consultation, they were both agreed upon, was to keep out of sight of father and mother, so that nobody might divine in what way they had been spending the afternoon. They did not, however, say much to each other about it. When they had got quite clear, indeed, of all possible inspection, and were out upon the east sands, which were always their resort when in disgrace or trouble, Rodie ventured to hazard an opinion on the situation.

“Papa’s text is an awfu’ kittle one to-day,” he said. “I wonder if he’ll ding it out.”

“Oh, whisht!” said Elsie, “yon’s not his text; he was never like that before.”

“Then what is it?” said Rodie; but this was a question to which she would give no reply.

As they returned home, towards the twilight, they passed old Mr. Anderson’s house, a large, old-fashioned mansion in the High Street, and gazed wistfully at the lights which already appeared in the upper windows, though it was not dark, and which looked strange and alarming to them as if many people were about, and much going on in this usually silent house.

“Does he need so many candles to die by?” said Rodie to his sister.

“Oh, perhaps he is better, and it’s for joy,” said Elsie, taking a more hopeful view.

Their father came out from the door, as they gazed, awe-stricken, from the other side of the street. His head was sunk upon his breast; they had never seen him so cast down before. His aspect, and the fact that he passed them without seeing them, had a great effect upon the children. They went home very quietly, and stole into the house without making any of the familiar noises that usually announced their arrival. However, it cheered them a little to find that their mother was very busy about Willie’s outfit, and that their eldest sister Marion was marking all his new shirts in her fine writing, with the small bottle of marking ink, and the crow quill. The interest of this process and the pleasure of getting possession of the hot iron, which stamped that fine writing into a vivid black, gave a salutary diversion to Elsie’s thoughts. As for Rodie, he was very hungry for his supper, which had an equally salutary effect.

CHAPTER II.

A FRIEND IN NEED.

MR. BUCHANAN, the minister of St. Leonard's Church, was a member of a poor, but well-connected family in the West of Scotland, to which district, as everybody knows, that name belongs; and it is not to be supposed that he came to such advancement as a church in a university town all at once. He had married early the daughter of another minister in Fife, and it was partly by the interest procured by her family, and partly by the great reputation he had attained as a preacher, that he had been promoted to his present charge, which was much more important and influential than a mere country parish. But a succession of flittings from manse to manse, even though each new transfer was a little more important than the previous one, is hard upon a poor clergyman's purse, though it may be soothing to his self-esteem; and St. Leonard's, though St. Rule was an important port, had not a very large stipend attached to it. Everybody dwelt upon the fact that it was a most important post, being almost indeed attached to the university, and with so large a sphere of influence over the students. But influence is a privilege and payment in itself, or is supposed to be, and cannot be made into coin of the realm, or even pound notes, which are its equivalent. Mr. Buchanan himself was gratified, and he was solemnised, and felt his responsibility as a power for good over all those young men very deeply, but his wife may be forgiven, if she sighed occasionally for a few more tangible signs of the importance of his post. On the contrary, it led them into expenses to which a country minister is not tempted. They had to take their share in the hospitalities of the place, to entertain strangers, to give as seldom as possible, but still periodically,

modest dinner-parties, a necessary return of courtesy to the people who invited them. Indeed, Mrs. Buchanan was like most women in her position, the soul of hospitality. It cost her a pang not to invite any lonely person, any young man of whom she could think that he missed his home, or might be led into temptation for want of a cheerful house to come to, or motherly influence over him. She, too, had her sphere of influence; it hurt her not to exercise it freely. Indeed, she did exercise it, and was quite unable often to resist the temptation of crowding the boys up at dinner or supper, in order to have a corner for some *protégé*. "It was a privilege," she said, but unfortunately it was an expensive one, plain though these repasts were. "Oh, the siller!" this good woman would say, "if there was only a little more of that, how smoothly the wheels would run."

The consequence of all this, however, of the frequent removals, of the lapses into hospitality, the appearances that had to be kept up, and, finally, the number of the family, had made various hitches in the family progress. Settling in St. Rule's, where there was no manse, and where a house had to be taken, and new carpets and curtains to be got, not to speak of different furniture than that which had done so very well in the country, had been a great expense; and all those changes which attend the setting out of young people in the world had begun. For Marion, engaged to another young minister, and to be married as soon as he got a living, there was the plenishing to think of, something more than the modern trousseau, a provision which included all the household linen of the new house; and, in short, as much as the parents could do to set the bride forth in a becoming and liberal manner. And Willie, as has been told, had his outfit for India to procure. These were the days before examinations, when friends—it was a kindly habit superseded now by the changed customs of life—put

themselves to great trouble to further the setting out in life of a clergyman's sons. And William Buchanan had got a writership, which is equivalent, I believe, to an appointment in the Civil Service, by the exertions of one of his father's friends. The result of these two desirable family events, the provision for life of two of its members, though the very best things that could have happened, and much rejoiced over in the family, brought with them an appalling prospect for the father and mother when they met in private conclave, to consider how the preliminaries were to be accomplished. Where were Willie's outfit and Marion's plishing to come from? Certainly not out of the straightened stipend of the Kirk of St. Leonard, in the city of St. Rule. Many anxious consultations had ended in this, that money must be borrowed in order to make the good fortune of the children available—that is to say, that the parents must put themselves under a heavy yoke for the greater part of their remaining life, in order that the son and the daughter might make a fair and equal start with their compeers. It is, let us thank heaven, as common as the day that such sacrifices should be made, so common that there is no merit in them, nor do the performers in the majority of cases think of them at all except as simple necessities, the most everyday duties of life. It was thus that they appeared to the Buchanans. They had both that fear and horror of debt which is, or was, the accompaniment of a limited and unelastic income with most reasonable people. They dreaded it and hated it with a true instinct; it gave them a sense of shame, however private it was, and that it should be betrayed to the world that they were *in debt* was a thing horrible to them. Nevertheless, nothing remained for them but to incur this dreadful reproof. They would have to pay it off slowly year by year; perhaps the whole of their remaining lives would be overshadowed by this, and all their little indulgences, so few, so innocent, would have to be given up

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