

CHAPTER XXXI.

In which a witch did dwell, in loathly weeds,
And wilful want, all careless of her deeds;
So choosing solitary to abide,
Far from all neighbours, that her devilish deeds
And hellish arts from people she might hide,
And hurt far off, unknown, whome'er she envied.
Faerie Queene.

The health of Lucy Ashton soon required the assistance of a person more skilful in the office of a sick-nurse than the female domestics of the family. Ailsie Gourlay, sometimes called the Wise Woman of Bowden, was the person whom, for her own strong reasons, Lady Ashton selected as an attendant upon her daughter.

This woman had acquired a considerable reputation among the ignorant by the pretended cures which she performed, especially in "oncomes," as the Scotch call them, or mysterious diseases, which baffle the regular physician. Her pharmacopoeia consisted partly of herbs selected in planetary hours, partly of words, signs, and charms, which sometimes, perhaps, produced a favourable influence upon the imagination of her patients. Such was the avowed profession of Luckie Gourlay, which, as may well be supposed, was looked upon with a suspicious eye, not only by her neighbours, but even by the clergy of the district. In private, however, she traded more deeply in the occult sciences; for, notwithstanding the dreadful punishments inflicted upon the supposed crime of witchcraft, there wanted not those who, steeled by want and bitterness of spirit, were willing to adopt the hateful and dangerous character, for the sake of the influence which its terrors enabled them to exercise in the vicinity, and the wretched emolument which they could extract by the practice of their supposed art.

Ailsie Gourlay was not indeed fool enough to acknowledge a compact with the Evil One, which would have been a swift and ready road to the stake and tar-barrel. Her fairy, she said, like Caliban's, was a harmless fairy. Nevertheless, she "spaed fortunes," read dreams, composed philtres, discovered stolen goods, and made and dissolved matches as successfully as if, according to the belief of the whole neighbourhood, she had been aided in those arts by Beelzebub himself. The worst of the pretenders to these sciences was, that they were generally persons who, feeling themselves odious to humanity, were careless of what they did to deserve the public hatred. Real crimes were often committed under pretence of magical imposture; and it somewhat relieves the disgust with which we read, in the criminal records, the conviction of these wretches, to be aware that many of them merited, as poisoners, suborners, and diabolical agents in secret domestic crimes, the severe fate to which they were condemned for the imaginary guilt of witchcraft.

Such was Aislie Gourlay, whom, in order to attain the absolute subjugation of Lucy Ashton's mind, her mother thought it fitting to place near her person. A woman of less consequence than Lady Ashton had not dared to take such a step; but her high rank and strength of character set her above the censure of the world, and she was allowed to have selected for her daughter's attendant the best and most experienced sick-nurse and "mediciner" in the neighbourhood, where an inferior person would have fallen under the reproach of calling in the assistance of a partner and ally of the great Enemy of mankind.

The beldam caught her cue readily and by innuendo, without giving Lady Ashton the pain of distinct explanation. She was in many respects qualified for the part she played, which indeed could not be efficiently assumed without some knowledge of the human heart and passions. Dame Gourlay perceived that Lucy shuddered at her external appearance, which we have already described when we found her in the death-chamber of blind Alice; and while internally she hated the poor girl for the involuntary horror with which she saw she was regarded, she commenced her operations by endeavouring to efface or overcome those prejudices which, in her heart, she resented as mortal offences. This was easily done, for the hag's external ugliness was soon balanced by a show of kindness and interest, to which Lucy had of late been little accustomed; her attentive services and real skill gained her the ear, if not the confidence, of her patient; and under pretence of diverting the solitude of a sick-room, she soon led her attention captive by the legends in which she was well skilled, and to which Lucy's habit of reading and reflection induced her to "lend an attentive ear." Dame Gourlay's tales were at first of a mild and interesting character—

Of fays that nightly dance upon the wold,
And lovers doom'd to wander and to weep,
And castles high, where wicked wizards keep
Their captive thralls.

Gradually, however, they assumed a darker and more mysterious character, and became such as, told by the midnight lamp, and enforced by the tremulous tone, the quivering and livid lip, the uplifted skinny forefinger, and the shaking head of the blue-eyed hag, might have appalled a less credulous imagination in an age more hard of belief. The old Sycorax saw her advantage, and gradually narrowed her magic circle around the devoted victim on whose spirit she practised. Her legends began to relate to the fortunes of the Ravenswood family, whose ancient grandeur and portentous authority credulity had graced with so many superstitious attributes. The story of the fatal fountain was narrated at full length, and with formidable additions, by the ancient sibyl. The prophecy, quoted by Caleb, concerning the dead bride who was to be won by the last of the Ravenswoods, had its own mysterious commentary; and the singular circumstance of the apparition seen by the Master of Ravenswood in the forest, having partly transpired through his hasty inquiries in the cottage of Old Alice, formed a theme for many exaggerations.

Lucy might have despised these tales if they had been related concerning another family, or if her own situation had been less despondent. But circumstanced as she was, the idea that an evil fate hung over her attachment became predominant over her other feelings; and the gloom of superstition darkened a mind already sufficiently weakened by sorrow, distress, uncertainty, and an oppressive sense of desertion and desolation. Stories were told by her attendant so closely resembling her own in their circumstances, that she was gradually led to converse upon such tragic and mystical subjects with the beldam, and to repose a sort of confidence in the sibyl, whom she still regarded with involuntary shuddering. Dame Gourlay knew how to avail herself of this imperfect confidence. She directed Lucy's thoughts to the means of inquiring into futurity—the surest mode perhaps, of shaking the understanding and destroying the spirits. Omens were expounded, dreams were interpreted, and other tricks of jugglery perhaps resorted to, by which the pretended adepts of the period deceived and fascinated their deluded followers. I find it mentioned in the articles of dittay against Ailsie Gourlay—for it is some comfort to know that the old hag was tried, condemned, and burned on the top of North Berwick Law, by sentence

of a commission from the privy council—I find, I say, it was charged against her, among other offences, that she had, by the aid and delusions of Satan, shown to a young person of quality, in a mirror glass, a gentleman then abroad, to whom the said young person was betrothed, and who appeared in the vision to be in the act of bestowing his hand upon another lady. But this and some other parts of the record appear to have been studiously left imperfect in names and dates, probably out of regard to the honour of the families concerned. If Dame Gourlay was able actually to play off such a piece of jugglery, it is clear she must have had better assistance to practise the deception than her own skill or funds could supply. Meanwhile, this mysterious visionary traffic had its usual effect in unsettling Miss Ashton's mind. Her temper became unequal, her health decayed daily, her manners grew moping, melancholy, and uncertain. Her father, guessing partly at the cause of these appearances, made a point of banishing Dame Gourlay from the castle; but the arrow was shot, and was rankling barb-deep in the side of the wounded deer.

It was shortly after the departure of this woman, that Lucy Ashton, urged by her parents, announced to them, with a vivacity by which they were startled, "That she was concious heaven and earth and hell had set themselves against her union with Ravenswood; still her contract," she said, "was a binding contract, and she neither would nor could resign it without the consent of Ravenswood. Let me be assured," she concluded, "that he will free me from my engagement, and dispose of me as you please, I care not how. When the diamonds are gone, what signifies the casket?"

The tone of obstinacy with which this was said, her eyes flashing with unnatural light, and her hands firmly clenched, precluded the possibility of dispute; and the utmost length which Lady Ashton's art could attain, only got her the privilege of dictating the letter, by which her daughter required to know of Ravenswood whether he intended to abide by or to surrender what she termed "their unfortunante engagement." Of this advantage Lady Ashton so far and so ingeniously availed herself that, according to the wording of the letter, the reader would have supposed Lucy was calling upon her lover to renounce a contract which was contrary to the interests and inclinations of both. Not trusting even to this point of deception, Lady Ashton finally determined to suppress the letter altogether, in hopes that Lucy's impatience would induce her to condemn Ravenswood unheard and in absence. In this she was disappointed. The time, indeed, had long elapsed when an answer should have been received from the continent. The faint ray of hope which still glimmered in Lucy's mind was well nigh extinguished. But the idea never forsook her that her letter might not have been duly forwarded. One of her mother's new machinations unexpectedly furnished her with the means of ascertaining what she most desired to know.

The female agent of hell having been dismissed from the castle, Lady Ashton, who wrought by all variety of means, resolved to employ, for working the same end on Lucy's mind, an agent of a very different character. This was no other than the Reverent Mr. Bide-the-Bent, a presbyterian clergyman, formerly mentioned, of the very strictest order and the most rigid orthodoxy, whose aid she called in, upon the principle of the tyrant in the in the tragedy:

I'll have a priest shall preach her from her faith,
And make it sin not to renounce that vow
Which I'd have broken.

But Lady Ashton was mistaken in the agent she had selected. His prejudices, indeed, were easily enlisted on her side, and it was no difficult matter to make him regard with horror the prospect of a union betwixt the daughter of a God-fearing, professing, and Presbyterian family of distinction and the heir of a bloodthirsty prelatist and persecutor, the hands of whose fathers had been dyed to the wrists in the blood of God's saints. This resembled, in the divine's opinion, the

union of a Moabitish stranger with a daughter of Zion. But with all the more severe prejudices and principles of his sect, Bide-the-Bent possessed a sound judgment, and had learnt sympathy even in that very school of presecution where the heart is so frequently hardened. In a private interview with Miss Ashton, he was deeply moved by her distress, and could not but admit the justice of her request to be permitted a direct communication with Ravenswood upon the subject of their solemn contract. When she urged to him the great uncertainty under which she laboured whether her letter had been ever forwarded, the old man paced the room with long steps, shook his grey head, rested repeatedly for a space on his ivory-headed staff, and, after much hesitation, confessed that he thought her doubts so reasonable that he would himself aid in the removal of them.

“I cannot but opine, Miss Lucy,” he said, “that your worshipful lady mother hath in this matter an eagerness whilk, although it ariseth doubtless from love to your best interests here and hereafter, for the man is of persecuting blood, and himself a persecutor, a Cavalier or Malignant, and a scoffer, who hath no inheritance in Jesse; nevertheless, we are commanded to do justice unto all, and to fulfil our bond and covenant, as well to the stranger as to him who is in brotherhood with us. Wherefore myself, even I myself, will be aiding unto the delivery of your letter to the man Edgar Ravenswood, trusting that the issue therof may be your deliverance from the nets in which he hath sinfully engaged you. And that I may do in this neither more nor less than hath been warranted by your honourable parents, I pray you to transcribe, without increment or subtraction, the letter formerly expeded under the dictation of your right honourable mother; and I shall put it into such sure course of being delivered, that if, honourable young madam, you shall receive no answer, it will be necessary that you conclude that the man meaneth in silence to abandon that naughty contract, which, peradventure, he may be unwilling directly to restore.”

Lucy eagerly embraced the expedient of the worthy divine. A new letter was written in the precise terms of the former, and consigned by Mr. Bide-the-Bent to the charge of Saunders Moonshine, a zealous elder of the church when on shore, and when on board his brig as bold a smuggler as ever ran out a sliding bowsprit to the winds that blow betwixt Campvere and the east coast of Scotland. At the recommendation of his pastor, Saunders readily undertook that the letter should be securely conveyed to the Master of Ravenswood at the court where he now resided.

This retrospect became necessary to explain the conference betwixt Miss Ashton, her mother, and Bucklaw which we have detailed in a preceding chapter.

Lucy was now like the sailor who, while drifting through a tempestuous ocean, clings for safety to a single plank, his powers of grasping it becoming every moment more feeble, and the deep darkness of the night only checkered by the flashes of lightning, hissing as they show the white tops of the billows, in which he is soon to be engulfed.

Week crept away after week, and day after day. St. Jude’s day arrived, the last and protracted term to which Lucy had limited herself, and there was neither letter nor news of Ravenswood.

CHAPTER XXXII.

How fair these names, how much unlike they look
To all the blurr’d subscriptions in my book!
The bridegroom’s letters stand in row above,

Tapering, yet straight, like pine-trees in his grove;
While free and fine the bride's appear below,
As light and slender as her jessamines grow.
CRABBE.

St. Jude's day came, the term assigned by Lucy herself as the furthest date of expectation, and, as we have already said, there were neither letters from nor news of Ravenswood. But there were news of Bucklaw, and of his trusty associate Craigenfelt, who arrived early in the morning for the completion of the proposed espousals, and for signing the necessary deeds.

These had been carefully prepared under the revision of Sir William Ashton himself, it having been resolved, on account of the state of Miss Ashton's health, as it was said, that none save the parties immediately interested should be present when the parchments were subscribed. It was further determined that the marriage should be solemnised upon the fourth day after signing the articles, a measure adopted by Lady Ashton, in order that Lucy might have as little time as possible to recede or relapse into intractability. There was no appearance, however, of her doing either. She heard the proposed arrangement with the calm indifference of despair, or rather with an apathy arising from the oppressed and stupified state of her feelings. To an eye so unobserving as that of Bucklaw, her demeanour had little more of reluctance than might suit the character of a bashful young lady, who, however, he could not disguise from himself, was complying with the choice of her friends rather than exercising any personal predilection in his favour.

When the morning compliment of the bridegroom had been paid, Miss Ashton was left for some time to herself; her mother remarking, that the deeds must be signed before the hour of noon, in order that the marriage might be happy. Lucy suffered herself to be attired for the occasion as the taste of her attendants suggested, and was of course splendidly arrayed. Her dress was composed of white satin and Brussels lace, and her hair arranged with a profusion of jewels, whose lustre made a strange contrast to the deadly paleness of her complexion, and to the trouble which dwelt in her unsettled eye.

Her toilette was hardly finished ere Henry appeared, to conduct the passive bride to the state apartment, where all was prepared for signing the contract. "Do you know, sister," he said, "I am glad you are to have Bucklaw after all, instead of Ravenswood, who looked like a Spanish grandee come to cut our throats and trample our bodies under foot. And I am glad the broad seas are between us this day, for I shall never forget how frightened I was when I took him for the picture of old Sir Malise walked out of the canvas. Tell me true, are you not glad to be fairly shot of him?"

"Ask me no questions, dear Henry," said his unfortunate sister; "there is little more can happen to make me either glad or sorry in this world."

"And that's what all young brides say," said Henry; "and so do not be cast down, Lucy, for you'll tell another tale a twelvemonth hence; and I am to be bride's-man, and ride before you to the kirk; and all our kith, kin, and allies, and all Bucklaw's, are to be mounted and in order; and I am to have a scarlet laced coat, and a feathered hat, and a swordbelt, double bordered with gold, and point d'Espagne, and a dagger instead of a sword; and I should like a sword much better, but my father won't hear of it. All my things, and a hundred besides, are to come out from Edinburgh to-night with old Gilbert and the sumpter mules; and I will bring them and show them to you the instant they come."

The boy's chatter was here interrupted by the arrival of Lady Ashton, somewhat alarmed at her daughter's stay. With one of her sweetest smiles, she took Lucy's arm under her own.

There were only present, Sir William Ashton and Colonel Douglas Ashton, the last in full regimentals; Bucklaw, in bridegroom trim; Craigengelt, freshly equipt from top to toe by the bounty of his patron, and bedizened with as much lace as might have become the dress of the Copper Captain; together with the Rev. Mr. Bide-the-Bent; the presence of a minister being, in strict Presbyterian families, an indispensable requisite upon all occasions of unusual solemnity.

Wines and refreshments were placed on a table, on which the writings were displayed, ready for signature.

But before proceeding either to business or refreshment, Mr. Bide-the-Bent, at a signal from Sir William Ashton, invited the company to join him in a short extemporary prayer, in which he implored a blessing upon the contract now to be solemnised between the honourable parties then present. With the simplicity of his times and profession, which permitted strong personal allusions, he petitioned that the wounded mind of one of these noble parties might be healed, in reward of her compliance with the advice of her right honourable parents; and that, as she had proved herself a child after God's commandment, by honouring her father and mother, she and hers might enjoy the promised blessing—length of days in the land here, and a happy portion hereafter in a better country. He prayed farther, that the bridegroom might be weaned from those follies which seduced youth from the path of knowledge; that he might cease to take delight in vain and unprofitable company, scoffers, rioters, and those who sit late at the wine (here Bucklaw winked at Craigengelt), and cease from the society that causeth to err. A suitable supplication in behalf of Sir William and Lady Ashton and their family concluded this religious address, which thus embraced every individual present excepting Craigengelt, whom the worthy divine probably considered as past all hopes of grace.

The business of the day now went forward: Sir William Ashton signed the contract with legal solemnity and precision; his son, with military nonchalance; and Bucklaw, having subscribed as rapidly as Craigengelt could manage to turn the leaves, concluded by wiping his pen on that worthy's new laced cravat. It was now Miss Ashton's turn to sign the writings, and she was guided by her watchful mother to the table for that purpose. At her first attempt, she began to write with a dry pen, and when the circumstance was pointed out, seemed unable, after several attempts, to dip it in the massive silver ink-standish, which stood full before her. Lady Ashton's vigilance hastened to supply the deficiency. I have myself seen the fatal deed, and in the distinct characters in which the name of Lucy Ashton is traced on each page there is only a very slight tremulous irregularity, indicative of her state of mind at the time of the subscription. But the last signature is incomplete, defaced, and blotted; for, while her hand was employed in tracing it, the hasty tramp of a horse was heard at the gate, succeeded by a step in the outer gallery, and a voice which, in a commanding tone, bore down the opposition of the menials. The pen dropped from Lucy's fingers, as she exclaimed with a faint shriek: "He is come—he is come!"

CHAPTER XXXIII.

This by his tongue should be a Montague!
Fetch me my rapier, boy;

Now, by the faith and honour of my kin,
To strike him dead I hold it not a sin.
Romeo and Juliet.

Hardly had Miss Ashton dropped the pen, when the door of the apartment flew open, and the Master of Ravenswood entered the apartment.

Lockhard and another domestic, who had in vain attempted to oppose his passage through the gallery or antechamber, were seen standing on the threshold transfixed with surprise, which was instantly communicated to the whole party in the stateroom. That of Colonel Douglas Ashton was mingled with resentment; that of Bucklaw with haughty and affected indifference; the rest, even Lady Ashton herself, showed signs of fear; and Lucy seemed stiffened to stone by this unexpected apparition. Apparition it might well be termed, for Ravenswood had more the appearance of one returned from the dead than of a living visitor.

He planted himself full in the middle of the apartment, opposite to the table at which Lucy was seated, on whom, as if she had been alone in the chamber, he bent his eyes with a mingled expression of deep grief and deliberate indignation. His dark-coloured riding cloak, displaced from one shoulder, hung around one side of his person in the ample folds of the Spanish mantle. The rest of his rich dress was travel-soiled, and deranged by hard riding. He had a sword by his side, and pistols in his belt. His slouched hat, which he had not removed at entrance, gave an additional gloom to his dark features, which, wasted by sorrow and marked by the ghastly look communicated by long illness, added to a countenance naturally somewhat stern and wild a fierce and even savage expression. The matted and dishevelled locks of hair which escaped from under his hat, together with his fixed and unmoved posture, made his head more resemble that of a marble bust than that of a living man. He said not a single word, and there was a deep silence in the company for more than two minutes.

It was broken by Lady Ashton, who in that space partly recovered her natural audacity. She demanded to know the cause of this unauthorised intrusion.

“That is a question, madam,” said her son, “which I have the best right to ask; and I must request of the Master of Ravenswood to follow me where he can answer it at leisure.”

Bucklaw interposed, saying, “No man on earth should usurp his previous right in demanding an explanation from the Master. Craigengelt,” he added, in an undertone, “d—n ye, why do you stand staring as if you saw a ghost? fetch me my sword from the gallery.”

“I will relinquish to none,” said Colonel Ashton, “my right of calling to account the man who has offered this unparalleled affront to my family.” “Be patient, gentlemen,” said Ravenswood, turning sternly towards them, and waving his hand as if to impose silence on their altercation. “If you are as weary of your lives as I am, I will find time and place to pledge mine against one or both; at present, I have no leisure for the disputes of triflers.”

“Triflers!” echoed Colonel Ashton, half unsheathing his sword, while Bucklaw laid his hand on the hilt of that which Craigengelt had just reached him.

Sir William Ashton, alarmed for his son’s safety, rushed between the young men and Ravenswood, exclaiming: “My son, I command you—Bucklaw, I entreat you—keep the peace, in the name of the Queen and of the law!”

“In the name of the law of God,” said Bide-the-Bent, advancing also with uplifted hands between Bucklaw, the Colonel, and the object of their resentment—“in the name of Him who brought peace on earth and good-will to mankind, I implore—I beseech—I command you to

forbear violence towards each other! God hateth the bloodthirsty man; he who striketh with the sword shall perish with the sword.”

“Do you take me for a dog, sir” said Colonel Ashton, turning fiercely upon him, “or something more brutally stupid, to endure this insult in my father’s house? Let me go, Bucklaw! He shall account to me, or, by Heavens, I will stab him where he stands!”

“You shall not touch him here,” said Bucklaw; “he once gave me my life, and were he the devil come to fly away with the whole house and generation, he shall have nothing but fair play.”

The passions of the two young men thus counteracting each other gave Ravenswood leisure to exclaim, in a stern and steady voice: “Silence!—let him who really seeks danger take the fitting time when it is to be found; my mission here will be shortly accomplished. Is THAT your handwriting, madam?” he added in a softer tone, extending towards Miss Ashton her last letter.

A faltering “Yes” seemed rather to escape from her lips than to be uttered as a voluntary answer.

“And is THIS also your handwriting?” extending towards her the mutual engagement.

Lucy remained silent. Terror, and a yet stronger and more confused feeling, so utterly disturbed her understanding that she probably scarcely comprehended the question that was put to her.

“If you design,” said Sir William Ashton, “to found any legal claim on that paper, sir, do not expect to receive any answer to an extrajudicial question.”

“Sir William Ashton,” said Ravenswood, “I pray you, and all who hear me, that you will not mistake my purpose. If this young lady, of her own free will, desires the restoration of this contract, as her letter would seem to imply, there is not a withered leaf which this autumn wind strews on the heath that is more valueless in my eyes. But I must and will hear the truth from her own mouth; without this satisfaction I will not leave this spot. Murder me by numbers you possibly may; but I am an armed man—I am a desperate man, and I will not die without ample vengeance. This is my resolution, take it as you may. I WILL hear her determination from her own mouth; from her own mouth, alone, and without witnesses, will I hear it. Now, choose,” he said, drawing his sword with the right hand, and, with the left, by the same motion taking a pistol from his belt and cocking it, but turning the point of one weapon and the muzzle of the other to the ground—”choose if you will have this hall floated with blood, or if you will grant me the decisive interview with my affianced bride which the laws of God and the country alike entitle me to demand.”

All recoiled at the sound of his voice and the determined action by which it was accompanied; for the ecstasy of real desperation seldom fails to overpower the less energetic passions by which it may be opposed. The clergyman was the first to speak. “In the name of God,” he said, “receive an overture of peace from the meanest of His servants. What this honourable person demands, albeit it is urged with over violence, hath yet in it something of reason. Let him hear from Miss Lucy’s own lips that she hath dutifully acceded to the will of her parents, and repenteth her of her covenant with him; and when he is assured of this he will depart in peace unto his own dwelling, and cumber us no more. Alas! the workings of the ancient Adam are strong even in the regenerate; surely we should have long- suffering with those who, being yet in the gall of bitterness and bond of iniquity, are swept forward by the uncontrollable current of worldly passion. Let, then, the Master of Ravenswood have the interview on which he insisteth; it can but be as a passing pang to this honourable maiden, since her faith is now irrevocably pledged to the choice of her parents. Let it, I say, be this: it belongeth to my functions to entreat your honours’ compliance with this headling overture.”

“Never!” answered Lady Ashton, whose rage had now overcome her first surprise and terror—
”never shall this man speak in private with my daughter, the affianced bride of another! pass from this room who will, I remain here. I fear neither his violence nor his weapons, though some,
“ she said, glancing a look towards Colonel Ashton, “who bear my name appear more moved by them.”

“For God’s sake, madam,” answered the worthy divine, “add not fuel to firebrands. The Master of Ravenswood cannot, I am sure, object to your presence, the young lady’s state of health being considered, and your maternal duty. I myself will also tarry; peradventure my grey hairs may turn away wrath.”

“You are welcome to do so, sir,” said Ravenswood; “and Lady Ashton is also welcome to remain, if she shall think proper; but let all others depart.”

“Ravenswood,” said Colonel Ashton, crossing him as he went out, “you shall account for this ere long.”

“When you please,” replied Ravenswood.

“But I,” said Bucklaw, with a half smile, “have a prior demand on your leisure, a claim of some standing.”

“Arrange it as you will,” said Ravenswood; “leave me but this day in peace, and I will have no dearer employment on earth to-morrow than to give you all the satisfaction you can desire.”

The other gentlemen left the apartment; but Sir William Ashton lingered.

“Master of Ravenswood,” he said, in a conciliating tone, “I think I have not deserved that you should make this scandal and outrage in my family. If you will sheathe your sword, and retire with me into my study, I will prove to you, by the most satisfactory arguments, the inutility of your present irregular procedure——”

“To-morrow, sir—to-morrow—to-morrow, I will hear you at length,” reiterated Ravenswood, interrupting him; “this day hath its own sacred and indispensable business.”

He pointed to the door, and Sir William left the apartment.

Ravenswood sheathed his sword, uncocked and returned his pistol to his belt; walked deliberately to the door of the apartment, which he bolted; returned, raised his hat from his forehead, and gazing upon Lucy with eyes in which an expression of sorrow overcame their late fierceness, spread his dishevelled locks back from his face, and said, “Do you know me, Miss Ashton? I am still Edgar Ravenswood.” She was silent, and he went on with increasing vehemence: “I am still that Edgar Ravenswood who, for your affection, renounced the dear ties by which injured honour bound him to seek vengeance. I am that Ravenswood who, for your sake, forgave, nay, clasped hands in friendship with, the oppressor and pillager of his house, the traducer and murderer of his father.”

“My daughter,” answered Lady Ashton, interrupting him, “has no occasion to dispute the identity of your person; the venom of your present language is sufficient to remind her that she speaks with the moral enemy of her father.”

“I pray you to be patient, madam,” answered Ravenswood; “my answer must come from her own lips. Once more, Miss Lucy Ashton, I am that Ravenswood to whom you granted the solemn engagement which you now desire to retract and cancel.”

Lucy’s bloodless lips could only falter out the words, “It was my mother.”

“She speaks truly,” said Lady Ashton, “it WAS I who, authorised alike by the laws of God and man, advised her, and concurred with her, to set aside an unhappy and precipitate engagement, and to annul it by the authority of Scripture itself.”

“Scripture!” said Ravenswood, scornfully.

“Let him hear the text,” said Lady Ashton, appealing to the divine, “on which you yourself, with cautious reluctance, declared the nullity of the pretended engagement insisted upon by this violent man.”

The clergyman took his clasped Bible from his pocket, and read the following words: “If a woman vow a vow unto the Lord, and bind herself by a bond, being in her father’s house in her youth, and her father hear her vow, and her bond wherewith she hath bound her soul, and her father shall hold his peace at her; then all her vows shall stand, and every vow wherewith she hath bound her soul shall stand.”

“And was it not even so with us?” interrupted Ravenswood.

“Control thy impatience, young man,” answered the divine, “and hear what follows in the sacred text: ‘But if her father disallow her in the day that he heareth, not any of her vows, or of her bonds wherewith she hath bound her soul, shall stand; and the Lord shall forgive her, because her father disallowed her.’”

“And was not,” said Lady Ashton, fiercely and triumphantly breaking in—“was not ours the case stated in the Holy Writ? Will this person deny, that the instant her parents heard of the vow, or bond, by which our daughter had bound her soul, we disallowed the same in the most express terms, and informed him by writing of our determination?”

“And is this all?” said Ravenswood, looking at Lucy. “Are you willing to barter sworn faith, the exercise of free will, and the feelings of mutual affection to this wretched hypocritical sophistry?”

“Hear him!” said Lady Ashton, looking to the clergyman—“hear the blasphemer!”

“May God forgive him,” said Bide-the-Bent, “and enlighten his ignorance!” “Hear what I have sacrificed for you,” said Ravenswood, still addressing Lucy, “ere you sanction what has been done in your name. The honour of an ancient family, the urgent advice of my best friends, have been in vain used to sway my resolution; neither the arguments of reason nor the portents of superstition have shaken my fidelity. The very dead have arisen to warn me, and their warning has been despised. Are you prepared to pierce my heart for its fidelity with the very weapon which my rash confidence entrusted to your grasp?”

“Master of Ravenswood,” said Lady Ashton, “you have asked what questions you thought fit. You see the total incapacity of my daughter to answer you. But I will reply for her, and in a manner which you cannot dispute. You desire to know whether Lucy Ashton, of her own free will, desires to annual the engagement into which she has been trepanned. You have her letter under her own hand, demanding the surrender of it; and, in yet more full evidence of her purpose, here is the contract which she has this morning subscribed, in presence of this reverence gentleman, with Mr. Hayston of Bucklaw.”

Ravenswood gazed upon the deed as if petrified. “And it was without fraud or compulsion,” said he, looking towards the clergyman, “that Miss Ashton subscribed this parchment?”

“I couch it upon my sacred character.”

“This is indeed, madam, an undeniable piece of evidence,” said Ravenswood, sternly; “and it will be equally unnecessary and dishonourable to waste another word in useless remonstrance or reproach. There, madam,” he said, laying down before Lucy the signed paper and the broken piece of gold—“there are the evidences of your first engagement; may you be more faithful to that which you have just formed. I will trouble you to return the corresponding tokens of my ill-placed confidence; I ought rather to say, of my egregious folly.”

Lucy returned the scornful glance of her lover with a gaze from which perception seemed to have been banished; yet she seemed partly to have understood his meaning, for she raised her

hands as if to undo a blue ribbon which she wore around her neck. She was unable to accomplish her purpose, but Lady Ashton cut the ribbon asunder, and detached the broken piece of gold, which Miss Ashton had till then worn concealed in her bosom; the written counterpart of the lovers' engagement she for some time had had in her own possession. With a haughty courtesy, she delivered both to Ravenswood, who was much softened when he took the piece of gold.

"And she could wear it thus," he said, speaking to himself— "could wear it in her very bosom—could wear it next to her heart—even when—— But complain avails not," he said, dashing from his eye the tear which had gathered in it, and resuming the stern composure of his manner. He strode to the chimney, and threw into the fire the paper and piece of gold, stamping upon the coals with the heel of his boot, as if to ensure their destruction. "I will be no longer," he then said, "an intruder here. Your evil wishes, and your worse offices, Lady Ashton, I will only return by hoping these will be your last machinations against your daughter's honour and happiness. And to you, madam," he said, addressing Lucy, "I have nothing farther to say, except to pray to God that you may not become a world's wonder for this act of wilful and deliberate perjury." Having uttered these words, he turned on his heel and left the apartment.

Sir William Ashton, by entreaty and authority, had detained his son and Bucklaw in a distant part of the castle, in order to prevent their again meeting with Ravenswood; but as the Master descended the great staircase, Lockhard delivered him a billet, signed "Sholto Douglas Ashton," requesting to know where the Master of Ravenswood would be heard of four or five days from hence, as the writer had business of weight to settle with him, so soon as an important family event had taken place.

"Tell Colonel Ashton," said Ravenswood, composedly, "I shall be found at Wolf's Crag when his leisure serves him."

As he descended the outward stair which led from the terrace, he was a second time interrupted by Craigengelt, who, on the part of his principal, the Laird of Bucklaw, expressed a hope that Ravenswood would not leave Scotland within ten days at least, as he had both former and recent civilities for which to express his gratitude.

"Tell your master," said Ravenswood, fiercely, "to choose his own time. He will find me at Wolf's Crag, if his purpose is not forestalled."

"MY master!" replied Craigengelt, encouraged by seeing Colonel Ashton and Bucklaw at the bottom of the terrace. "Give me leave to say I know of no such person upon earth, nor will I permit such language to be used to me!"

"Seek your master, then, in hell!" exclaimed Ravenswood, giving way to the passion he had hitherto restrained, and throwing Craigengelt from him with such violence that he rolled down the steps and lay senseless at the foot of them. "I am a fool," he instantly added, "to vent my passion upon a caitiff so worthless."

He then mounted his horse, which at his arrival he had secured to a balustrade in front of the castle, rode very slowly past Bucklaw and Colonel Ashton, raising his hat as he passed each, and looking in their faces steadily while he offered this mute salutation, which was returned by both with the same stern gravity. Ravenswood walked on with equal deliberation until he reached the head of the avenue, as if to show that he rather courted than avoided interruption. When he had passed the upper gate, he turned his horse, and looked at the castle with a fixed eye; then set spurs to his good steed, and departed with the speed of a demon dismissed by the exorcist.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

Who comes from the bridal chamber?

It is Azrael, the angel of death.

Thalaba.

After the dreadful scene that had taken place at the castle, Lucy was transported to her own chamber, where she remained for some time in a state of absolute stupor. Yet afterwards, in the course of the ensuing day, she seemed to have recovered, not merely her spirits and resolution, but a sort of flighty levity, that was foreign to her character and situation, and which was at times chequered by fits of deep silence and melancholy and of capricious pettishness. Lady Ashton became much alarmed and consulted the family physicians. But as her pulse indicated no change, they could only say that the disease was on the spirits, and recommended gentle exercise and amusement. Miss Ashton never alluded to what had passed in the state-room. It seemed doubtful even if she was conscious of it, for she was often observed to raise her hands to her neck, as if in search of the ribbon that had been taken from it, and mutter, in surprise and discontent, when she could not find it, "It was the link that bound me to life."

Notwithstanding all these remarkable symptoms, Lady Ashton was too deeply pledged to delay her daughter's marriage even in her present state of health. It cost her much trouble to keep up the fair side of appearances towards Bucklaw. She was well aware, that if he once saw any reluctance on her daughter's part, he would break off the treaty, to her great personal shame and dishonour. She therefore resolved that, if Lucy continued passive, the marriage should take place upon the day that had been previously fixed, trusting that a change of place, of situation, and of character would operate a more speedy and effectual cure upon the unsettled spirits of her daughter than could be attained by the slow measures which the medical men recommended. Sir William Ashton's views of family aggrandisement, and his desire to strengthen himself against the measures of the Marquis of A——, readily induced him to acquiesce in what he could not have perhaps resisted if willing to do so. As for the young men, Bucklaw and Colonel Ashton, they protested that, after what had happened, it would be most dishonourable to postpone for a single hour the time appointed for the marriage, as it would be generally ascribed to their being intimidated by the intrusive visit and threats of Ravenswood.

Bucklaw would indeed have been incapable of such precipitation, had he been aware of the state of Miss Ashton's health, or rather of her mind. But custom, upon these occasions, permitted only brief and sparing intercourse between the bridegroom and the betrothed; a circumstance so well improved by Lady Ashton, that Bucklaw neither saw nor suspected the real state of the health and feelings of his unhappy bride.

On the eve of the bridal day, Lucy appeared to have one of her fits of levity, and surveyed with a degree of girlish interest the various preparations of dress, etc., etc., which the different members of the family had prepared for the occasion.

The morning dawned bright and cheerily. The bridal guests assembled in gallant troops from distant quarters. Not only the relations of Sir William Ashton, and the still more dignified connexions of his lady, together with the numerous kinsmen and allies of the bridegroom, were present upon this joyful ceremony, gallantly mounted, arrayed, and caparisoned, but almost every Presbyterian family of distinction within fifty miles made a point of attendance upon an occasion which was considered as giving a sort of triumph over the Marquis of A——, in the person of his kinsman. Splendid refreshments awaited the guests on their arrival, and after these

were finished, the cry was "To horse." The bride was led forth betwixt her brother Henry and her mother. Her gaiety of the preceding day had given rise [place] to a deep shade of melancholy, which, however, did not misbecome an occasion so momentous. There was a light in her eyes and a colour in her cheek which had not been kindled for many a day, and which, joined to her great beauty, and the splendour of her dress, occasioned her entrance to be greeted with an universal murmur of applause, in which even the ladies could not refrain from joining. While the cavalcade were getting to horse, Sir William Ashton, a man of peace and of form, censured his son Henry for having begirt himself with a military sword of preposterous length, belonging to his brother, Colonel Ashton.

"If you must have a weapon," he said, "upon such a peaceful occasion, why did you not use the short poniard sent from Edinburgh on purpose?"

The boy vindicated himself by saying it was lost.

"You put it out of the way yourself, I suppose," said his father, "out of ambition to wear that preposterous thing, which might have served Sir William Wallace. But never mind, get to horse now, and take care of your sister."

The boy did so, and was placed in the centre of the gallant train. At the time, he was too full of his own appearance, his sword, his laced cloak, his feathered hat, and his managed horse, to pay much regard to anything else; but he afterwards remembered to the hour of his death, that when the hand of his sister, by which she supported herself on the pillion behind him, touched his own, it felt as wet and cold as sepulchral marble.

Glancing wide over hill and dale, the fair bridal procession at last reached the parish church, which they nearly filled; for, besides domestics, above a hundred gentlemen and ladies were present upon the occasion. The marriage ceremony was performed according to the rites of the Presbyterian persuasion, to which Bucklaw of late had judged it proper to conform.

On the outside of the church, a liberal dole was distributed to the poor of the neighbouring parishes, under the direction of Johnie Morthuech [Mortsheugh], who had lately been promoted from his desolate quarters at the Hermitage to fill the more eligible situation of sexton at the parish church of Ravenswood. Dame Gourlay, with two of her contemporaries, the same who assisted at Alice's late-wake, seated apart upon a flat monument, or "through-stane," sate enviously comparing the shares which had been allotted to them in dividing the dole.

"Johnie Morthuech," said Annie Winnie, "might hae minded auld lang syne, and thought of his auld kimmers, for as braw as he is with his new black coat. I hae gotten but five herring instead o' sax, and this disna look like a gude saxpennys, and I dare say this bit morsel o' beef is an unce lighter than ony that's been dealt round; and it's a bit o' the tenony hough, mair by token that yours, Maggie, is out o' the back-sey."

"Mine, quo' she!" mumbled the paralytic hag—"mine is half banes, I trow. If grit folk gie poor bodies ony thing for coming to their weddings and burials, it suld be something that wad do them gude, I think."

"Their gifts," said Ailsie Gourlay, "are dealt for nae love of us, nor out of respect for whether we feed or starve. They wad gie us whinstanes for loaves, if it would serve their ain vanity, and yet they expect us to be as gratefu', as they ca' it, as if they served us for true love and liking."

"And that's truly said," answered her companion.

"But, Ailsie Gourlay, ye're the auldest o' us three—did ye ever see a mair grand bridal?"

"I winna say that I have," answered the hag; "but I think soon to see as braw a burial."

“And that wad please me as weel,” said Annie Winnie; “for there’s as large a dole, and folk are no obliged to girn and laugh, and mak murgeons, and wish joy to these hellicat quality, that lord it ower us like brute beasts. I like to pack the dead- dole in my lap and rin ower my auld rhyme—

My loaf in my lap, my penny in my purse, Thou art ne’er the better, and I’m ne’er the worse.”

“That’s right, Annie,” said the paralytic woman; “God send us a green Yule and a fat kirkyard!”

“But I wad like to ken, Luckie Gourlay, for ye’re the auldest and wisest amang us, whilk o’ these revellers’ turn it will be to be streikit first?”

“D’ye see yon dandilly maiden,” said Dame Gourlay, “a’ glistenin’ wi’ gowd and jewels, that they are lifting up on the white horse behind that hare-brained callant in scarlet, wi’ the lang sword at his side?”

“But that’s the bride!” said her companion, her cold heart touched with some sort of compassion—“that’s the very bride hersell! Eh, whow! sae young, sae braw, and sae bonny— and is her time sae short?”

“I tell ye,” said the sibyl, “her winding sheet is up as high as her throat already, believe it wha list. Her sand has but few grains to rin out; and nae wonder—they’ve been weel shaken. The leaves are withering fast on the trees, but she’ll never see the Martinmas wind gar them dance in swirls like the fairy rings.” “Ye waited on her for a quarter,” said the paralytic woman, “and got twa red pieces, or I am far beguiled?”

“Ay, ay,” answered Ailsie, with a bitter grin; “and Sir William Ashton promised me a bonny red gown to the boot o’ that—a stake, and a chain, and a tar-barrel, lass! what think ye o’ that for a propine?—for being up early and doun late for fourscore nights and mair wi’ his dwining daughter. But he may keep it for his ain leddy, cummers.”

“I hae heard a sough,” said Annie Winnie, “as if Leddy Ashton was nae canny body.”

“D’ye see her yonder,” said Dame Gourlay, “as she prances on her grey gelding out at the kirkyard? There’s mair o’ utter deevilry in that woman, as brave and fair-fashioned as she rides yonder, than in a’ the Scotch withces that ever flew by moonlight ower North Berwick Law.”

“What’s that ye say about witches, ye damned hags?” said Johnie Mortheuch [Mortsheugh]; “are ye casting yer cantrips in the very kirkyard, to mischieve the bride and bridegroom? Get awa’ hame, for if I tak my souple t’ye, I’ll gar ye find the road faster than ye wad like.”

“Hegh, sirs!” answered Ailsie Gourlay; “how bra’ are we wi’ our new black coat and our weel-pouthered head, as if we had never kenn’d hunger nor thirst oursells! and we’ll be screwing up our bit fiddle, doubtless, in the ha’ the night, amang a’ the other elbo’-jiggers for miles round. Let’s see if the pins haud, Johnie—that’s a’, lad.”

“I take ye a’ to witness, gude people,” said Morheuch, “that she threatens me wi’ mischief, and forespeaks me. If ony thing but gude happens to me or my fiddle this night, I’ll make it the blackest night’s job she ever stirred in. I’ll hae her before presbytery and synod: I’m half a minister mysell, now that I’m a bedral in an inhabited parish.”

Although the mutual hatred betwixt these hags and the rest of mankind had steeled their hearts against all impressions of festivity, this was by no means the case with the multitude at large. The splendour of the bridal retinue, the gay dresses, the spirited horses, the blythesome appearance of the handsome women and gallant gentlemen assembled upon the occasion, had the usual effect upon the minds of the populace. The repeated shouts of “Ashton and Bucklaw for ever!” the discharge of pistols, guns, and musketoons, to give what was called the bridal shot, evinced the interest the people took in the occasion of the cavalcade, as they accompanied it upon their return to the castle. If there was here and there an elder peasant or his wife who

sneered at the pomp of the upstart family, and remembered the days of the long-descended Ravenswoods, even they, attracted by the plentiful cheer which the castle that day afforded to rich and poor, held their way thither, and acknowledged, notwithstanding their prejudices, the influence of l'Amphitruon ou l'on dine.

Thus accompanied with the attendance both of rich and poor, Lucy returned to her father's house. Bucklaw used his privilege of riding next to the bride, but, new to such a situation, rather endeavoured to attract attention by the display of his person and horsemanship, than by any attempt to address her in private. They reached the castle in safety, amid a thousand joyous acclamations.

It is well known that the weddings of ancient days were celebrated with a festive publicity rejected by the delicacy of modern times. The marriage guests, on the present occasion, were regaled with a banquet of unbounded profusion, the relics of which, after the domestics had feasted in their turn, were distributed among the shouting crowd, with as many barrels of ale as made the hilarity without correspond to that within the castle. The gentlemen, according to the fashion of the times, indulged, for the most part, in deep draughts of the richest wines, while the ladies, prepared for the ball which always closed a bridal entertainment, impatiently expected their arrival in the state gallery. At length the social party broke up at a late hour, and the gentlemen crowded into the saloon, where, enlivened by wine and the joyful occasion, they laid aside their swords and handed their impatient partners to the floor. The music already rung from the gallery, along the fretted roof of the ancient state apartment. According to strict etiquette, the bride ought to have opened the ball; but Lady Ashton, making an apology on account of her daughter's health, offered her own hand to Bucklaw as substitute for her daughter's. But as Lady Ashton raised her head gracefully, expecting the strain at which she was to begin the dance, she was so much struck by an unexpected alteration in the ornaments of the apartment that she was surprised into an exclamation, "Who has dared to change the pictures?"

All looked up, and those who knew the usual state of the apartment observed, with surprise, that the picture of Sir William Ashton's father was removed from its place, and in its stead that of old Sir Malise Ravenswood seemed to frown wrath and vengeance upon the party assembled below. The exchange must have been made while the apartments were empty, but had not been observed until the torches and lights in the sconces were kindled for the ball. The haughty and heated spirits of the gentlemen led them to demand an immediate inquiry into the cause of what they deemed an affront to their host and to themselves; but Lady Ashton, recovering herself, passed it over as the freak of a crazy wench who was maintained about the castle, and whose susceptible imagination had been observed to be much affected by the stories which Dame Gourlay delighted to tell concerning "the former family," so Lady Ashton named the Ravenswoods. The obnoxious picture was immediately removed, and the ball was opened by Lady Ashton, with a grace and dignity which supplied the charms of youth, and almost verified the extravagant encomiums of the elder part of the company, who extolled her performance as far exceeding the dancing of the rising generation.

When Lady Ashton sat down, she was not surprised to find that her daughter had left the apartment, and she herself followed, eager to obviate any impression which might have been made upon her nerves by an incident so likely to affect them as the mysterious transposition of the portraits. Apparently she found her apprehensions groundless, for she returned in about an hour, and whispered the bridegroom, who extricated himself from the dancers, and vanished from the apartment. The instruments now played their loudest strains; the dancers pursued their exercise with all the enthusiasm inspired by youth, mirth, and high spirits, when a cry was heard

so shrill and piercing as at once to arrest the dance and the music. All stood motionless; but when the yell was again repeated, Colonel Ashton snatched a torch from the sconce, and demanding the key of the bridal-chamber from Henry, to whom, as bride's-man, it had been entrusted, rushed thither, followed by Sir William Ashton and Lady Ashton, and one or two others, near relations of the family. The bridal guests waited their return in stupified amazement.

Arrived at the door of the apartment, Colonel Ashton knocked and called, but received no answer except stifled groans. He hesitated no longer to open the door of the apartment, in which he found opposition from something which lay against it. When he had succeeded in opening it, the body of the bridegroom was found lying on the threshold of the bridal chamber, and all around was flooded with blood. A cry of surprise and horror was raised by all present; and the company, excited by this new alarm, began to rush tumultuously towards the sleeping apartment. Colonel Ashton, first whispering to his mother, "Search for her; she has murdered him!" drew his sword, planted himself in the passage, and declared he would suffer no man to pass excepting the clergyman and a medical person present. By their assistance, Bucklaw, who still breathed, was raised from the ground, and transported to another apartment, where his friends, full of suspicion and murmuring, assembled round him to learn the opinion of the surgeon.

In the mean while, Lady Ashton, her husband, and their assistants in vain sought Lucy in the bridal bed and in the chamber. There was no private passage from the room, and they began to think that she must have thrown herself from the window, when one of the company, holding his torch lower than the rest, discovered something white in the corner of the great old-fashioned chimney of the apartment. Here they found the unfortunate girl seated, or rather couched like a hare upon its form—her head-gear dishevelled, her night-clothes torn and dabbled with blood, her eyes glazed, and her features convulsed into a wild paroxysm of insanity. When she saw herself discovered, she gibbered, made mouths, and pointed at them with her bloody fingers, with the frantic gestures of an exulting demoniac.

Female assistance was now hastily summoned; the unhappy bride was overpowered, not without the use of some force. As they carried her over the threshold, she looked down, and uttered the only articulate words that she had yet spoken, saying, with a sort of grinning exultation, "So, you have ta'en up your bonny bridegroom?" She was, by the shuddering assistants, conveyed to another and more retired apartment, where she was secured as her situation required, and closely watched. The unutterable agony of the parents, the horror and confusion of all who were in the castle, the fury of contending passions between the friends of the different parties—passions augmented by previous intemperance—surpass description.

The surgeon was the first who obtained something like a patient hearing; he pronounced that the wound of Bucklaw, though severe and dangerous, was by no means fatal, but might readily be rendered so by disturbance and hasty removal. This silenced the numerous party of Bucklaw's friends, who had previously insisted that he should, at all rates, be transported from the castle to the nearest of their houses. They still demanded, however, that, in consideration of what had happened, four of their number should remain to watch over the sick-bed of their friend, and that a suitable number of their domestics, well armed, should also remain in the castle. This condition being acceded to on the part of Colonel Ashton and his father, the rest of the bridegroom's friends left the castle, notwithstanding the hour and the darkness of the night. The cares of the medical man were next employed in behalf of Miss Ashton, whom he pronounced to be in a very dangerous state. Farther medical assistance was immediately summoned. All night she remained delirious. On the morning, she fell into a state of absolute insensibility. The next evening, the physicians said, would be the crisis of her malady. It proved so; for although she awoke from her

trance with some appearance of calmness, and suffered her night- clothes to be changed, or put in order, yet so soon as she put her hand to her neck, as if to search for the fatal flue ribbon, a tide of recollections seemed to rush upon her, which her mind and body were alike incapable of bearing. Convulsion followed convulsion, till they closed in death, without her being able to utter a word explanatory of the fatal scene.

The provincial judge of the district arrived the day after the young lady had expired, and executed, though with all possible delicacy to the afflicted family, the painful duty of inquiring into this fatal transaction. But there occurred nothing to explain the general hypothesis that the bride, in a sudden fit of insanity, had stabbed the bridegroom at the threshold of the apartment. The fatal weapon was found in the chamber smeared with blood. It was the same piniard which Henry should have worn on the widding-day, and the unhappy sister had probably contrived to secrete on the preceding evening, when it had been shown to her among other articles of preparation for the wedding.

The friends of Bucklaw expected that on his recovery he would throw some light upon this dark story, and eagerly pressed him with inquiries, which for some time he evaded under pretext of weakness. When, however, he had been transported to his own house, and was considered in a state of convalescence, he assembled those persons, both male and female, who had considered themselves as entitled to press him on this subject, and returned them thanks for the interest they had exhibited in his behalf, and their offers of adherence and support. "I wish you all," he said, "my friends, to understand, however, that I have neither story to tell nor injuries to avenge. If a lady shall question me henceforward upon the incident of that unhappy night, I shall remain silent, and in future consider her as one who has shown herself desirous to break of her friendship with me; in a word, I will never speak to her again. But if a gentleman shall ask me the same question, I shall regard the incivility as equivalent to an invitation to meet him in the Duke's Walk, and I expect that he will rule himself accordingly."

A declaration so decisive admitted no commentary; and it was soon after seen that Bucklaw had arisen from the bed of sickness a sadder and a wiser man than he had hitherto shown himself. He dismissed Craigengelt from his society, but not without such a provision as, if well employed, might secure him against indigence and against temptation. Bucklaw afterwards went abroad, and never returned to Scotland; nor was he known ever to hint at the circumstances attending his fatal marriage. By many readers this may be deemed overstrained, romantic, and composed by the wild imagination of an author desirous of gratifying the popular appetite for the horrible; but those who are read in the private family history of Scotland during the period in which the scene is laid, will readily discover, through the disguise of borrowed names and added incidents, the leading particulars of AN OWER TRUE TALE.

CHAPTER XXXV.

Whose mind's so marbled, and his heart so hard,
That would not, when this huge mishap was heard,
To th' utmost note of sorrow set their song,
To see a gallant, with so great a grace,
So suddenly unthought on, so o'erthrown,

And so to perish, in so poor a place,
By too rash riding in a ground unknown!
POEM, IN NISBET'S Heraldry, vol. ii.

We have anticipated the course of time to mention Bucklaw's recovery and fate, that we might not interrupt the detail of events which succeeded the funeral of the unfortunate Lucy Ashton. This melancholy ceremony was performed in the misty dawn of an autumnal morning, with such moderate attendance and ceremony as could not possibly be dispensed with. A very few of the nearest relations attended her body to the same churchyard to which she had so lately been led as a bride, with as little free will, perhaps, as could be now testified by her lifeless and passive remains. An aisle adjacent to the church had been fitted up by Sir William Ashton as a family cemetery; and here, in a coffin bearing neither name nor date, were consigned to dust the remains of what was once lovely, beautiful, and innocent, though exasperated to frenzy by a long tract of unremitting persecution.

While the mourners were busy in the vault, the three village hags, who, notwithstanding the unwonted earliness of the hour, had snuffed the carrion like vultures, were seated on the "through-stane," and engaged in their wonted unhallowed conference.

"Did not I say," said Dame Gourlay, "that the braw bridal would be followed by as braw a funeral?"

"I think," answered Dame Winnie, "there's little bravery at it: neither meat nor drink, and just a wheen silver tippences to the poor folk; it was little worth while to come sae far a road for sae sma' profit, and us sae frail."

"Out, wretch!" replied Dame Gourlay, "can a' the dainties they could gie us be half sae sweet as this hour's vengeance? There they are that were capering on their prancing nags four days since, and they are now ganging as dreigh and sober as oursells the day. They were a' glistening wi' gowd and silver; they're now as black as the crook. And Miss Lucy Ashton, that grudged when an honest woman came near her—a taid may sit on her coffin that day, and she can never scunner when he croaks. And Lady Ashton has hell-fire burning in her breast by this time; and Sir William, wi' his gibbets, and his faggots, and his chains, how likes he the witcheries of his ain dwelling-house?"

"And is it true, then," mumbled the paralytic wretch, "that the bride was trailed out of her bed and up the chimly by evil spirits, and that the bridegroom's face was wrung round ahint him?"

"Ye needna care wha did it, or how it was done," said Aislie Gourlay; "but I'll uphaid it for nae stickit job, and that the lairds and leddies ken weel this day."

"And was it true," said Annie Winnie, "sin ye ken sae muckle about it, that the picture of auld Sir Malise Ravenswood came down on the ha' floor, and led out the brawl before them a'?"

"Na," said Ailsie; "but into the ha' came the picture—and I ken weel how it came there—to gie them a warning that pride wad get a fa'. But there's as queer a ploy, cummers, as ony o' thae, that's gaun on even now in the burial vault yonder: ye saw twall mourners, wi' crape and cloak, gang down the steps pair and pair!"

"What should ail us to see them?" said the one old woman.

"I counted them," said the other, with the eagerness of a person to whom the spectacle had afforded too much interest to be viewed with indifference.

"But ye did not see," said Ailsie, exulting in her superior observation, "that there's a thirteenth amang them that they ken naething about; and, if auld freits say true, there's ane o' that company that'll no be lang for this warld. But come awa' cummers; if we bide here, I'se warrant we get

the wyte o' whatever ill comes of it, and that gude will come of it nane o' them need ever think to see."

And thus, croaking like the ravens when they anticipate pestilence, the ill-boding sibyls withdrew from the churchyard.

In fact, the mourners, when the service of interment was ended, discovered that there was among them one more than the invited number, and the remark was communicated in whispers to each other. The suspicion fell upon a figure which, muffled in the same deep mourning with the others, was reclined, almost in a state of insensibility, against one of the pillars of the sepulchral vault. The relatives of the Ashton family were expressing in whispers their surprise and displeasure at the intrusion, when they were interrupted by Colonel Ashton, who, in his father's absence, acted as principal mourner. "I know," he said in a whisper, "who this person is, he has, or shall soon have, as deep cause of mourning as ourselves; leave me to deal with him, and do not disturb the ceremony by unnecessary exposure." So saying, he separated himself from the group of his relations, and taking the unknown mourner by the cloak, he said to him, in a tone of suppressed emotion, "Follow me."

The stranger, as if starting from a trance at the sound of his voice, mechanically obeyed, and they ascended the broken ruinous stair which led from the sepulchre into the churchyard. The other mourners followed, but remained grouped together at the door of the vault, watching with anxiety the motions of Colonel Ashton and the stranger, who now appeared to be in close conference beneath the shade of a yew-tree, in the most remote part of the burial-ground.

To this sequestered spot Colonel Ashton had guided the stranger, and then turning round, addressed him in a stern and composed tone.—"I cannot doubt that I speak to the Master of Ravenswood?" No answer was returned. "I cannot doubt," resumed the Colonel, trembling with rising passion, "that I speak to the murderer of my sister!"

"You have named me but too truly," said Ravenswood, in a hollow and tremulous voice.

"If you repent what you have done," said the Colonel, "may your penitence avail you before God; with me it shall serve you nothing. Here," he said, giving a paper, "is the measure of my sword, and a memorandum of the time and place of meeting. Sunrise to-morrow morning, on the links to the east of Wolf's Hope."

The Master of Ravenswood held the paper in his hand, and seemed irresolute. At length he spoke—"Do not," he said, "urge to farther desperation a wretch who is already desperate. Enjoy your life while you can, and let me seek my death from another."

"That you never, never shall!" said Douglas Ashton. "You shall die by my hand, or you shall complete the ruin of my family by taking my life. If you refuse my open challenge, there is no advantage I will not take of you, no indignity with which I will not load you, until the very name of Ravenswood shall be the sign of everything that is dishonourable, as it is already of all that is villainous."

"That it shall never be," said Ravenswood, fiercely; "if I am the last who must bear it, I owe it to those who once owned it that the name shall be extinguished without infamy. I accept your challenge, time, and place of meeting. We meet, I presume, alone?"

"Alone we meet," said Colonel Ashton, "and alone will the survivor of us return from that place of rendezvous."

"Then God have mercy on the soul of him who falls!" said Ravenswood.

"So be it!" said Colonel Ashton; "so far can my charity reach even for the man I hate most deadly, and with the deepest reason. Now, break off, for we shall be interrupted. The links by the sea-shore to the east of Wolf's Hope; the hour, sunrise; our swords our only weapons."

“Enough,” said the Master, “I will not fail you.”

They separated; Colonel Ashton joining the rest of the mourners, and the Master of Ravenswood taking his horse, which was tied to a tree behind the church. Colonel Ashton returned to the castle with the funeral guests, but found a pretext for detaching himself from them in the evening, when, changing his dress to a riding-habit, he rode to Wolf’s Hope, that night, and took up his abode in the little inn, in order that he might be ready for his rendezvous in the morning.

It is not known how the Master of Ravenswood disposed of the rest of that unhappy day. Late at night, however, he arrived at Wolf’s Crag, and aroused his old domestic, Caleb Balderstone, who had ceased to expect his return. Confused and flying rumours of the late tragical death of Miss Ashton, and of its mysterious cause, had already reached the old man, who was filled with the utmost anxiety, on account of the probable effect these events might produce upon the mind of his master.

The conduct of Ravenswood did not alleviate his apprehensions. To the butler’s trembling entreaties that he would take some refreshment, he at first returned no answer, and then suddenly and fiercely demanding wine, he drank, contrary to his habits, a very large draught. Seeing that his master would eat nothing, the old man affectionately entreated that he would permit him to light him to his chamber. It was not until the request was three or four times repeated that Ravenswood made a mute sign of compliance. But when Balderstone conducted him to an apartment which had been comfortably fitted up, and which, since his return, he had usually occupied, Ravenswood stopped short on the threshold.

“Not here,” said he, sternly; “show me the room in which my father died; the room in which SHE slept the night she was at the castle.”

“Who, sir?” said Caleb, too terrified to preserve his presence of mind.

“SHE, Lucy Ashton! Would you kill me, old man, by forcing me to repeat her name?”

Caleb would have said something of the disrepair of the chamber, but was silenced by the irritable impatience which was expressed in his master’s countenance; he lighted the way trembling and in silence, placed the lamp on the table of the deserted room, and was about to attempt some arrangement of the bed, when his master bid him begone in a tone that admitted of no delay. The old man retired, not to rest, but to prayer; and from time to time crept to the door of the apartment, in order to find out whether Ravenswood had gone to repose. His measured heavy step upon the floor was only interrupted by deep groans; and the repeated stamps of the heel of his heavy boot intimated too clearly that the wretched inmate was abandoning himself at such moments to paroxysms of uncontrolled agony. The old man thought that the mornning, for which he longed, would never have dawned; but time, whose course rolls on with equal current, however it may seem more rapid or more slow to mortal apprehension, brought the dawn at last, and spread a ruddy light on the broad verge of the glistening ocean. It was early in November, and the weather was serene for the season of the year. But an easterly wind had prevailed during the night, and the advancing tide rolled nearer than usual to the foot of the crags on which the castle was founded.

With the first peep of light, Caleb Balderstone again resorted to the door of Ravenswood’s sleeping apartment, through a chink of which he observed him engaged in measuring the length of two or three swords which lay in a closet adjoining to the apartment. He muttered to himself, as he selected one of these weapons: “It is shorter: let him have this advantage, as he has every other.”

Caleb Balderstone knew too well, from what he witnessed, upon what enterprise his master was bound, and how vain all interference on his part must necessarily prove. He had but time to retreat from the door, so nearly was he surprised by his master suddenly coming out and descending to the stables. The faithful domestic followed; and from the dishevelled appearance of his master's dress, and his ghastly looks, was confirmed in his conjecture that he had passed the night without sleep or repose. He found him busily engaged in saddling his horse, a service from which Caleb, though with faltering voice and trembling hands, offered to relieve him. Ravenswood rejected his assistance by a mute sign, and having led the animal into the court, was just about to mount him, when the old domestic's fear giving way to the strong attachment which was the principal passion of his mind, he flung himself suddenly at Ravenswood's feet, and clasped his knees, while he exclaimed: "Oh, sir! oh, master! kill me if you will, but do not go out on this dreadful errand! Oh! my dear master, wait but this day; the Marquis of A- — comes tomorrow, and a' will be remedied."

"You have no longer a master, Caleb," said Ravenswood, endeavouring to extricate himself; "why, old man, would you cling to a falling tower?"

"But I HAVE a master," cried Caleb, still holding him fast, "while the heir of Ravenswood breathes. I am but a servant; but I was born your father's—your grandfather's servant. I was born for the family—I have lived for them—I would die for them! Stay but at home, and all will be well!"

"Well, fool! well!" said Ravenswood. "Vain old man, nothing hereafter in life will be well with me, and happiest is the hour that shall soonest close it!"

So saying, he extricated himself from the old man's hold, threw himself on his horse, and rode out the gate; but instantly turning back, he threw towards Caleb, who hastened to meet him, a heavy purse of gold.

"Caleb!" he said, with a ghastly smile, "I make you my executor"; and again turning his bridle, he resumed his course down the hill.

The gold fell unheeded on the pavement, for the old man ran to observe the course which was taken by his master, who turned to the left down a small and broken path, which gained the sea-shore through a cleft in the rock, and led to a sort of cove where, in former times, the boats of the castle were wont to be moored. Observing him take this course, Caleb hastened to the eastern battlement, which commanded the prospect of the whole sands, very near as far as the village of Wolf's Hope. He could easily see his master riding in that direction, as fast as the horse could carry him. The prophecy at once rushed on Balderstone's mind, that the Lord of Ravenswood should perish on the Kelpie's flow, which lay half-way betwixt the Tower and the links, or sand knolls, to the northward of Wolf's Hope. He saw him according reach the fatal spot; but he never saw him pass further.

Colonel Ashton, frantic for revenge, was already in the field, pacing the turf with eagerness, and looking with impatience towards the Tower for the arrival of his antagonist. The sun had now risen, and showed its broad disk above the eastern sea, so that he could easily discern the horseman who rode towards him with speed which argued impatience equal to his own. At once the figure became invisible, as if it had melted into the air. He rubbed his eyes, as if he had witnessed an apparition, and then hastened to the spot, near which he was met by Balderstone, who came from the opposite direction. No trace whatever of horse or rider could be discerned; it only appeared that the late winds and high tides had greatly extended the usual bounds of the quicksand, and that the unfortunate horseman, as appeared from the hoof-tracks, in his

precipitate haste, had not attended to keep on the firm sands on the foot of the rock, but had taken the shortest and most dangerous course. One only vestige of his fate appeared. A large sable feather had been detached from his hat, and the rippling waves of the rising tide wafted it to Caleb's feet. The old man took it up, dried it, and placed it in his bosom.

The inhabitants of Wolf's Hope were now alarmed, and crowded to the place, some on shore, and some in boats, but their search availed nothing. The tenacious depths of the quicksand, as is usual in such cases, retained its prey.

Our tale draws to a conclusion. The Marquis of A——, alarmed at the frightful reports that were current, and anxious for his kinsman's safety, arrived on the subsequent day to mourn his loss; and, after renewing in vain a search for the body, returned, to forget what had happened amid the bustle of politics and state affairs.

Not so Caleb Balderstone. If wordly profit could have consoled the old man, his age was better provided for than his earlier years had ever been; but life had lost to him its salt and its savour. His whole course of ideas, his feelings, whether of pride or of apprehension, of pleasure or of pain, had all arisen from its close connexion with the family which was now extinguished. He held up his head no longer, forsook all his usual haunts and occupations, and seemed only to find pleasure in moping about those apartments in the old castle which the Master of Ravenswood had last inhabited. He ate without refreshment, and slumbered without repose; and, with a fidelity sometimes displayed by the canine race, but seldom by human beings, he pined and died within a year after the catastrophe which we have narrated.

The family of Ashton did not long survive that of Ravenswood. Sir William Ashton outlived his eldest son, the Colonel, who was slain in a duel in Flanders; and Henry, by whom he was succeeded, died unmarried. Lady Ashton lived to the verge of extreme old age, the only survivor of the group of unhappy persons whose misfortunes were owing to her implacability. That she might internally feel compunction, and reconcile herself with Heaven, whom she had offended, we will not, and we dare not, deny; but to those around her she did not evince the slightest symptom either of repentance or remorse. In all external appearance she bore the same bold, haughty, unbending character which she had displayed before these unhappy events. A splendid marble monument records her name, titles, and virtues, while her victims remain undistinguished by tomb or epitath.