Alison Hepburn's Exploit

by John Davidson

On a night in February, 1880, a tall, unwomanly figure, thickly veiled, and dressed in ill-fitting black, sped from the booking-office to the bookstall, bought a cheap edition of Byron, plunged through a struggling crowd of passengers and porters, and sprang into a third-class carriage, just as the guard blew his whistle.

By the time the 10 p.m. train had puffed out of the Waverley Station, Edinburgh, the late passenger had recovered her breath and lifted her veil. The face was that of a young woman of not more than nineteen, and was remarkable for its dark eyes, widely and deeply set in a broad low brow. The mouth, nose, and chin had a crude uncarved appearance, which the yellow light of the carriage lamp did nothing to dispel. A small black hat sat among a loosely coiled mass of black hair. The black silk gloves had been darned, and the black dress and jacket were much worn as well as badly made.

The girl glanced carelessly at the other passengers, of whom there were three, and then began to dip into Byron. She turned over the pages, reading a line here and there; but shortly she laid the book aside, and gave herself up to a furtive study of her companions. Opposite her were two women, with a large hamper on the seat between them. The faces of these women had the raw, florid hue of the porter-drinker; their eyes bulged and their mouths were loose. Wrapped in cloaks and shawls, their feet tucked up on the seat and pressing either side of the hamper, they had settled themselves in the corners—for the night, apparently. They stared at the girl out of their lustreless, bulging eyes, blinked at the lamp, dozed and stared, and blinked again. On the same side of the compartment as the girl sat the fourth passenger, a sailor, with a big brown beard on a young face. He kept clearing his throat and wetting his lips, as if about to speak; but whenever his eye caught that of one of the others, he became suddenly interested in the knotting of a hand-

kerchief which covered a cage he had beside him on the seat.

In the sailor the girl took little interest; but the women attracted and repelled her. They were clearly professional people of some kind. The girl's interest was expressed very frankly in a rapid succession of glances. At last, one of the women, more amused than annoyed, smiled impudently at her. A deep blush dyed the young woman's face immediately; she picked up her book and pressed back into her corner.

The volume opened at 'The Waltz,' and she read the first lines :

'Muse of the many-twinkling feet! whose charms
Are now extended up from legs to arms;
Terpsichore! too long misdeem'd a maid—
Reproachful term—bestow'd but to upbraid—
Henceforth in all the bronze of brightness shine,
The least a vestal of the virgin Nine.
Far be from thee and thine the name of prude;
Mock'd, yet triumphant; sneer'd at, unsubdued;
Thy legs must move to conquer as they fly,
If but thy coats are reasonably high;
Thy breast, if bare enough, requires no shield;
Dance forth—*sans armour* thou shall take the field,
And own—impregnable to most assaults,
Thy not too lawfully-begotten waltz.'

A smile of scorn curled her lip as she read. She was thinking how strong it was, and how very superior to Tennyson. Byron is still the poet of the 'teens,' and this young woman was a determined partisan. Although she had read hardly any of Tennyson, she had set up a Poet-Laureate of straw against which she was constantly tilting. She knew Tennyson had been dubbed 'Miss Alfred,' and she relished calling him so with sarcastic emphasis, and a deep satisfaction, as if she had invented the phrase. She closed the book over her finger, and lay back to enjoy the feeling of power transferred to her senses by the lines she had read. To be a rebel, to do and say daring

things—that was her ambition. And had she not begun her career in a very signal manner? To run away from home at nineteen, with nothing but a copy of Byron and some biscuits—not even a nightgown in a bag—and no umbrella! It was to beat the record, she thought. In some future school history of literature, admiring and envious girls should read how Alison Hepburn took her life into her own hands in her nineteenth year.

She took from her pocket a dumpy roll of manuscript. Undoing the ribbon with which it was tied, she glanced over the pages to see that they were all there and in their right order; she also looked lovingly at the small clear writing, and the old English letters of the title-page—'A Godless Universe, and other Poems, by Alison Hepburn.' It would make a sensation, she had no doubt of that. There *could* be no difficulty. A publisher would buy the copyright from her for a good sum, or she would have to wait for her fortune until the book had been brought out. She would be quite satisfied with either alternative. Had she not nine pounds in Scotch notes in her bosom? She blushed a little at the fancy picture of herself setting out to conquer the world, with nothing but biscuits and a copy of Byron. She really could make no claim to be considered a wild romantic person, possessed as she was of a small capital and a valuable manuscript. The blood mounted to her head, and a feeling of security, which even she perceived to be extraordinary, overcame her. She closed her eyes, and, broad awake, dreamt for an hour of a fabulous income from 'A Godless Universe'; of marriages with handsome young noblemen; and of unexampled worldwide fame. As her brain cooled, she thought: 'At any rate, I won't fare any worse than Campbell; he got half a crown a line for 'The Pleasures of Hope.' That would make— I have two thousand five hundred lines. Eight half-crowns to a pound; eights in twenty-five—three. That would make over three hundred pounds. That would keep me for three years; so it's all right.'

She picked up Byron again, for her spirits were falling rapidly, and selected a passage in 'Cain,' which she read with muttering lips.

'Souls who dare use their immortality—
Souls who dare look the Omnipotent tyrant in

His everlasting face, and tell him that
His evil is not good.'

The impulse of these verses, if they can be called so, was enough, in her overwrought condition, to send up the mercury. She laid aside the book, and sat erect, her head poised defiantly.

'Souls who dare use their immortality.'

That's what she was doing. Her brief life came before her, and she seemed to look down on her past from a high pinnacle. It was all a mystery. How had she come to be born the daughter of a small stationer in a street off Leith Walk? The force that was she might have been Sappho, might have been Mary Queen of Scots. A little dingy house with close, low-ceilinged rooms, and a mixed odour of the wood of lead pencils and the lamp-black of newspapers; the gray stone hill of houses between Leith and Edinburgh, the very special haunt of mist and east wind, and noisy all day and half the night with cars and waggons; a locality and condition upon which even shabby-genteel people looked down—into this, of all environments, she, Alison Hepburn, had been born. It was injurious and insulting. And yet that wasn't half the enormity of her circumstances. Her father was a solemn, rigid Scotch Puritan, sincerely devout, she knew, upright, and of some dignity of character; but on that account all the more unworthy to be her father. For what had he done? He had married a woman unfit to be the mother of anybody. Her face grew dark at this thought. Her mother had been chosen by her father because of her strength of mind, her managing power, and her religious disposition. Beauty and temperament she had none. She was ill-made, and her bones were disproportionately small. 'Visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children? Yes,' she thought; 'it is iniquitous in a common-looking, commonplace man to marry an ugly, weak-bodied woman. My father believes that the heathen will be damned, even although they have never heard of the Gospel. Well, then, although he had never heard of the proper conditions of marriage, he deserves to be damned for having perpetuated ugliness, ill-shaped bones, and ill-conditioned blood. Oh! I would give every pinch of brain I have to be sweet and beautiful, with rounded, warm-

tinted flesh, drawing all men's eyes! But I shall make men adore me for my poetry, or, at least, for the fame and money my poetry shall bring.'

Again she made her calculations, concluding this time with the assurance that, even if she got only one hundred pounds, the price Alexander Smith had received for 'A Life Drama,' she would still be able to overcome the world. A hundred pounds would give her a year. In that time, and in London, she could write a great poem; and in that time, also, her fame would have spread, and she would receive a very much larger sum for her second venture.

'And if,' she thought, as her depression deepened—'if the publisher will not give me anything, and I have to wait, or if I have difficulty in finding a publisher, I have these nine pounds, which will keep me easily for three months, and during that time I can get an engagement at a theatre.'

Yes, of course, she was forgetting about that, the second string to her bow. Why hadn't she brought her prize for elocution with her? It would be certain to influence a manager. Then her spirits leapt up again, and she went over to herself her two best recitations—Scott's 'Battle of Flodden' from 'Marmion,' and Aytoun's 'Death of Montrose.' With these she electrified herself, and before the excitement caused by them had passed, she fell into a doze.

Something tugging at her dress wakened her. Opening her eyes, and remembering at once where she was, she was amazed to find on the seat beside her, and with two paws on her skirt, a white dog, long-nosed and woolly, munching her biscuits. First of all, she picked up her manuscript, fastened it, and replaced it in her pocket. Perhaps it had been looked at while she dozed; the idea hurt her. She thought not, however; for the other three passengers were all sound asleep. She felt a little afraid of the dog, who kept a sharp eye on her while he continued eating her biscuits; but before she could make up her mind how to deal with him, a harsh, sharp cry, very audible even above the clanking of the train, went off in the compartment: 'Heave away!'

The dog, frightened out of his wits, sprang onto the hamper, and began to whine. Again the shriek was heard, louder and harsher than before, and

the dog leapt, yelping, at one of the women, who started up in alarm.

'Oh,' she said, looking about the carriage suspiciously, 'it's only you, is it? You naughty, naughty Lou-lou!'

The woman cuffed the dog, not very severely, and then placed him in the hamper. 'I hope,' she said, with her impudent smile, as she fastened the lid securely, 'the dog didn't frighten you?'

'Oh no!' said Alison, flushing.

'Heave away!'

'What can that be?' exclaimed the woman.

By this time the commotion in the compartment had awakened the other woman and the sailor. The latter, looking very shamefaced, wetted his lips, and said: 'I'm very sorry, ladies. It's only Juggernaut. I meant to tell you that he might start paying out language; but I couldn't somehow get the anchor up. Juggernaut's cut the cable, as it were. I'm not naturally backward, but just come off a two-years' voyage, and wondering to see ladies. That's all. Why, ma'am, for four months we never touched port; and we used to lower a boat in a calm, and pull round to have a look at the figure-head—the Aurora, a fine bust of a woman, but nothing like real flesh and blood.'

'Heave away! Tumble up!'

'He's very angry,' said the sailor, 'at being kept in the dark so long. I thought he might sleep; but the motion of the train's new to him, as he never was in one before. He'd better have it out; so, asking your pardon, here's Juggernaut.'

Whisking the handkerchief from the cage, the sailor displayed an Amazon green parrot.

'I got him in Rio, quite a youngster, and christened him in Calcutta. He christened himself, you may say; for Juggernaut was the first word he said.'

'Juggernaut! Now, Renzo was no sailor. The cook's a blooming Chinaman!' said the parrot.

'He's got a lot to say. I think missy had better put her fingers in her ears,' said the sailor, looking apologetically at Alison.

The girl moved uneasily, but kept her eyes on the parrot, who glared

about with an unchanging look of clownish surprise—the stage surprise of the low comedian.

'Damn her eyes!' went on the parrot. 'Splice! Aurora—Auro-ra! Beautiful Juggernaut! Keel-haul the cook! Keel-haul the cook! The cook's a blooming Chinaman!'

'He's going to say all he knows,' said the sailor, looking again towards Alison. 'Walnuts wouldn't stop him.'

Shrieking maledictions, the bird hopped to the lowest bar in its cage. After a few moments' silence, it lowered its head, stretched out its neck, and, fixing Alison with one of its astonished eyes, uttered very distinctly a string of oaths, scraps of prayers, and tags of songs. The women laughed, and Alison hid her face behind Byron.

'I'm Juggernaut—beautiful Juggernaut! The cook's a blooming Chinaman!'

Having wound up its oration with these words, the parrot resumed its night-perch, picked three feathers in slow succession from one of its wings, yawned, and disposed itself to sleep.

'He has what you call a vocabulary,' said the sailor, readjusting his handkerchief about the cage. 'Where are we?' he added, as the train began to slacken.

Alison looked out, and saw empty rainy streets shining darkly in the many-shadowed lights of the gas-lamps; below the level of the railway, and also sloping above it, long undulations and precipitous hills of houses wheeled past the slowing train.

'Why, it's Newcastle already!' exclaimed the sailor. 'Well, goodnight, asking your pardon for Juggernaut.'

Five minutes after the departure of the sailor, the train moved out of the station. Alison thought they were going back to be shunted; but as the speed increased, she imagined that perhaps there had been some mistake.

'Am I all right for London?' she asked.

'All right,' answered one of the women.

'We seem to be going back.'

'We go out of Newcastle as we go in.'

'Couldn't we go right through?'

'How should I know?' retorted the woman, tucking herself up in her corner as her companion had already done in hers.

Alison was hurt a little by the rebuff; but one thing pleased her—her fellow-travellers were not in the least concerned and curious about her. She had been apprehensive of inquisitive companions on her journey, and had meant to talk of going to see an aunt and of luggage in the van. It was now evident that there was nothing unusual in her appearance or her mode of travelling, and she took her present experience as a prophecy of exemption from molestation in her enterprise. Nevertheless, she felt very wretched. The awkward sailor, the foul-mouthed parrot, the two sordid women grunting and snoring beside her, the cold raw night, and the monotonous rush and jangle of the train, oppressed her like a nightmare. The intolerance with which she regarded everything that disturbed her intense self-preoccupation found vent in scowls and muttered execrations : 'What a beastly train! These dirty old hags!' She closed her eyes tightly, and endeavoured to compel her thoughts into the desired track; but her efforts were in vain, her immediate surroundings having gradually filled her nerves as a coil of wire is charged with electricity. At last she had recourse to Byron. She read here and there feverishly, and then searched out the passage in 'Cain' that had helped her already:

'Souls who dare use their immortality.'

She kept to that line; she struck it over and over as a piano-tuner strikes a note; she twisted and turned its meaning about until it said again the thing she wanted. She was, indeed, daring to use her immortality. She was immortal—not, she thought, with a curl of her lip, in the old ridiculous sense; she carried her immortality in her pocket. This that she had written could never die; it would go sounding on in hearts and brains, echoing through the ages. Being an immortal, she had a right to behave at once as an immortal; therefore she freed herself from parental control, and, a phrase she loved, took her life into her own hands. In thought she had been free for years, and now she must have perfect freedom. She had done, and was now going to London to do more effectually, what she had been sent into the world for: cer-

tainly not sent by God—oh, Nature, not by God in any understanding of the word. Alison Hepburn was rabid with Theophobia, a disease of young minds not uncommon in countries where religious bigotry prevails. She was flying from what was to her a hateful idea of God, represented by strict parents, and by a wretched Sabbath of three long services. She was flying from John Knox. Of her poetry no specimen shall be given; it was written, some in blank verse, some in ballad measure, and some in the manner of the rhymed version of the Psalms used in Scotland.

Between Newcastle and Doncaster, Alison's spirits fell far below zero. She began to realize how much she was depending on the immediate receipt of a large sum for her manuscript, and what a forlorn hope it was. She saw that she had been imagining, not believing, herself successful. She thought for the first time of the consternation at home, and for a brief moment realized that she cared a little for her father and mother, and that they loved her. She peered out of the window, but saw on the black screen night—what she wished to forget. She returned to Byron, but the famous verse was ineffective:

'Souls who dare use their immortality.'

It was nonsense; life consisted of an hour, a moment at a time. She read the next line scornfully:

'Souls who dare look the Omnipotent tyrant in.'

Some of her lines had weak endings, but none so weak as that. Besides, 'It's just havers,' she thought; 'because it was only when people began to disbelieve in an Omnipotent tyrant that they began to be cheeky to Him.' Was the Venice butcher's wife omnipotent? No; yet she had been Byron's mistress. Were her father and mother omnipotent? No; and yet—her head swam.

Before they arrived at Doncaster her travelling companions, the women with the bulging eyes, produced sandwiches and bottles of stout, and liberated their poodle. Alison ate some of her biscuits and gave some to the dog.

'You mustn't deprive yourself,' said one of the women, offering her a sandwich, which she took.

'Won't you have a drop of stout?' asked the other.

She swallowed half a tumblerful eagerly. It was the first alcoholic liquor she had ever drunk, having been brought up a total abstainer. She found the taste nauseous, but the effect amazed her, and she began to talk.

'I'm running away from home,' she said, with a cheerful smile, persuading herself that she felt nice and comfortable.

'We know that, my dear,' said one of the women.

'How do you know?' she asked, startled.

'Everything about you tells us.'

'Do girls often run away from home?'

'Half of them do. We did.'

'It's quite common, then,' said Alison, with an air of disgust.

'And stupid,' added one of the women, 'unless you're very good-looking. If I'd stayed at home and kept straight, I'd have had a house of my own and a decent shopkeeper for a husband, and ease and plenty. Instead of which—'

She shrugged her shoulders.

'The Sisters Tomboy with their wonderful poodle Lou-lou,' said the other. 'Have some more stout.'

Alison hesitated, but drank off another half-tumblerful.

'Do you know,' she said, 'this is the first intoxicating liquor I have ever tasted? I was made to join a Band of Hope when I was eight, and ever since I was twelve I have wanted to break the pledge, but couldn't think of going into a public-house. Thank you very much.'

The Sisters Tomboy grinned at each other and said nothing.

'I'm going on to London,' said Alison.

'We go out at Doncaster.'

Alison stretched herself on the seat, feeling in the humour for a good talk; but while she was still considering how far she might consult the Sisters Tomboy regarding her procedure in London, she fell asleep, and so soundly that the stoppage at Doncaster failed to waken her, although the shock of the train starting again did. She rubbed her eyes. The Sisters Tomboy had gone, and two men were in the carriage. They sat opposite each other, bent forward and absorbed in conversation. One of them was old and heavily

built; his eyes were small, gray, and dull; he had a dirty-white beard and moustache; his puffed cheeks and drooping nose were brick-red. She noted his silk hat, brown and rough with age, and broken-brimmed; his frayed and greasy clothes; and thick watch-chain of brass. The other, a younger man, was better dressed: his silk hat was new and glossy; he had sparkling rings on his fingers, and his watch-chain seemed to be of gold. But the man himself was uglier even than his companion. His black eyes, protruding and blood-shot, seemed about to blaze up and burst out of his head. His shaved chin, puckered like a many-eyed potato, receded among coarse black whiskers; his nose was swollen and red, his cheeks blotched, and his brow of a sickly white. This loathsome creature had no voice; with swollen veins and continuous restrained gesture he emitted husky, staccato whispers, to which the other replied in soft, oily tones. Neither paid any heed to Alison, but she watched them, fascinated. The sailor, with his parrot, belonged to a world she understood in some degree; so did the Sisters Tomboy; but what were these? From what rookery had these nightbirds issued, and on what mission?

At last the two men, having settled the point in dispute, lounged back into their corners. The younger one looked at himself in the window and rubbed his nose fiercely. Suddenly remembering, he sat up, and produced from behind him a half-bottle of port wine, a tumbler, and a white handkerchief in which were wrapped two sponge-cakes. He filled the tumbler and handed it with one of the cakes to his companion, who drank off the wine slowly but without a pause. The younger man took the rest of the wine; then both ate their sponge-cakes. There was no pledging each other; nothing at all was said about what they were doing; some common object preoccupied them intensely.

When the sponge-cakes were finished, the younger man took from his pocket a flat bottle containing whisky. This having been emptied, the tumbler and both bottles were flung out of the window, and the conversation resumed. The two men talked all the way to York, the elder rolling out long sentences, soft and oily, the younger growing huskier in his whispers, and less restrained in gesture. Alison could not make out a single word, but she watched them, hardly conscious of thought or feeling. As the train stopped

at York Station both men became silent, and the younger stared at Alison.

'By God!' she heard him croak in the lessening noise of the slowing train, 'she's uglier awake than asleep.'

'So much the better for her,' said the other.

She wondered vaguely for a moment if she had been the subject of their whole conversation. But that was impossible, for both resumed their look of intense preoccupation the moment they had uttered their rude remarks, and before the train stopped they jumped out and walked away quickly in a purposeful manner.

All the way from Doncaster to York these men had seemed like a hideous vision, utterly unreal and impossible. At the last moment, in their entire loathsomeness and brutality, they had trampled straight across her heart and they had done it with the utmost indifference, as she herself in a preoccupied mood might crush a worm visible in her path but unperceived by her inner sense. She had often told herself she was plain, but nobody had ever called her ugly before. She had understood the absence of comment—or had she not? Perhaps people would have talked to her of her appearance had she been only plain-looking. Had she heard the truth for the first time? Was she ugly?

She began to pace the compartment, impatient till the train should start. There was suspense in the stoppage—an added misery. The guard, passing, saw her.

'Twenty minutes here,' he said, opening the door.

'Oh!' she exclaimed, and got out.

She was very stiff and very cold, and walked about the platform to warm herself. She thought how comfortable a bed is—to lie down secure, with no concern for the morrow, in her father's house. She walked more quickly; she ran as if to escape her thoughts. She searched about for a clock. A few minutes to four! How had her father and mother spent the night?

The platform was almost deserted. One or two groups of men in caps and heavy overcoats stood at the doors of smoking compartments. Where had the passengers gone to? To her surprise, never having travelled at night before, she saw that the refreshment-room was open. She went in and drank

some coffee. There were over a score of people eating and drinking at the bar. The rattle of cups and saucers, the steaming tea and coffee, the sharp orders, chatter, an occasional spluttering laugh, and the bright light, soothed her, and then made her heart ache again. She remained in the refreshment-room until a porter announced that the train was on the point of departure. In the rush, she made up her mind to get into a compartment with some cheerful people if she could; but her heart failed her as she ran along the platform, and saw the others jumping in among their snug wraps, newspapers, books, open bags—the encampments of expert travellers. She got into an empty compartment—probably (she couldn't be sure) the one she had left; and from York to Grantham, from Grantham to Peterborough, she had it to herself.

Her dream was ended—her mad folly had run its course; but the train went on. The rattling glass in either end of the compartment reflected her ugly haggard face. She felt as if the universe were one immense block of adamant, through which the train was gnawing and drilling a way for itself like a fierce, instinctive worm. Half choked, she let down one of the sashes, and looked out. The cold wind rushed at her throat; but the world was there still—a drifting blackness above, a rushing blackness below, the lower blackness branded blacker in spots and stripes where trees and hedges clustered and stretched. She leaned out of the window until she was chilled to the bone; then she raised the sash and lay down on the seat with her back to the engine.

'By God! she's uglier awake than asleep.'

'So much the better for her.'

These words kept burning into her brain. Plain she had guessed herself to be, but with wonderful eyes and an irresistible expression when she chose; and then her cloud of hair, on which she could sit! She rose up, tore off her hat, uncoiled her hair, shook it about her shoulders, and looked in the window; looked her sweetest, smiled—her teeth were good—and said soft nothings to an imaginary lover. She coiled and uncoiled her hair, pressed her face to the window to stare into the depths of her eyes, started back at arm's length—to the middle of the compartment, to the opposite end—and looked

at herself from every point of view and possible distance. She was angular, pale, and her features were very irregular; but surely she was not ugly! She assured herself that, over certain temperaments, she was bound to exercise an irresistible fascination. She recited, she sang, she danced; she grew warm, her courage rose, and she laughed aloud. Hastily doing up her hair, and putting on her hat again, she picked up Byron, and sat down in the middle of one seat with her feet on the other. She read a piece of 'Manfred,' a piece of 'Childe Harold,' a piece of 'Don Juan,' but without pleasure, without a transference of energy. She grew drowsy, and had to close the book. Soon, however, as she shut her eyes and tried to sleep, her fancy was on the alert. She saw her father's stern but not unkindly face; and her mother's, worn and deeply lined, with all the hardness gone out of it. That was unendurable. She sat up again. She stamped up and down the compartment to keep herself warm. She set her teeth; she grew dogged. The train was going on; she must go on. She would find a publisher; she would go on the stage; she would make money; she would grow famous, and have men at her feet. The blood mounted to her head, and the dream of success held her again, although with no firm grip, till the train stopped at Grantham. As soon as it resumed its journey, the memory of her last travelling companions returned.

'By God! she's uglier awake than asleep.'

'So much the better for her.'

All the way to Peterborough, her sense of her own lack of physical charm filled her with dull pain. Why was she not beautiful, with rich blood and a gracious body? Why was she not as beautiful as she often felt—as she always felt in the presence of beautiful things, visible or heard: paintings, or sunsets, or music, or the sound of waters? Wrath possessed her again; her father and mother, and all the unlovely circumstances of her life, were severally indicted and condemned.

Day had broken for some time before she took note of it. Veils and scraps of mist hung about the leafless woods; rags and tufts had caught in the hedges, and widths and stretches of it lay on the fields like immense webs wringing wet and spread out to bleach. The gray dawn, labouring with clouds and the stubborn wintry night, got into the sky by stealth. Her com-

partment appeared like a world within a world, lit by the ghastly twilight of the yellow gas-lamp and the dull beams of morning. Sick with cold, hunger, and discomfort, and exhausted by an emotional conflict of nearly eight hours, she felt her spirits, like the yellow gas-lamp, grow pale in the new day. She suffered passively for a time, till her misery became unbearable. Then she let down one of the sashes, and flung Byron out of the window. The relief this action brought was of short duration; but while she was still fingering her manuscript in her pocket with thoughts of tearing it up, the train stopped at Peterborough. A countryman and some businessmen came into the compartment beside her. They seemed to her to bring with them a pleasant odour of breakfast, of cheerful parlours, and warm kitchens, where the ruddy firelight shone on gleaming dish-covers. She thought of breakfast at home—hot rolls and the fragrance of coffee in the sitting-room; hot-pressed newspapers in the shop. She shuddered, and shut her eyes tight. For several minutes she sat quivering like a creature bound and gagged, and in the grip of some torture engine. At last, quite worn out, she fell into a half-doze, half-swoon, which continued until the ticket-collector aroused her at Finsbury Park.

'Is this London?' she said.

'Yes,' replied the collector.

'Do I get out here, then?'

'What part of London do you want?'

'Does the train go on?'

'Yes; to the terminus.'

'Ah, yes, the terminus. I'll go to the terminus.'

In her abject state the mere word 'terminus ' did her good. Here was something that had an end. Probably, if the means had been to her hand when she stepped out of the train at King's Cross, she would have killed herself.

There were not very many passengers. Two or three of these were met by friends, and formed little glowing knots, with hearty hand-shakings and kisses. Bustle about luggage, the getting into cabs, and the giving of addresses, had never before seemed to Alison significant of anything except the

pettiness of life. Now her feeling was that no possible detail of interest that attaches one to life can be petty. She saw a well-dressed girl, not much older than herself, step into a hansom, and tip the porter who handed up her portmanteau and told the driver where to go. To possess luggage and to drive to an address was to be acquainted, and to have affairs of business or pleasure.

She, Alison Hepburn, was utterly alone, the victim of a mad dream that had swallowed her and cast her up again, a half-digested morsel. Her soul would bear the marks of the eating acid forever. It was clear to her as she stood, forlorn and shivering, on the platform at King's Cross, that there were hardly a dozen passable lines in her whole manuscript. A crimson flame lit her face as she thought of her confident expectations a few hours back—if not at the rate of Campbell's 'Pleasures of Hope,' then surely at the rate of Smith's 'Life Drama!' She walked quickly down the platform, pulling her nine greasy Scotch notes out of her bodice; but she did not leave the station.

It was one of the most dismal parts of London on which she looked out—the junction of Euston Road, Gray's Inn Road, Pentonville Road, and York Road—and there was a fog. Two men looked out with her; they were about to separate, and they spoke for a minute.

'Then, you'll have that stuff ready for me by half-past twelve?' said one, who was tall, well dressed, and well looking, and who spoke very pleasantly.

Yes,' said the other, short, shabby, husky; 'between that and one.'

'Oh, I must have it by one. You must bring it to me not later than twelve-fifty.'

'That's impossible,' said the other doggedly. 'Send or come at half-past twelve. If it's ready then, you'll have it. If not, you or your messenger must wait.'

'Where will you be?'

'I'll be in the Manuscript Room.'

'Very well.'

'What a beastly fog!'

'I always like a fog,' said the well-dressed man.

'Manuscript Room.'

'Manuscript Room.'

She knew she had overheard the talk of two men in some literary by-path—some lion and his jackal. The jackal stepped into a green bus that drifted into sight and was gone; for during the few seconds she had stood at the exit of the station the fog had become a dense sooty cloud. She had been aware of a tumult of busses, cars, waggons, and cabs, and had noticed the four crossroads when she first looked out. Now she felt as if she were occupying a hole in an immense dripping, dirty sponge. Some yellow dregs of light were suspended in the filthy moisture, and there was a muffled sound in her ears. She looked after the lion, who had returned into the station. He went to the cab-rank, walking with such ease and firmness, she thought. She had not seen the kind of man before—not among the Edinburgh lawyers, or the actors whom she had watched at the theatre doors; not in Princes Street, and not at Aberdour in the summer holidays. He looked to her a high creature from a different sphere. She saw his face distinctly, in spite of the fog, when the cab passed out of the station, for she bent forward and stared. He noticed her, and looked back, with a mixed expression of surprise and amusement, a touch of scorn, an affectation of indifference. It was a quaint, wild face he saw; pale, begrimed; glaring, fiery-eyed, out of a tangle of black hair. She saw a strong chin, a small firm mouth, a straight nose, and black-blue eyes; she saw yellow hair and a smooth fair face, and she hungered for them.

As soon as the fog had engulfed the cab, she replaced seven of her notes in her bosom, and turned back into the station. A porter directed her to the booking-office.

'When is there a train for Edinburgh?' she asked of the clerk.

'In five minutes.'

'Oh! Give me a third single, then.'

She laid down the two notes she had in her hand, and the clerk paused in the act of stamping the ticket. He picked up the notes, and held them close to the gas. She wondered what was to happen. Was she to be arrested for something?

'These are only worth nineteen and six-pence here,' he said.

'Oh! I'll give you another, then,' she rejoined, relieved, and not thinking what she was saying.

'You don't need. Instead of thirty-two and eightpence, it will cost you thirty-three and eightpence, as it were.'

'I see,' she said.

When she had received the ticket and her change, she walked about the departure platform in an aimless way. The porter who had shown her to the booking-office, having heard her destination, said to her:

'Beg pardon, lady, but you'll miss your train if you don't mind.'

'Oh, where is it?'

'This,' he said, opening a third-class carriage at her side.

She gave the porter half a crown and went in. Hardly had she seated herself, when the train started.

Her journey back to Edinburgh was one long blank misery, with here and there a vivid flash of pain. Worn out with excitement, and weak with cold and lack of food and lack of sleep, she sat motionless in a corner of the compartment. Passengers came and went at the various stations. Sometimes she was alone, sometimes the compartment was full; it was all alike to her. She slept no part of the way, but a kind of trance held her, in which she was conscious only of defeat and self-contempt, except at intervals, when she heard inhuman voices say, 'By God! she's uglier awake than asleep!' 'So much the better for her'; when the face of the lion mocked her out of the fog; or when she turned and stung herself with the taunt that her flight was a piece of mad folly, because she was weak and ugly—beauty and strength would have gone on undismayed. Her mind had been so fully occupied, and her thoughts had wandered so far back and so far forward during the up-journey, that on arriving at London it had seemed as if she had been travelling for weeks. But at the end of the way back, when she heard one of the passengers say, 'Yes, this is Edinburgh,' she could scarcely believe her ears. Physically and mentally exhausted, for her the hours and the miles had slipped past like minutes and footsteps, uncounted and unnoted.

She came out at the Haymarket instead of going on to the Waverley Station, because the former was further from her home. She had determined

suddenly that her brother and sister ought to be asleep before she returned, and it was still nearly two hours to their bedtime. At the Haymarket Station she was half an hour from home, and so that disposed of a quarter of the time she had to wait.

She took a seat on a bench on the platform. Her mind was a blank—numb, like a bloodless finger. After a few minutes she went to the refreshment-room, hardly knowing what she was doing, and drank some tea. As she had eaten very little for twenty-four hours, the tea, inferior station infusion as it was, had a powerful effect. Her nerves grew tense at once; she felt light-headed, and went out into the street like one walking on air, as the saying is. The raw east wind was grateful to her senses; it smelt of home, and carried also the fragrance of the romantic dreams and high thoughts she had been accustomed to weave as she walked in the windy evenings. Breathing hard and stepping quickly, she soon reached the west end of Princes Street. The mass of the Castle and the Castle rock, faintly but firmly outlined against the night sky, like a piece of ancient darkness that had grown solid and taken shape, seemed about to overwhelm her. Her eye wavered along the ridge of the High Street; the tall dark houses trembled and grew steady; ghostly lights flickered up behind them from shop-windows and lurked about the shadowy crown of St. Giles.

Mechanically, Alison turned towards home. She recognised at once that she was obeying a habit, and that she would be home sooner than she had intended if she went in the direction her steps had chosen. Nevertheless, she let herself go. She had come back to the native ground from which she had wrenched herself, and the roots were stretching instinctively towards their old grooves. Yet when she arrived at the street in which she lived, her first impulse was to turn and run. The light from her father's shop streamed across the dreary way; the shop was always open late, as penny packets of paper and envelopes were required by the people in the neighbourhood till after ten o'clock. She saw the school-bags hanging at the door, and the tissue-paper chimney ornaments in the window. It was this mean life she had run away from, and to it she was returning, a convicted fool and coward. Leaning against a lamppost, she began to defend herself. The long, cold,

miserable railway journey was the cause of her defeat. If London were an hour away, and she could have started in the morning! But this was no preparation for what she was about to do. She would not be irresolute now. Lifting her dress, she ran along the street and into the shop.

Her father, who was arranging some new goods on his shelves, knew at once, although his back was to the door, that his daughter had come back. He turned round slowly; his face was white, and working; his large dark eyes lightened and clouded with emotion.

'Well, Alison?' he said, in a judicial tone, through which a tremor shot.

'I've been very bad,' said Alison sheepishly.

Mr. Hepburn finished what he had been about. Alison clasped and unclasped her hands, and then pulled off her gloves as if they had been burning her.

'You had better go to your mother,' said Mr. Hepburn.

Alison passed through the shop into the parlour, where her mother was sewing.

'Oh!' cried Mrs. Hepburn, rising. 'Where have you been?'

'Nowhere,' replied Alison. 'In a train. I went to London, and came back.'

'London!' said Mrs. Hepburn, sitting again.

Mrs. Hepburn was older-looking than her years—a tall, scraggy woman, with a sallow complexion. Alison had inherited her broad brow and wide, deep-set eyes, but the facial resemblance ended there; the daughter's irregular features were in marked contrast with Mrs. Hepburn's straight nose and large, firm mouth and chin.

The parlour, a small square room with a moderately high ceiling, was lit by a single gas jet from a chimney bracket. On the walls were several illuminated texts, and two engravings—one of the Royal Family, the other a bird's-eye view of Edinburgh. The furniture consisted of a Pembroke table, chairs, and a sofa of mahogany upholstered in horsehair, a small glazed bookcase, and a cheap inlaid whatnot.

'Are you tired? You must be tired,' said Mrs. Hepburn. 'You'd better go to bed.'

Alison stood still, staring at her mother, who had resumed her sewing.

'Where are Tom and Katey?' she asked at length.

'In bed. I sent them sooner than usual.'

'I am tired,' said Alison. 'Goodnight.'

'Goodnight,' said her mother.

Alison went upstairs to her room, placed her pound notes in a drawer, washed her hands and face, undressed quickly, and lay down. She had never in her life before felt so completely at rest; and the repose of her mind was rather deepened than disturbed by a vague wonder.

Before she fell asleep her mother came in and lit the gas. She had brought a tray, with tea and bread-and-butter.

'You must be hungry, Alison,' she said. 'Sit up and take this.'

Alison obeyed. While she ate, her mother, in a nervous manner, lifted and laid things on the mantelshelf and the toilet-table. Then she made an orderly disposition of the clothes which Alison had thrown off in a heap, and this actual employment restored in a measure her self-control.

When Alison had finished, Mrs. Hepburn took the tray, and said, with a return of her nervous manner:

'Where did you get the money, Alison?'

'It was my own money,' said Alison; 'I saved it from the wages father gives me. It took me three years to save it.'

'I see,' said Mrs. Hepburn, trying to hide her relief.

She tucked in the bedclothes, seemed about to speak again, but said only 'Goodnight.' Then she put out the gas and pulled open the door, which had been ajar. Instead of leaving the room, however, she stood suddenly stock still. Alison heard her give up the tray, and come back to her bedside.

'Alison,' she said, whispering, 'were you alone?'

'Quite alone.'

'Well, goodnight again.'

Mrs. Hepburn raised her voice, but not loud enough to prevent her daughter from hearing a deep long-drawn sigh at the door.

The most prominent among the ideas that came dimly before Alison's mind as she fell asleep was a sense of power acquired over her father and

mother by her exploit. She had expected to be at their mercy, but found herself, in a way, mistress of the situation.

In the morning her mother advised her not to rise until her brother and sister had gone to school. She had breakfast in bed, and then slept again for two hours. At eleven she rose and went to the parlour, where her father awaited her. Mrs. Hepburn attended to the shop that forenoon.

Alison blushed fiery red as she entered the parlour, for on the table lay her manuscript.

'I have been glancing through this,' said Mr. Hepburn, lifting and dropping 'A Godless Universe.' 'I'm no great judge of poetry, but some of it seems not badly written. I think it's nonsense, of course, too nonsensical to be blasphemous. Was it this took you to London, Alison?'

'Yes.'

A subtle smile softened Mr. Hepburn's face and flickered about the corners of his dark eyes.

'You had plenty of money with you, your mother tells me. Why did you come back?'

Alison said nothing.

'I believe it was really at bottom some affection for your father and mother that brought you back. Was it, Alison?'

'Yes, yes,' replied Alison, conscious of an attempt to appear more deeply stirred than she was.

'Well, what do you want to do?' asked her father, an anxious look coming into his face.

'I want to write; I feel that I have something to say.'

'How can you have anything to say? You're only a lassie yet.'

'Well, then, I have a need to say something.'

'Yes; but how are you going to live? If you leave the shop, I shall have to hire an assistant, and shall have nothing to give you.'

'I'll stay in the shop,' said Alison, 'though I hate it.'

'I hate it, too. I may tell you, Alison, that it was just such restlessness as is now appearing in you that stranded me here. I know how difficult it is to learn from the experience of others; but it is as sure as you are sitting there,

that if you don't stick to the shop your life will be one of misery. That I can foresee.'

'What did you want to be, father?' asked Alison, forgetting herself in the new light thrown on her father's character.

'I shall tell you of my foolish days. My father wished me to be a lawyer, and I studied law for several years. When he died, I persuaded my mother to enter me for the Church; then I shifted to medicine; then I wished to be a medical missionary; but, instead of studying, I wasted my time at revival meetings. I spent about eight years at the University altogether, eating up my father's savings. My mother had carried on my father's business—a very good stationery and fancy business in Princes Street—but her employés cheated her, and we were bankrupt before I had acquired even the rudiments of a profession. It was then we came here, and it was then I learned that religion is more than sentiment, that without works faith is a mere prurience, that love for God without duty to God is an illicit love.' Here Mr. Hepburn, whose speech had grown fervid, paused abruptly. 'In the circumstances,' he said, resuming, 'it is odd that I should be explaining myself to you. I am afraid you have a very hard heart, Alison. But I shall never urge religion upon you. Well, then, my lass, are you quite prepared to go on as before?'

'Yes,' said Alison, as heartily as she could. 'Oh, father!' she exclaimed, suddenly understanding, although scarcely feeling at all, how gentle he was with her.

She had never really had a talk with her father before. His hard life had made him outwardly stern, and his children shunned him.

'I hope,' he said, laying his hand on his daughter's head, as he left the room, 'this will work for good to us all.'

It was said and done conventionally, and spoilt entirely the effect of the interview.

When her father had gone, Alison picked up her manuscript and turned to her favourite pieces.

'I'm damned if they aren't good,' she said hotly.

She put some dozen pages in her pocket and thrust the rest in the fire.

She then went to the bookcase to select a book, but her mother entered from the shop.

'Now, Alison,' Mrs. Hepburn said, 'I hope you are going to do what your father wants. He is very stern-like. You've not been thwarting him?'

'Oh no!'

'You'll be wise not to. You'll find it impossible to live at loggerheads with your father, his sense of duty is so strong. If you please him, you may be certain you are doing what's right, Alison. Go into the shop and see if he wants you. I must look after the dinner.'

'Oh!' said Mr. Hepburn when his daughter appeared. 'I forgot to say to you to try and be more agreeable with your mother—more of a help to her. Your mother has a very strong sense of duty, and you may think her exacting sometimes, but she will never ask you to do what you can't or oughtn't to do.'

'A strong sense of whose duty?' asked Alison. 'And what is duty?'

'These are childish questions, Alison,' said her father.

But Alison grinned, thinking what simple, grotesque people her father and mother were. What had duty to do with shopkeeping, and cooking and the making of beds? All those things, and all other things, became so utterly insignificant when she put the question: Could it ever have been anybody's duty to bring into the world such an ugly, ill-conditioned creature as Alison Hepburn? She picked up a toy hand-mirror and looked at herself in it, and then at her father. Mr. Hepburn, half divining something dreadful in her mind, left the shop quickly.

Shortly after, Tom and Kate came home from school for dinner. They had clearly been cautioned about their first meeting with Alison, for they looked very conscious when they saw her. Tom, a lanky, ill-thriven boy of twelve, turned round as he was about to pass into the parlour, and stuck his tongue in his cheek. Kate, a lanky, ill-thriven girl of ten, blushed and looked sideways at her sister.

Alison kept the shop while the rest were at dinner. She sold some copybooks, some pencils, some notepaper, and thought how wretched it was to be depending for a livelihood on such petty wants. How ineffably weak and

foolish she had been to come back! She said nothing to Tom and Kate when they passed through the shop again on their return to school; and they; quarrelling hotly about a piece of slate-pencil, gave their sister neither word nor look.

After dinner she read listlessly in several books. In the evening she walked along Princes Street eating her heart out. She was so utterly unequipped for the battle of life that there could never be any need for her to choose between shame and starvation. For a moment she envied the furred and scented women she passed.

'By God! she's uglier awake than asleep.'

'So much the better for her.'

If somebody would only put an iron mask on her and shut her up in a cage! If—

'Oh, Miss Hepburn! How do you do?'

It was James Williamson, the son of a wholesale stationer, with whom her father dealt. The Williamsons were members of the same church as the Hepburns. James, a loutish, red-haired lad of twenty, travelled for his father; an adept at business, he was regarded by his friends and by himself as a social failure. Alison flushed when he stopped her; he and his attentions had not once crossed her memory during her journey. She never had thought of him at all. He had been to her a mere detail common to the nuisances of business and church-going, an odd creature who generally succeeded in shaking hands with her on Sunday in a bashful, surprised way, turning up in unexpected corners with his 'Oh, Miss Hepburn! How do you do?' It occurred to her for the first time that this man was wooing her, that here was a lover! She remembered in the instant of shaking hands how his business visits were generally paid in the evening when her father was at tea, and she alone behind the counter; and how he never would hear of her summoning her father, but stood looking at her and trying to talk until Mr. Hepburn returned to the shop.

She gave him her hand and burst out laughing; it was such an odd sensation. Here was a man who desired her, wanted her, thought he needed her. She laughed again.

'Oh,' said young Williamson, much disconcerted, 'I see you're quite well! I thought you weren't. Goodbye.'

'But why did you think I was ill?' asked Alison, becoming serious.

'You looked so white.'

Alison said nothing. She was wondering what attraction she could have for this stupid red-headed fellow.

'Well, goodbye,' he said.

'Won't you walk back with me?' she asked.

James rubbed his hands, and stared. Then, with a gurgling laugh, he placed himself at her side, and assumed the position of escort in a very self-conscious manner.

They walked on in silence for several minutes.

'I say,' said James, after clearing his throat repeatedly, 'what a good re-citer you are!'

'Do you think so?'

'Yes, you do it splendid. But you're awfully clever.'

'How do you know I'm clever.'

'Everybody says you are.'

'Everybody!'

'In the church, you know.'

'What else do they say about me?'

James looked askance at her.

'Then, they do say other things about me. Tell me.'

'Well—mind you, it's only what they say.'

'Of course.'

'Well, you're conceited and stuck-up.'

'And what do you think?'

'Me!'

'Yes.'

'Oh, I don't mind if you are.'

'Do you think me conceited and stuck-up?'

'I can't express myself. You know I'm not clever. It's like this: I would like you to be conceited and stuck-up, but not—with me.'

James, alarmed at what he had said, moved a little away, and fell half a step behind; but Alison turned towards him, laughing, and he pulled himself together immediately.

'Do you read much?' asked Alison.

'I haven't time, and I don't care for it. I suppose you're an awful reader.'

'I haven't time, either, but I read as much as I can.'

'Shakespeare and Scott and Carlyle, and all those old buffers, I suppose?'

'I don't care much for Scott. He's no psychologist.'

'Ah!' exclaimed James admiringly. 'Who's your favourite poet?'

'Byron, I think.'

'Ah! Byron! Ay. I say, do you know I'm going into partnership in a month?'

'With your father?'

'Yes. I'll have two hundred and fifty per ann.'

He watched her closely out of the tail of his eye to note the effect of this announcement; but it was not visible, which was disappointing. If he had no learning, he was about to have an income; and that was something to set off against the reading of Byron.

'I suppose a man can live on two hundred and fifty a year?' said Alison.

'Rather! Why, a man can marry on two hundred and fifty a year!'

'Into misery,' said Alison, looking him square in the face.

'Misery!' he exclaimed, standing still abruptly, while she half halted and moved on more slowly. 'But do you know what you're saying?' he cried, getting into line again. 'Plenty of people marry on a hundred.'

'I don't call that marriage.'

'Oh, you don't call it marriage?' he said, not knowing whether to be perplexed or amused. ' What would you call marriage, now?'

'I don't know. Are you coming in?'

They had arrived at the shop.

'May I?' he said eagerly. 'Do you think I should?'

'Father will be glad to see you.'

'I've no business, you know.'

'Never mind.'

Mr. Hepburn, surprised but not ill pleased, shook hands cordially, and asked the young man to go into the parlour. There the table was set for supper, and Mrs. Hepburn was busy at the fire.

'This is a surprise!' she said.

'Oh!' said James. 'I was coming down, at any rate, and met Miss Hepburn on the way.'

'Well, you'll stay and have a bite of supper now you're here?'

'Oh, thank you!'

'We're very homely people, you know,' continued Mrs. Hepburn. 'But you won't object to take potluck. We have no servant, so we let the kitchen fire out after tea, and if there's any supper to cook, do it here.'

'And a very good plan, too,' said James, beside himself with delight at the cordiality of his reception.

Alison began to assist her mother, but Mrs. Hepburn declined her help.

'Show Mr. Williamson the album,' she said.

Seated together on the sofa, they looked over the album, holding it between them. Young Mr. Williamson's eager interest in every photograph of which Alison chose to speak was very marked. Mrs. Hepburn noticed it, and cast an intelligent glance at the couple.

'Oh, this is yourself, Miss Hepburn!' cried James, seizing the album, and holding it close to his face. 'It's like you,' he continued, 'and yet it's not like you. It doesn't do you justice. It doesn't bring out your expression, or your—eh—wonderful eyes.'

'Don't be stupid!' said Alison.

When the album was finished, James turned to the bookcase. A shelf of red and blue books, with heavily-gilt backs which no one could mistake, attracted his attention. He took down one and opened it.

'Ah!' he exclaimed, with lifted eyebrows. 'Your prizes, Miss Hepburn!' He went over several of them quickly. 'Arithmetic, history, geography, English literature, elocution, French, general excellence—first prizes in everything,' he said. 'It's too terrible. I never got a prize in my life.'

'Oh, that doesn't mean anything, or, if it does, it means the opposite of what you think. Scott never got a prize, nor Shakespeare, I should think.'

'No,' said James, perspiring with pleasure, his resemblance to Scott and Shakespeare never having struck him before.

'It was the merest accident that I got all these prizes. There was nobody cleverer than me in the school, or I shouldn't have had them.'

Apart from its modesty, which he adored, this was, in James's estimation, a most original way of looking at things.

'Nobody cleverer! If there had been anybody cleverer! Well, that's a good one!' he said.

'I mean,' explained Alison, 'that if there had been anybody at all clever in the school, I shouldn't have had them; I'm not clever. Scott and Shakespeare weren't clever. Women, as a rule, are cleverer than men. Mrs. Browning and George Eliot, for example, were far cleverer than Scott and Shakespeare. I mean, that these two women were given to sitting down doggedly and acquiring things, whereas Scott and Shakespeare let things come as they would. Mrs. Browning and George Eliot hunted out their mental food—killed it, skinned it, cooked it, ate it—and it was always tough to them; while Scott and Shakespeare—why, they just drank it in without knowing it.'

'Oh, Mr. Williamson,' said Mrs. Hepburn, 'she talks such nonsense! never mind her.'

'Oh, it's not nonsense, Mrs. Hepburn,' James retorted. 'I never heard such things. Why, it's quite wonderful! You ought to have a class in the Sunday-school, Miss Hepburn. And Byron—was Byron clever?'

'No; he was a dunce all his life.'

James chuckled and spluttered at this. Then he said, radiant at the idea of coming out with something critical:

'By-the-by, Miss Hepburn, I thought you didn't like Scott? Now, you know; you placed him along with Shakespeare just now.'

'Oh yes! But I know how great he was, although I don't quite like him in the meantime. After awhile I'll like him again. It's children and old people who read Scott most, they say.'

Mr. Hepburn came in from the shop, and they sat down to the table. To the fried potatoes, which was the usual supper twice or thrice a week, Mrs. Hepburn had added a hash of the cold meat originally intended for next day's dinner; and there was coffee, bread-and-butter, oat-cake, and raspberry jam. James found everything very good indeed, and chatted with Mr. Hepburn about business and church matters.

Immediately after supper Mr. Hepburn rose.

'I have some accounts to finish,' he said. 'I wish you would come and help me, Annie.'

'Let me clear the table first,' said his wife.

'No; I'll do that,' said Alison.

'Well, I must go now,' said James.

'Must you?' queried Mr. Hepburn, in a disappointed tone.

'There's no hurry, Mr. Williamson,' said Mrs. Hepburn reproachfully.

'They'll be wondering what's come over me at home. I had no intention of being so late.'

'In that case, we won't press you, Mr. Williamson,' said Mr. Hepburn.

James reached for his hat.

'Mr. Williamson's going to help me to clear away the dishes,' said Alison, with a heightened colour and a catch in her voice.

'Oh, of course, with pleasure,' said James, upsetting a coffee-cup.

'Alison!' exclaimed Mrs. Hepburn. 'For shame! Do you know what you're saying?'

'But I want to,' said James.

'You two old fogeys go away,' said Alison, with unusual briskness, and taking a liberty with her father and mother the like of which she had never used before. 'Mr. Williamson and I'll manage all right.'

'Alison,' said Mrs. Hepburn, 'you're forgetting yourself entirely.'

But her husband pulled her skirt, and they left the parlour together.

Two cups were washed and dried in silence—Alison very grave, James grinning from ear to ear.

'Well, but,' stammered James at last, resuming the conversation that had been interrupted on entering the house, while he polished the third cup

vigorously, 'if you can't marry on two hundred and fifty per ann., the world would begin to stop.'

'But what could a husband and wife do on two hundred and fifty per ann., as you call it?'

'Why, they could have a nice little house and a piano and a good general servant, and they could ask their friends to little parties; and when they came home from church-meetings and soirees and things, there's their cosy parlour all to themselves, a fine fire, and a bit of supper laid. And they could practise the hymns. Oh, you've no idea how comfortable it would be!'

'I see.'

'Well?'

'But you couldn't go to a good seat in the theatre whenever you wanted to, or visit London and Paris now and again.'

'No,' said James, in dull amazement. 'No.'

'Do you go to the theatre often?'

'Me! I never was in a theatre in my life. Were you?'

'I only went once for half an hour—on the sly, of course. I saw the first act of "Othello" —it made me quite giddy. Then the orchestra began after the curtain fell, and I felt like to cry out with anger. I wanted the play to go on, on, on. And I came away. But I mean to go now openly.'

'Oh!' said James, at a loss. 'Of course,' he went on stammering, 'you being such a good elocutionist!'

'Yes,' said Alison, draining a saucer into the slop-basin in which she was washing the dishes. 'Wouldn't you like to go to the theatre?'

'Well—isn't it wrong? Of course, you're not a member of the church, and—'

'No; but I can easily join it, can't I?

'Oh!' said James, twisting his face in a perplexed grin.

'Do you know what I did the other night?'

'No.'

'I went to London.'

'To London?'

'Yes; but I hear father and mother coming. Don't say anything about

this before them.'

'No, no, I won't,' said James, gratified by this secret understanding. 'But you must tell me all about it.'

'So I will some day.'

'Oh, but soon!'

'Well, tomorrow night? Half-past eight on the North Bridge.'

Alison remained in the parlour after her father and mother had gone to bed. Having read a little in an anthology of verse, she took from her pocket the few pages of 'A Godless Universe' which she had preserved. She went over them carefully, and without excitement.

'What paltry trash!' she said, blushing deeply.

The fire was almost out, but she gathered the embers together, and blew them into a blaze. Then she lit her manuscript, and, with a sick smile, watched it burn.

'That's done,' she said, poking the charred pieces of paper into the glowing ash. 'We can practise the hymns!' she muttered, as she went upstairs to bed.