MALCOLM: A ROMANCE

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GEORGE MACDONALD

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BY

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MALCOLM.

PART I.

CHAPTER I.

MISS HORN.

"NA, na; I hae nae feelin's, I'm thankfu' to say. I never kent ony guid come o' *them*. They're a terrible sicht i' the gait."

"Naebody ever thoucht o' layin' 't to yer chairge, mem."

"'Deed, I aye had eneuch adu to dū the thing I had to du, no to say the thing 'at naebody wad du but mysel'. I hae had nae leisur' for feelin's an' that," insisted Miss Horn.

But here a heavy step descending the stair just outside the room attracted her attention, and, checking the flow of her speech perforce, with three ungainly strides she reached the landing.

"Watty Witherspail! Wattie!" she called after the footsteps down the stair.

"Yes, mem," answered a gruff voice from below.

"Wattie, whan ye fess the bit boxie, jist pit a hemmer an' a puckle nails i' yer pooch to men' the hen-hoose-door. The tane maun be atten't till as weel's the tither."

"The bit boxie" was the coffin of her third cousin, Griselda Campbell, whose body lay in the room on her left hand as she called down the stair. Into that on her right Miss Horn now re-entered, to rejoin Mrs. Mellis, the wife of the principal draper in the town, who had called ostensibly to condole with her, but really to see the corpse.

"Aih! she was taen yoong!" sighed the visitor, with long-drawn tones and a shake of the head, implying that therein lay ground of complaint, at which poor mortals dared but hint.

"No that yoong," returned Miss Horn. "She was upo' the edge o' aucht an' thirty."

"Weel, she had a sair time o' 't."

"No that sair, sae far as I see—an' wha sud ken better? She's had a bien doon-sittin' (*sheltered quarters*), and sud hae had as lang's I was to the fore. Na, na; it was nowther sae young nor yet sae sair."

"Aih! but she was a patient crater wi' a' flesh," persisted Mrs. Mellis, as if she would not willingly be foiled in the attempt to extort for the dead some syllable of acknowledgment from the lips of her late companion.

"'Deed she was that!—a wheen ower patient wi' some. But that cam' o' haein mair hert nor brains. *She* had feelin's gin ye like—and to spare. But I never took ower ony o' the stock. It's a pity she hadna the jeedgment to match, for she never misdoobted onybody eneuch. But I wat it disna maitter noo, for she's gane whaur it's less wantit. For ane 'at has the hairmlessness o' the doo i' this ill-wulled warl', there's a feck o' ten 'at has the wisdom o' the serpent. An' the serpents mak sair wark wi' the doos—lat alane them 'at flees into the verra mou's o' them."

"Weel, ye're jist richt there," said Mrs. Mellis. "An' as ye say, she was aye some easy to perswaud. I hae nae doobt she believed to the verra last he wad come back and mairry her."

"Come back and mairry her! Wha or what div ye mean? I jist tell ye, Mistress Mellis—an' it's weel ye're named—gin ye daur to hint at ae word o' sic clavers, it's this side o' this door o' mine ye s' be less acquant wi'."

As she spoke, the hawk eyes of Miss Horn glowed on each side of her hawk nose, which grew more and more hooked as she glared, while her neck went craning forward as if she were on the point of making a swoop on the offender. Mrs. Mellis's voice trembled with something very like fear as she replied:

"Gude guide 's, Miss Horn! What hae I said to gar ye look at me sae by ordinar 's that?"

"Said!" repeated Miss Horn, in a tone that revealed both annoyance with herself and contempt for her visitor. "There's no a claver in a' the countryside but ye maun fess 't hame aneth yer oxter, as gin 't were the prodigal afore he repentit. Ye s' get sma' thanks for sic like here. An' her lyin' there as she'll lie till the jeedgment-day, puir thing!"

"I'm sure I meant no offence, Miss Horn," said her visitor. "I thocht a' body kent 'at she was ill aboot him."

"Aboot wha, i' the name o' the father o' lees?"

"Ow, aboot that lang-leggit doctor 'at set oot for the Ingies, an' dee'd afore he wan across the equautor. Only fouk said he was nae mair deid nor a halvert worm, an' wud be hame whan she was merried."

"It 's a' lees frae heid to fut, an' frae hert to skin."

"Weel, it was plain to see she dwyned awa efter he gaed, an' never was hersel' again—ye dinna deny that."

"It's a' havers," persisted Miss Horn, but in accents considerably softened. "She cared no more aboot the chiel nor I did mysel'. She dwyned, I grant ye, an' he gaed awa, I grant ye; but the win' blaws an' the water rins, an' the tane has little to do wi' the tither."

"Weel, weel; I'm sorry I said onything to offen' ye, an' I canna say mair. Wi' yer leave, Miss Horn, I'll jist gang an' tak' a last leuk at her, puir thing!"

"'Deed, ye s' du naething o' the kin'! I s' lat nobody glower at her 'at wad gang and spairge sic havers aboot her, Mistress Mellis. To say 'at sic a doo as my Grizel, puir, saft-hertit, winsome thing, wad hae luikit twise at ony sic a serpent as him! Na, na, mem! Gang yer wa's hame, an' come back straucht frae yer prayers the morn's mornin'. By that time she'll be quaiet in her coffin, and I'll be quaiet i' my temper. Syne I'll lat ye see her—maybe.—I wiss I was weel rid o' the sicht o' her, for I canna bide it. Lord, I canna bide it."

These last words were uttered in a murmured aside, inaudible to Mrs. Mellis, to whom, however, they did not apply, but to the dead body. She rose notwithstanding in considerable displeasure, and with a formal farewell walked from the room, casting a curious glance as she left it in the direction of that where the body lay, and descending the stairs as slowly as if on every step she deliberated whether the next would bear her weight. Miss Horn, who had followed her to the head of the stair, watched her out of sight below the landing, when she turned and walked back once more into the parlor, but with a lingering look toward the opposite room, as if she saw through the closed door what lay white on the white bed.

"It's a God's mercy I hae no feelin's," she said to herself. "To even my bonny Grizel to sic a lang kyte-clung chiel as yon! Aih, puir Grizel! She's gane like a knotless threid."

CHAPTER II.

BARBARA CATANACH.

MISS HORN was interrupted by the sound of the latch of the street door, and sprung from her chair in anger.

"Canna they lat her sleep for five meenutes?" she cried aloud, forgetting that there was no fear of rousing her any more.—"It'll be Jean come in frae the pump," she reflected, after a moment's pause; but, hearing no footstep along the passage to the kitchen, concluded—"It's no her, for she gangs aboot the hoose like the fore half o' a new-shod cowt;" and went down the stair to see who might have thus presumed to enter unbidden.

In the kitchen, the floor of which was as white as scrubbing could make it, and sprinkled with sea-sand—under the gayly-painted Dutch clock, which went on ticking as loud as ever, though just below the dead—sat a woman about sixty years of age, whose plump face to the first glance looked kindly, to the second, cunning, and to the third, evil. To the last look the plumpness appeared unhealthy, suggesting a doughy in-

dentation to the finger, and its color was also pasty. Her deep-set, black-bright eyes, glowing from under the darkest of eyebrows, which met over her nose, had something of a fascinating influence—so much so that at a first interview one was not likely for a time to notice any other of her features. She rose as Miss Horn entered, buried a fat fist in a soft side, and stood silent.

"Weel?" said Miss Horn, interrogatively, and was silent also.

"I thocht ye micht want a cast o' my callin'," said the woman.

"Na, na; there's no a han' 'at s' lay finger upo' the bairn but mine ain," said Miss Horn. "I had it a' ower, my lee lane, afore the skreigh o' day. She's lyin' quaiet noo—verra quaiet—waitin' upo' Watty Witherspail. Whan he fesses hame her bit boxie, we s' hae her laid canny intill 't, an' hae dune wi' 't."

"Weel, mem, for a leddy-born, like yersel', I maun say, ye tak it unco composed!"

"I'm no awaur, Mistress Catanach, o' ony necessity laid upo' ye to say yer min' i' this hoose. It's no expeckit. But what for sud I no tak' it wi' composur'? We'll hae to tak' oor ain turn er lang, as composed as we hae the skiel o', and gang oot like a lang-nibbit can'le—ay, an lea' jist sic a memory ahin' some o' 's, Bawby."

"I kenna gin ye mean me, Miss Horn," said the woman; "but it's no that muckle o' a memory I expec' to lea' ahin' me."

"The less the better," muttered Miss Horn; but her unwelcome visitor went on:

"Them 'at 's maist i' *my* debt kens least aboot it; and their mithers canna be said to hae muckle to be thankfu' for. It's God's trowth, I *ken* waur nor ever I *did*, mem. A body in my trade canna help fa'in' amo' ill company whiles, for we're a' born in sin, an' brocht furth in iniquity, as the Buik says; in fac', it's a' sin thegither: we come o' sin an' we gang for sin; but ye ken the likes o' me maunna clype (*tell tales*). A' the same, gien ye dinna tak the help o' my han', ye winna refuse me the sicht o' my een, puir thing!"

"There's nane sall luik upon her deid 'at wasna a pleesur' till her livin'; an' ye ken weel eneuch, Bawby, she cudna thole the sicht o' *you*."

"An' guid rizzon had she for that, gien a' 'at gangs throu' my heid or I fa' asleep i' the lang mirk nichts be a hair better nor ane o' the auld wife's fables that the holy Buik maks sae licht o'!"

"What mean ye?" demanded Miss Horn, sternly and curtly.

"I ken what I mean mysel', an' ane that's no content wi' that, bude ill be a howdie (*midwife*). I wad fain hae gotten a fancy oot o' my heid that's been there this mony a lang year, and for that I wad fain hae seen her. But please yersel', mem, gien ye winna be neeborly; thof, maybe, ye're mair obligated nor ye ken, for a' ye luik at me sae sair asklent."

"Ye s' no gang near her—no to save ye frae a' the ill dreams that ever gethered aboot a sin-stappit bowster!" cried Miss Horn, and drew down her long upper lip in a strong arch.

"Ca cannie! ca cannie!" (*drive gently*), said Bawby. "Dinna anger me ower sair, for I *am* but mortal. Fowk tak a heap frae you, Miss Horn, 'at they'll tak frae nane ither, for yer temper's weel kent, an' little made o'; but it's an ill-faured thing to anger the howdie—sae muckle lies upo' *her*; an' I'm no i' the tune to put up wi' muckle the nicht. I wonner at ye bein' sae oonneebor-like—at sic a time tu, wi' a corp i' the hoose!"

"Gang awa—gang oot o't: it's *my* hoose," said Miss Horn, in a low, hoarse voice, restrained from rising to tempest pitch only by the consciousness of what lay on the other side of the ceiling above her head. "I wad as sune lat a cat intill the deid-chaumer to gang loupin' ower the corp, or may be waur, as I wad lat yersel' intill 't, Bawby Catanach; an' there's 'till ye!"

At this moment the opportune entrance of Jean afforded fitting occasion to her mistress for leaving the room without encountering the dilemma of either turning the woman out—a pro-

ceeding which the latter, from the way in which she set her short, stout figure square on the floor, appeared ready to resist—or of herself abandoning the field in discomfiture. She turned and marched from the kitchen with her head in the air, and the gait of one who had been insulted on her own premises.

She was sitting in the parlor, still red-faced and wrathful, when Jean entered, and, closing the door behind her, drew near to her mistress, with a narrative, commenced at the door, of all she had seen, heard and done while "oot an' aboot i' the toon." But Miss Horn interrupted her the moment she began to speak.

"Is that woman furth the hoose, Jean?" she asked, in the tone of one who awaited her answer in the affirmative as a preliminary condition of all further conversation.

"She's gane, mem," answered Jean—adding to herself in a wordless thought, "I'm no sayin' *whaur*."

"She's a woman I wadna hae ye throng wi', Jean."

"I ken no ill o' her, mem," returned Jean.

"She's eneuch to corrup' a kirkyaird!" said her mistress, with more force than fitness. Jean was on the shady side of fifty, and more likely to have already yielded than to be liable to a first assault of corruption.

But little did Miss Horn think how useless was her warning, or where Barbara Catanach was at that very moment. Trusting to Jean's cunning, as well she might, she was in the dead-chamber, and standing over the dead. She had folded back the sheet—not from the face, but from the feet—and raised the night-dress of fine linen in which the love of her cousin had robed the dead for the repose of the tomb.

"It wad hae been tellin' her," she muttered, "to hae spoken Bawby fair! I'm no used to be fa'en foul o' that gait. I s' be even wi' her yet, I'm thinkin'—the auld speldin'! Losh! an' Praise be thankit! there it's! It's there! —a wee darker, but the same—jist whaur I could ha' laid the pint o' my finger upo' 't i' the mirk! Noo let the worms eat it," she concluded, as she folded down the linen of shroud and sheet—"an' no mortal ken o' 't but mysel' an' him 'at bude till hae seen 't, gin he was a hair better nor Glenkindie's man i' the auld ballant!"

The instant she had rearranged the garments of the dead, she turned and made for the door with a softness of step that strangely contrasted with the ponderousness of her figure, and indicated therefore great muscular strength; opened it with noiseless circumspection to the width of an inch, peeped from the crack, and seeing the opposite door still shut, stepped out with a swift, noiseless swing of person and door simultaneously, closed the latter behind her, stole down the stairs, and left the house. Not a board creaked, not a latch clicked as she went. She stepped into the street as sedately as if she had come from paying to the dead the last duties of her calling, the projected front of her person appearing itself aware of its dignity as the visible sign and symbol of a good conscience and kindly heart.

CHAPTER III.

THE MAD LAIRD.

When Mistress Catanach arrived at the opening of a street which was just opposite her own door, and led steep toward the sea-town, she stood, and shading her eyes with her hooded hand although the sun was far behind her, looked out to sea. It was the forenoon of a day of early summer. The larks were many and loud in the skies above her—for, although she stood in a street, she was only a few yards from the green fields—but she could hardly have heard them, for their music was not for her. To the north, whither her gaze—if gaze it could be called—was directed, all but cloudless blue heavens stretched over an all but shadowless blue sea; two bold, jagged promontories, one on each side of her, far apart, formed the bay; between that on the west and the sea-town at her feet lay a great curve of yel-

low sand, upon which the long breakers, born of last night's wind, were still roaring from the north-east, although the gale had now sunk to a breeze—cold and of doubtful influence. From the chimneys of the fishermen's houses below ascended a yellowish smoke, which, against the blue of the sea, assumed a dull green color as it drifted vanishing toward the south-west. But Mrs. Catanach was looking neither at nor for anything; she had no fisherman husband, or any other relative, at sea; she was but revolving something in her unwholesome mind; and this was her mode of concealing an operation which naturally would have been performed with down-bent head and eyes on the ground.

While she thus stood a strange figure drew near, approaching her with step almost as noiseless as that with which she had herself made her escape from Miss Horn's house. At a few yards distance from her it stood, and gazed up at her countenance as intently as she seemed to be gazing on the sea. It was a man of dwarfish height and uncertain age with a huge hump upon his back, features of great refinement, a long thin beard, and a forehead unnaturally large, over eyes which, although of a pale blue, mingled with a certain mottled milky gleam, had a pathetic, dog-like expression. Decently dressed in black, he stood with his hands in the pockets of his trowsers, gazing immovably in Mrs. Catanach's face. Becoming suddenly aware of his presence, she glanced downward, gave a great start and a half scream, and exclaimed in no gentle tones,

"Whaur come *ye* frae?"

It was neither that she did not know the man, nor that she meant any offence: her words were the mere embodiment of the annoyance of startled surprise; but their effect was peculiar.

Without a single other motion he turned abruptly on one heel, gazed seaward with quick-flushed cheeks and glowing eyes, and, apparently too polite to refuse an answer to the evidently unpleasant question, replied in low, almost sullen tones:

"I dinna ken whaur I come frae. Ye *ken* 'at I dinna ken whaur I come frae. I dinna ken whaur *ye* come frae. I dinna ken whaur onybody comes frae."

"Hoot, laird! nae offence!" returned Mrs. Catanach. "It was yer ain wyte. What gart ye stan' glowerin' at a body that gait, ohn telled them 'at ye was there?"

"I thocht ye was luikin' whaur ye cam frae," returned the man in tones apologetic and hesitating.

"'Deed I fash wi' nae sic freits," said Mrs. Catanach.

"Sae lang's ye ken whaur ye 're gaein' till," suggested the man.

"Toots! I fash as little wi' that either, and ken jist as muckle about the tane as the tither," she answered with a low oily guttural laugh of contemptuous pity.

"I ken mair nor that mysel', but no muckle," said the man. "I dinna ken whaur I cam frae, and I dinna ken whaur I'm gaun till; but I ken 'at I'm gaun *whaur* I cam frae. That stan's to rizzon, ye see; but they telled me 'at *ye* kenned a' about whaur we a' cam frae."

"Deil a bit o' 't!" persisted Mrs. Catanach, in tones of repudiation. "What care I whaur I cam frae, sae lang 's—"

"Sae lang 's what, gien ye please?" pleaded the man, with a childlike entreaty in his voice.

"Weel—gien ye *wull* hae 't—sae lang 's I cam frae my mither," said the woman, looking down on the inquirer with a vulgar laugh.

The hunchback uttered a shriek of dismay, and turned and fled; and, as he turned, long, thin, white hands flashed out of his pockets, clasped his ears, and intertwined their fingers at the back of his neck. With a marvelous swiftness he shot down the steep descent toward the shore.

"The deil 's in't 'at I bude to anger him!" said the woman, and walked away, with a short laugh of small satisfaction.

The style she had given the hunchback was no nickname. Stephen Stewart was laird of the small property and ancient house of Kirkbyres, of which his mother managed the affairs—hardly *for* her son, seeing that, beyond his clothes