LOVE AMONG THE BEECH LEAVES

(By S.R.Crockett, in Love Idylls, 1901)

‘Elizabeth Macandrew! Saw ye ever the make o' that lassie? I declare, there she is at the barn-end wi' the laddies again! I'll fetch her in by oot o' that.’ Thus hopefully from the kitchen door, to whomsoever it might concern, Mistress Robin MacAndrew, the goodwife of Pitlarg.

A fine sunny afternoon in the heart of summer it was at Pitlarg. The hens were scraping in the hot roadway and scattering dustbaths over their backs, clucking low to themselves for very content in the holes in the hedges. Pitlarg dreamed a dream, and, as it were, turned over in its deep sleep. Nothing stirred about it anywhere—except Donald, that ancient black pet lamb, now grown into a great sheep; and even he only moved restlessly about the farmyard, and thrust his nose into every pail and bucket in quest of something to eat. It was never too hot or too cold for Donald to want to eat. He had been out with the cows, it was true; but there are limits to the society of cows, for one so enterprising as Donald.

‘Elizabeth MacAndrew!’ cried the goodwife again from the kitchen door. Now, Elizabeth is not an easy name to cry aloud, which is a reason why dogs and horses are not called Elizabeth. So that the herald at the kitchen door had to do her best with MacAndrew.

But name and surname thus cried aloud in the farmyard both returned, void as an echo to the herald in the white baking apron. Only a sleepy hen rooped lazily in a hole under the hedge, and a bantam cock exerted himself just enough to crow derisively.

‘Betsy MacAndrew—my certie, gin I come to ye, ye hempie!’

The words lengthened themselves out, still without effect. Donald, the pet sheep, came lumbering awkwardly to his mistress, and stuck his cold moist nose into her hand. It was certainly a strange time for her to feed him, he thought; but Donald was not the sheep to miss a chance. One never knows. On this occasion, however, he had assuredly drawn a blank.

‘Gae 'way, beast!’ said Mistress MacAndrew, shaking her baking apron at him with one hand, whilst she shaded her eyes with the other from the sun and looked along the road. There was a changing group at the end of the barn, on that smooth open space called the Playing Green, before every Galloway farmhouse, on which many generations of children have played and maidens danced,

‘It's thae Beattie lads an' Rab Christie, the new loon, playin' at the bools—an' that daft lassie, Elizabeth, encouragin' them an' playin' wi' them, nae less.’

Mistress MacAndrew ran in suddenly, struck with a wild fear that her last girdleful of crumpy farles of cake had overbalanced and fallen into the grate.

Being satisfied on this point (by finding that it was only a hen which had passed her outer guard, and was stalking about the kitchen making a high-pitched and wearisome plaint in a minor key), she shooed the fowl out. It hastened away in a foolish fluster, and continued to make remarks on the subject all across the yard with hurrying footsteps and drooping rufflings of wing.

Then, with an access of determination in her eye, Mistress MacAndrew took a hasty survey of her kitchen and of the cake drying in the fireplace. It seemed to her that no accident could happen for five minutes. So she went to the door.

She would try once more.

‘Bess!’ she cried. But neither is Bess a good name to carry, specially to those who do not want to hear, on a slumberous afternoon when the sun and the sleepy air drown the voice.

The monosyllabic adjunction only sounded like a goose trying to bark. Mistress MacAndrew took the life of her precious cake in her hands and walked towards the scattering and changing group at the loaning head.

‘I'll fetch that lassie in a hurry, I'll wager ye!’ she said.

She was a woman of some firmness of character, but her husband's brother's daughter was almost too much for her. Niece is a vain word in Galloway.

‘James MacAndrew's lassie,’ was what, in hours of ease, Elizabeth was called—with an accent on her parent's name which intimated that James had not been a success in life. At other times, and they were the more numerous, she was addressed with simplicity, as ‘Bess, ye hempie!’

Mistress MacAndrew had the dramatic sense. She drew near to the absorbed group along the covered way of the orchard wall, that she might take them red-handed in the midst of their iniquity. Presently she stood in the shade looking upon their play almost from striking distance. There was a supple willow wand in her hand. Nemesis hovered imminent—in a baking apron.

They were four who were playing that game of marbles which is known in the simple dialect of the place as Ringie. Four marbles or ‘bools’ lay in the ring, at the four cardinal points of the circle. The ‘playing bools’ or taws of three urchins lay at varying distances from the ring, each watched over by its owner; while a slim, long-limbed girl of fifteen knelt on one knee and shot, with swift and accurate jerk of the thumb and forefinger, her taw towards the ring. She knocked one off, pocketed it and tried again. The second time she missed, and it was Wull Beattie's turn. His marble did not reach the ring, but lay immediately outside.

The next boy, Jock Beattie the name of him, played with equal lack of success. The girl regarded him with an air of contempt, and scratched the dust with her bare toe—an unseemly thing in a great lass of fifteen. There was now but one other to play, and he seemed uncertain. He was the tallest of the three, but he seemed to walk in a maze. The sight of him awakened the worst passions in the breast of the white-aproned watcher by the barn-end. He was the ‘new loon’ of the farm, hired for summer work, and set to cut thistles at a penny an hour. Yet here he was playing at ‘the bools’ with the Beatties and Elizabeth MacAndrew! The willow wand twitched and turned in the hand—not, as in the case of the spring finder, to indicate the proximity of water, but rather that of fire. The fire was glowing in the breast of the mistress of the ‘new loon,’ and was soon to be transferred to various convenient outliers of his person.

But the ‘new loon,’ whose turn it was to play, did unexpectedly well. The Beatties, indeed, laughed at him for his way of holding his ‘bool,’ and Bess gave him a little shove behind with her foot at the moment of playing. Nevertheless, his marble performed the notable feat of ‘skinning the ring.’ It knocked off all the three marbles that lay round. The two Beatties yelled with disgust.

But Bess MacAndrew was more practical. Also she was an entirely shameless young woman. She bent down suddenly, scooped up the three marbles that had been on the ring, the new loon's playing taw, and that which of rights belonged to the elder of the Beatties, and fled fleetfoot for the kitchen door with flutter of high-kilted skirt.

The Beatties gave instant chase, though they might quite as well have hunted the summer wind. Only the new loon stood still, wondering in his slow way what had happened. He had no satisfaction on that point, but he found out very soon what was going to happen. For it was just then that his mistress made her appearance. She had missed the psychological moment, owing to the crisis which the unexpected act of Bess MacAndrew had precipitated; but at the instant when the kitchen door clashed to and the lock clicked in the inside, the willow wand fell on the dusty jacket of the new loon, and his mistress began to explain his duties to him.

It was a somewhat distracting lecture for the loon; for in the background the Beatties were flinging themselves on the kitchen door with baffled howlings, and in the intervals of carpet-beating upon his jacket the mistress of Pitlarg was telling him where he would go to. The new loon said he did not care: anything for a change; and, indeed, a worse time for a lecture on moral philosophy could hardly be conceived.

When it was over the new loon went back in a dazed condition to the pasture field, where, with a hook freshly sharpened at the grindstone, he had been set at dinner-time to cut thistles. He had only come to Pitlarg that day; and when Bess MacAndrew summoned him to come and play marbles with the Beatties he had been of opinion that this was part of his daily duties. The willow wand induced him to think otherwise.

Then, justice being so far satisfied, Mistress Mac-Andrew turned her attention to the Beatties, who were still trying to get in at the kitchen door. They had not seen what happened to the new loon; so that when the wrathful voice of the mistress of the farm arose suddenly behind them, and the first sharp touches of the willow wand fell upon their appointed place, it is little wonder that they turned and fled, leaving their bags in the hands of the enemy. Miss Elizabeth MacAndrew stood at the kitchen window and made faces at them as they ran. She held up the captured marbles in her hand, threw them in the air and caught them as they fell. The thoughts of the Beatties were prayers—taken from the Psalms.

But the new loon only rubbed himself and thought what a strange place Pitlarg was. He had come from the heathery hillside above the laird's plantations, where his father had been a gamekeeper, and Pitlarg was his first place. His mother was now a widow, and he had come away from home in order to help to keep her. He was seventeen, though he did not look so much.

Bess MacAndrew listened with due deference to her aunt's hortatory lecture. She put on her shoes and stockings. Then she went and set all the marbles in a row under the glass case of the clock in the ‘room,’ where the new loon could see them, but where, owing to his subordinate position, he would have no right to go. Bess meant to make it interesting for the new loon.

His name was Robert Christie, and he had grown six inches during the year, but his clothes had not accompanied him. His joints looked like knots on beech branches, and his long neck gave him the look of a jack heron that has just alighted. He had a Globe Shakespeare in his pocket, Macaulay's History in his box upstairs, a Milton, and three volumes of the cheap edition of Carlyle (blessed treasure of Providence for boys in their teens during the sixties and seventies!) and, besides these, a Bible which his mother had given him. He had also a change of everything. So he promised his mother to read his Bible. And Rab Christie was a boy of his word, even when he only passed it to himself: much more when he passed it to his mother.

But the terms of his engagement were unfortunate. In the meantime he was just at Pitlarg on trial, and the master was from home for the day. He was to cut thistles at a penny an hour, and after a week's experience at his work William MacAndrew would tell the new loon whether he wished him to remain. He had thus come in between terms, owing to Pate Tamson, the late Pitlarg boy, running away to join the play-actors, with whom he learned to swing naphtha lamps and sleep on a sack, instead of playing Hamlet as he had expected. So Robert Christie had his comfortable bed in the stable loft and reigned in his stead.

But for all that it was not yet decided whether the new loon was to stop about the place.

William Mac Andrew, decent man, came home from the town over in the afternoon, and took a walk round the fields (he called it ‘a dawner’) to see how things were going. He looked over the croft dyke to observe how the new loon was conquering the thistles at a penny an hour—and good money. The new loon was reading Measure for Measure at a penny an hour, prone on his face, with his ragged straw hat over his eyes and his feet from the knees flailing in the air to warn off the flies.

In a moment the scene changed to ‘The Tempest,’ and that without warning. William MacAndrew was a decent man and quiet, but this was too much for him.

‘Aye, my man,’ he said, ‘an' what's this o't ye are at? Is this cuttin' my thistles, ye lazy whalp? D'ye ken what comes o' cheatry? D'ye ken whaur cheats gang to?’

‘My mither says they gang to be drovers an' packmen, an' mak' sillar like slate stanes!’ said the new loon. ‘But if ye please, Pitlarg, I'm no a cheat, though I was readin' my buik for a meenit. See, I hae my faither's watch, an' I was readin' juist five meenits by it. Then I wad gang screevin' ower the field and cut doon the thistles like mawin' meadow hay. Yince roond and come back for five meenits mair. Ye see, sir, I mak' up for't, an' it's juist like takkin' a drink!’

Pitlarg smiled grimly.

‘An' what micht it be that ye are readin', my man?’ he asked.

‘It's Shakespeare, sir,’ said the new loon with shamefacedness. Pitlarg was an elder, and there was no saying what he might think of Shakespeare.

‘Ay,’ said Pitlarg, ‘I was jaloosin' that it wadna be your Bible. But ye micht read waur. Let us see.

The new loon handed him the book.

‘It's ower sma' prent for me!’ said Pitlarg, ‘but I think you and me will fettle fine yet. Only till we 'gree aboot a price, I am thinking that we'll work by the piece an' no by the hour. I'll pay ye a penny a rig for the thistles, and then ye can read Shakespeare in your ain time.’

It was a bad, backward year, and Pitlarg was a little anxious about his rent; but he was a hardworking and honest man, and trusted in Providence.

For many years he had been harassed by the game of the neighbouring landlords ‘eating off’ him; especially the rabbits and hares from the carefully preserved coverts on two sides of his farm, in which a brace of landlords bred game by the hundred to feed upon his crofts.

It so happened that Pitlarg's farm lay by itself, apart from the estate of his own laird, and was surrounded by the lands of gentlemen sportsmen, whose grouse fed freely on his stooks, and whose rabbits and hares wasted his turnips.

But it was the year of the ‘ground game,’ and there was a better prospect for the future. Only the two next rent days were hard fences for the farmers of Pitfour to take.

‘The Lord will provide a deliverer,’ said Pitlarg, with genuine piety.

And He did—the new loon.

When Rab Christie came in that night he had done a good day's work on the new terms of working by the piece. He was satisfied with himself, and some sonorous lines from Shakespeare were sounding in his head.

He took his porridge quietly at the kitchen table and looked about him. The mistress was bustling about, clattering dishes. Pitlarg was lying with his boots off on the sofa in the ‘room,’ reading the ‘wee paper’—lamb sales were his first subjects, then the synopsis of the Rabbits and Hares Bill.

Miss Elizabeth MacAndrew sat demurely at her uncle's side near the window. She was working a sampler. The new loon looked at her. She had shoes on now, also stockings, and her long legs were crooked up under her chair out of sight. She caught him looking, and put out her tongue at him. Then she pointed out the marbles under the clock-case to him, counting upon her fingers—one, two, three, four, and her thumb for his own stolen ‘taw,’ which was a fine sphere of alabaster.

But the new loon did not even look annoyed. He rose calmly and walked into the sacred ‘room,’ where no farm loon had ever been before, except at worship. Bess watched him with stupefaction. Mistress MacAndrew stopped as suddenly as if a hen had flown in her face, and even Pitlarg himself put down his paper and his jaw dropped with wonder.

Rab Christie calmly lifted the glass shade off the clock, took out the marbles, counted them leisurely, and put them in his pocket. Then he walked back to the kitchen table, and set about finishing his porridge. It was some time before the three in the room recovered themselves. The mistress came first to her senses. She had followed the audacious loon to the room door.

‘Hoo daur ye,’ she said, ‘to meddle wi' my clock, an' to come ben to my room withoot biddin'?’

‘They were my bools,’ said Rab calmly, taking bite and sup time about.

Bess thought she had never admired any one so much—not even the man at the fair that rode three horses at a time, whose shining example had drawn off Rab's predecessor.

‘Your bools!’ said Mistress MacAndrew, gasping; ‘an' hoo cam' your bools under my crystal clock case, that hasna been lifted or dusted for twenty year?’

‘That,’ answered the new loon indifferently, ‘I dinna ken, but they war my bools.’

‘Losh preserve us! that fair cowes Co'en!’ said Mistress MacAndrew, holding up her hands.

But Pitlarg only laughed, and took up his paper. ‘It's Shakespeare that does it. He's gotten it on him, guidwife! Ye canna help it!’

‘Eh—what? what has he gotten—whatna a trouble did ye say the laddie had on him? Is't smittable, think ye. He'll no bide aboot Pitlarg gin it be. Let me see, laddie.’

And the cautious goodwife of Pitlarg, who feared not the face of man, but stood in deadly terror of ‘onything smittable,’ examined Rab Christie's brow and the back of his ears for spots, and his hair for possibilities.

‘Na,’ she said, ‘he's clean and weel-keepit, at ony rate. I see nae sign o' trouble aboot the boy. What said ye he had gotten, guidman?’

‘Hoot, nocht ava, mistress; I juist said that he had gotten a Shakespeare,’ said Pitlarg over his paper.

‘A what, William—I wush ye wad speak plain Scots, an' nane o' yer langnebbit yins. What's Shakespeare?—Is't a swallin' or a 'luppen shinnin'?' I've heard o' folks haein' an income in their knee, an' a brither o' my auntie's had a white swell-in', but never in a' my days did I hear o' ony body haein' a Shakespeare—guidelife, no!’

‘Hoot na, woman: d'ye no ken?’ said Pitlarg— who had kept perfectly serious, for he loved to hear the wife talk: ‘Shakespeare's juist a book.’

‘A book!—guidman, ye are no richt in the mind! What harm could a book do him to gar him come clamperin' in howking bools oot o' my clock case? Guidman, ye are gettin' to hae less an' less sense in yer auld age.’

‘Aweel, aweel!’ said Pitlarg good-naturedly,

‘it's no lost what a freend gets. Ye're gettin' a' the sense that is aboot Pitlarg, and to them that hae shall be given, ye ken.’

‘Lord save us, guidman! did ye ever see sic a boy?’ said the mistress of Pitlarg that night, when the new loon had gone off to the stable loft, and Elizabeth MacAndrew was in bed but not asleep in her own room; ‘d'ye think that we'll be able to keep him?’

The goodman, who was sitting having his last smoke before bedding, lifted a glowing peat from the hearth, and fitted the end of it into his pipe, holding that grimy cutty sideways, so that he might be able to survey the operation with a wary eye. Not till his pipe was drawing well did he answer his wife. He was a cautious man, Pitlarg. The operation when thus performed gives time for consideration. Several promising reputations for wisdom have been built up on it.

‘He may do no that ill, gin there's somebody to owerlook his wark.’

‘Deed, then, guidman, Pitlarg is the very bit for him. Ye were a graund ower-looker a' the days o' ye. There's few in this countryside can keep steeks wi' you at a day's gafferin'!’

Which was Mrs. MacAndrew's way of saying that her husband did not love hard work. Perhaps that might be the reason that there was an anxiety about the rent.

William MacAndrew did not enter into the subject. Instead he put a new coal in his pipe.

‘He's a guid boy to his mither, an' the herd says that he sees him at his prayers nicht an' mornin',’ he said at last.

Pitlarg wanted the boy to stay, so that he touched his wife's preferences on their weak side, as he well knew how.

Next morning when the goodwife of Pitlarg came into the kitchen, the new loon came in, and threw a pair of fat rabbits down on a chair.

‘Whar gat ye thae?’ said Mrs. MacAndrew.

‘In the kailyaird,’ said Rab Christie.

‘Deed, aye, they hae been sair on the plants, the vermin; and they'll mak' a graund denner; but how did ye get them?’

‘I made a gin o' a steeker,’ said the youth, simply enough, but using highly technical language.

He meant that he had constructed a snare of an old bootlace, and that he had so fixed it with a little fall beneath that the rabbits had committed felo de se.

‘I canna bear skinnin' rabbits,’ said Mistress MacAndrew. ‘I wonder wha'll do it for me.’

‘Skin the rabbits—that nocht ava,’ returned the loon, to whom the matter was as simple as peeling a potato. In ten minutes the rabbits were clean and ready for the pot.

When Bess reached home from school, next day she came into the yard swinging her green bag of books. There were three great beeches standing in the old courtyard, making a dream of rustling leaves, and sprinkling a pleasant shade over the great iron bar to which the horses were yoked when the mill was to be set agoing. As she passed under the trees something fell at her feet, narrowly missing her head. Bess MacAndrew sprang her own length aside, with a shrill cry. There was something moving among the leaves, and that which had fallen at her feet was a book.

From overhead came the voice of the new loon.

‘Lassie fetch me up that book. It'll save me comin' doom’

‘I daresay,’ said Bess. ‘Come doon and get the book. It'll save me comin' up.’

‘Verra weel,’ said crafty Rab, ‘I can do withoot it; but it's juist graund up here!’

‘What are ye doin' there?’ continued Bess, standing on tiptoe and peering up. She could see nothing, however, except a pair of legs waving in the air. It was certainly very mysterious and attractive.

'I can see Criffel an' the three Cairnsmores, an' the dominie at the schule, an' a' the boys playin' 'Steal the Bonnets'! Oh, it's graund!’

‘I wish I could see!’ said Bess MacAndrew wistfully.

‘There's made a bonny seat up here where ye can sit and swing, and the wind rocks ye, an' the leaves birl aboot ye and tell ye stories, an' ye can sit an' read—splendid stories—ghosts and murders and fairies an'…’

‘I'm comin' up,’ said Bess.

‘Wi, than!’ said the invisible in the tree; ‘fetch the book wi ye!’

Soon Rab and Bess were seated side by side far up in the great beech tree. Rab had fixed a slate in a curious but perfectly safe position between two thick branches; and, with her back to the main trunk and her feet on a bough, Bess MacAndrew stated it as a fact that she would not call the Queen her grandmother.

The loon swung beside her in a manner apparently far more perilous, but so accustomed was he to arboreal life that he often went to sleep hooked on to three branches like a great grey homespun squirrel. Perhaps it was heredity that did it. Or more likely adaptation to the habits of Mistress MacAndrew.

‘Now read me about the murders and the ghosts!’ commanded Bess.

The new loon had never heard of Mr. Lamb's ‘Tales from Shakespeare,’ but Bess considered that nothing could beat Rab Christie's. Indeed, the manner in which he illustrated his points with quotations and dramatic utterances sometimes threatened his equilibrium. For instance, on the occasion when as Lady Macbeth he endeavoured at once to wash his hands, to balance himself on the top of a tree, and to keep the leaf of the Globe Shakespeare from flapping over in the wind, it became necessary for Bess to catch him by the hair and bring him to his poise again with a tug of great dexterity. Indeed, after this she considered it her duty to keep a hand twisted permanently in the crisp curls at the back of his head.

Rab did not mind at all, except when he wanted to emphasise a striking point in a dramatic way. This somewhat shortened his dramatic tether. Think of Mr. Irving being so controlled! But Bess would not let go, however interested she might be. She looked upon it as a duty.

William MacAndrew, on his evening tour of inspection, turned into the yard a little while after this. He most certainly heard voices in the earth or in the air, but he had not the least idea where to look for Ariel.

Now, it was the wide-awake Miss Elizabeth who first saw her uncle, and put her hand over the reader's mouth, causing an abrupt hiatus in the drama at the thrilling announcement, ‘Thrice the brindled cat hath mewed!’

‘Davert!’ said William MacAndrew, ‘but I could hae sworn I heard that boy.’

Two pairs of eyes watched him from aloft. The ‘hempie’ put aside the branches to have a better view. This was as good as hide-and-seek and going to church all in one. But a tell-tale green bag lay on the path. When Elizabeth started to climb the great beech she had not taken her schoolbag with her. Her uncle now found it, and took it in his hand.

‘That careless lassie!’ he said, ‘she never thinks that a' her books cost siller. Let us see!’

And with that William MacAndrew sat him down on the iron bar of the mill and proceeded to open out Bess's schoolbag of green frieze.

Up among the tree branches there was an agitation. The owner shook with anger and indignation. ‘The horrid wretch—to open my bag!’ she said.

Uncle William adjusted his glasses and opened the first book. It was a Bible.

‘'Steal not this book for fear of shame.' Dear me! that's what I wrote on my ain, forty year syne!’ said the searcher, not ill pleased.

He opened another. Various hieroglyphics were drawn over it—ladies of the hourglass-and-parasol persuasion, houses with curly smoke proceeding from all the chimneys, and fronted with gravel walks of alarming precision.

All was as it had been forty years ago. Children are the true Conservatives:

‘Elizabeth MacAndrew is my name, Scotland is my nashun, Pitlarg is my dwelling-place— A pleesant habitation.’

Uncle William slapped his leg as he sat on the mill bar. He thought this very excellent poetry indeed. And truly the sentiment was unexceptionable. It beat Shakespeare for real contentment.

But the author was exceedingly indignant, though, owing to temporary circumstances, she was unable to state her grievances. The trees rustled and shook irregularly above Uncle William's head, and a leaf or two fell; but the goodman of Pitlarg was content to think that the wind must be rising, and so read stolidly on.

He took out next a grimy twist of greyish-brown paper. The trees shook more than ever.

Up in the top branches, Bess took the new loon by the collar and said, ‘Do something to make him stop! Oh, the wretch, the horrid wretch!’

The new loon at that moment could not think of anything.

Uncle William looked within the twist of paper. Six bull's-eyes were there, aromatic and exceedingly adherent. A paper lay on the top of them.

Uncle William read aloud, with great apparent enjoyment:

''Lisbeth MacAndrew, I luv you— The rose is red, the vilet's blew, Sugar's sweet, And so are you! Wulliam Baittie, wrote with a new pen.’

Up in the tree, Miss Elizabeth MacAndrew was blushing the red of the rose aforesaid.

‘It's that great softie Wull Beattie,’ she whispered. ‘He's aye slippin' things in my bag when I am no lookin'.’

But the new loon sat a little farther off, in spite of the explanation.

‘I didna ken it was there,’ said Elizabeth, whose shame was great and real.

But something else came to light—a brass curtain ring, that Uncle William put upon his little finger.

Leaning back, he chuckled to himself. He foresaw that in a year or two Pitlarg would be a lively place.

Up in the tree Elizabeth dug her hands into the side of her companion. ‘Do something, can ye no, or I'll throw doon your Shakespeare at him!’

Then the new loon began to call softly with his hand to his mouth.

Sitting beneath, on the iron bar of the mill, William MacAndrew, who was a little deaf, cocked his ear to listen. Surely he heard the bleating of sheep in distress—the deeper cry of the ewes, the shrill, sweet treble of the lambs. It was not for nothing that Rab Christie had been a gamekeeper's son. There was no sound in nature that with his hands and mouth he could not imitate, and that well enough to deceive the wild things themselves. It was, therefore, easy for him to take in an old farmer rather hard of hearing.

The impression which Pitlarg got as he sat and listened was that the lambs recently weaned had again got in among their mothers. So he set down the bag where he had found it; and, taking his staff and whistling on his dogs, he set off briskly up the hill road. Before he was round the corner, Elizabeth was at the foot of the tree, and had reclaimed her violated treasure.

She shook her clenched fist at her uncle's back as he hastened up the road.

‘Horrid, mean old wretch!’ she cried.

‘Eh! what was that ye said?’ queried her aunt, at the door. ‘Ye surely warna' speaking that gate to your uncle, Elizabeth?’

‘It was that new loon,’ said the ungrateful young lady.

‘Oh!’ said the mistress of Pitlarg, satisfied.

Rab Christie had a fine plan for catching the hares and rabbits which infested Pitlarg from the neighbouring preserves. He first invested a considerable sum in the common material for wires and

snares. Then he interested his master in the venture. Finally, he excited Miss MacAndrew to such an extent that she petitioned that she might be permitted to assist him. Rab was nothing loath.

So the next night, after her aunt had looked in upon her sleeping-room and seen her wrapped safely up in the bed-clothes for the night, who but the ‘hempie’ stole out fully dressed, raised the sill of her bedroom window, and met Rab at the corner of the byre? There was a sharp chill in the air, and Elizabeth shuddered. The loon of Pitlarg observed this, and threw his coat about the girl's neck, tying it about her throat by the arms.

‘Hae, carry that!’ he said, handing her a rabbit net. ‘Ye'll hae mair to carry or ye come hame.’ So they went out into the grey twilight of the night.

Soon they were at the march dyke. At every hare run and rabbit track Rab placed a snare, as they went round the irregular marches of Pitlarg. In many cases, so constant was the traffic, that Rab and Bess could hear them being filled up only a few hundred yards from where they were working. Rab made Bess put on a pair of mittens, so that her hands would not touch the snares. It took them two hours to go round.

Then Rab saw Elizabeth back to her window. She was safe within in a moment. But he never thought of thanking her for coming. The shoe was altogether on the other foot, and Elizabeth felt it to be so.

‘May I come an' help ye to bring them hame?’ she said meekly.

‘Weel, if ye are wakkin' at five, ye may,’ said the youth coolly, as he walked away.

Elizabeth was again at the corner of the barn at five by the clock, and in an hour Rab and she had every snare lifted and nearly a hundred rabbits and hares lying at the barn door. Then Bess slipped quickly to her room, watching her aunt as she went into the byre to milk the cows.

‘An' what wull we do wi' a' thae?’ said the farmer of Pitlarg, in amazement. He had never seen so much fur together in all his life.

The new loon was practical.

‘Lend me the powny an' the cairt,’ he said, ‘an' I'll tak' them to Cairnochan, the game-dealer in the toon.’

He had been at that job before.

But before he went he made a practical proposal to the master of Pitlarg for a penny for each rabbit that he should catch and get to market.

So Rab drove off to the town with his loaded cart of ground game. At the gate he passed the gamekeeper of the Dullarg estate, who looked curiously at the heap under the sacking. But Rab passed without giving him any information. At the town he made a most favourable arrangement with the game-dealer to take all the rabbits and hares from Pitlarg. Cairnochan wanted them to send to Newcastle. They were not poached, but sold altogether ‘on the square,’ so Rab got the best price for them. They were to be driven down every morning, that they might be entirely fresh. They were to be exclusively in the hands of Cairnochan, and nothing was to be said to the surrounding gamekeepers. The loon returned triumphant.

So night after night it went on, and day after day the light cart drove to the town. In three months the rent was paid and Rab was a capitalist. He offered the half of the pennies to his trained assistant, but Bess rejected the offer with scorn. To take money for her help would be to spoil all the romance of the ploy.

But the neighbouring gamekeepers waxed suspicious. They lay in watch, and finally found Rab setting his traps one night. There was a storm of language, but the action was perfectly legal; and, as Rab put it, it would be years before Pitlarg could trap from the Dullarg and Craigley a tenth of what the game of the Dullarg had eaten off Pitlarg.

In a day or two there was a wire netting round the better part of the Pitlarg march dyke, and the gamekeepers rubbed their hands. They had done that atrocious new loon at Pitlarg to rights this time. But they did not know that, with a broomstick for a lever, that boy and his capable trained assistant had been at the trouble to raise the netting at all the runs, and engineer passages through the blocking furze. And on the morrow the pile at the barn door was not much less than usual. When

Rab is away, Bess can do it herself, for she is not a bit afraid of the brown moor, the colourless night, the dewy fields, or the cries of the wild things on the hills before the dawning comes.

Pitlarg thought, and with good reason, that there never was such a boy, and at last the goodwife agreed with him. Rab had been promoted to taking his meals in the room along with his master and mistress, which never boy was allowed to do before.

By the following autumn Rab had so much money between his wages and his percentage (much increased now by the grateful Pitlarg) that he thought of taking a year at college, for the loon who reads Shakespeare has ambitions, and the world does not end for him with rabbit-catching.

So he went away, and Bess MacAndrew accompanied him to the gate upon his departure. There was a sense of emptiness somewhere, and her heart was welling rebelliously within her at the desertion.

‘You are glad to go away,’ she said, scraping the ground with her foot, as they stood before parting at the black gate of the loaning.

‘Yes,’ said Rab, his heart full of his future, and with the sublime selfishness of youth and excellent intentions; ‘yes, ye see I want to get on, Bess.’

‘‘You are a nasty, horrid, deceitful thing, and I'll never speak to you again as long as I live!’ said Elizabeth; and, lest she should ignominiously burst into tears she turned and fled, leaving Rab standing dumbfoundered at the gate, looking after her.

She ran straight into the byre, and putting her arms round the neck of her favourite red-and-white cow, she sobbed her girl's heart out, sore and hurt with the cruel desertion of her comrade and companion.

‘Love!’ she said to herself— ‘not such a thing. That is all nonsense; but it is a horrid shame of him, all the same.’

The loon meant to come back next year, but the year lengthened into two, and Rab had taken a college bursary and been through three sessions at college before he came back to Pitlarg. He was now twenty, and Elizabeth MacAndrew was nearly eighteen. But nothing was changed when he came up the loaning. He was to bide with the MacAndrews all the summer, and help with the hay and harvest; but he had arranged to have time also for his studying.

The gate was hanging on one hinge when he tried to open it. He resolved that he would come out and mend it at once. The stable was grimy and dull: he would begin to give the whole place a coat of whitewash tomorrow. But the kitchen doorstep was scoured, and the windows winked like jewels. The neglect was only apparent in what had been his own department. He would soon set that to rights. The new loon had come to his own again. But here was someone approaching.

A tall and sedate young lady moved towards him, book in hand. She was dressed in black. Rab Christie took off his hat, for amongst other things he had learnt manners in Edinburgh town. The quietly graceful young woman bowed.

‘A visitor!’ thought the new loon.

He came nearer.

‘Mercy me, Bess—I mean Miss MacAndrew!’ stammered Rab.

The young lady extended her hand calmly.

‘How do you do, Mr. Christie?’ she said, with great self-possession.

The loon, now come to his regality, only to find all things new, walked through the yard by her side, more dazed than when, in the slumberous summer afternoon of long ago, Mistress MacAndrew had laced his jacket for playing ‘bools’ in working hours, and Bess had run off with the stakes to put them in the clock-case. There, too, was the window out of which she had got to help him with the rabbits. It was all a dream. This tall young lady never swung her feet over a tree branch, sitting on a slate stool.

‘It is a fine day,’ she said at last, keeping her eyes demurely on the ground.

‘It is that!’ said the new loon, becoming conscious of the size of his feet and the fact that his hands hung by his side like hams.

They passed under the tree of climbing. Its leaves rustled invitingly. Rab sighed as he looked up. Then just for a moment he caught the glint of ancient mischief in the eye of Bess MacAndrew.

‘Will ye try it, Bess?’ he said audaciously.

For one quivering moment it seemed as if Bess would, but her eye drooped again upon the ground.

‘You will want to see my aunt,’ she said meekly.

‘Aye!’ said Mr. Robert Christie, who had, of course, come so far solely for that purpose.

They were passing the corner of the hedge in which the hawthorn tree, carefully trained, stooped across and made about them a fragrant dusk of shade. They were going calmly underneath, when the new loon paused to pick a spray. No, he did not stop—he only ceased advancing. With a little sigh Elizabeth MacAndrew ceased also, and reached up to pick another spray.

‘Let me do it,’ said the loon.

So Bess let him; but the audacious loon, wicked thoughts working in him, suddenly, and of course unexpectedly, stooped and kissed her.

For a long moment she stood, four great roaring oceans swirling in her ears. Then the old Bess asserted herself. She gave the loon as sound a cuff on the ear as she would have done before he went away.

‘Now let us go in and see my aunt,’ she said, with great content.

So they went in together, but took hands as they went.

And the rest is an old story.