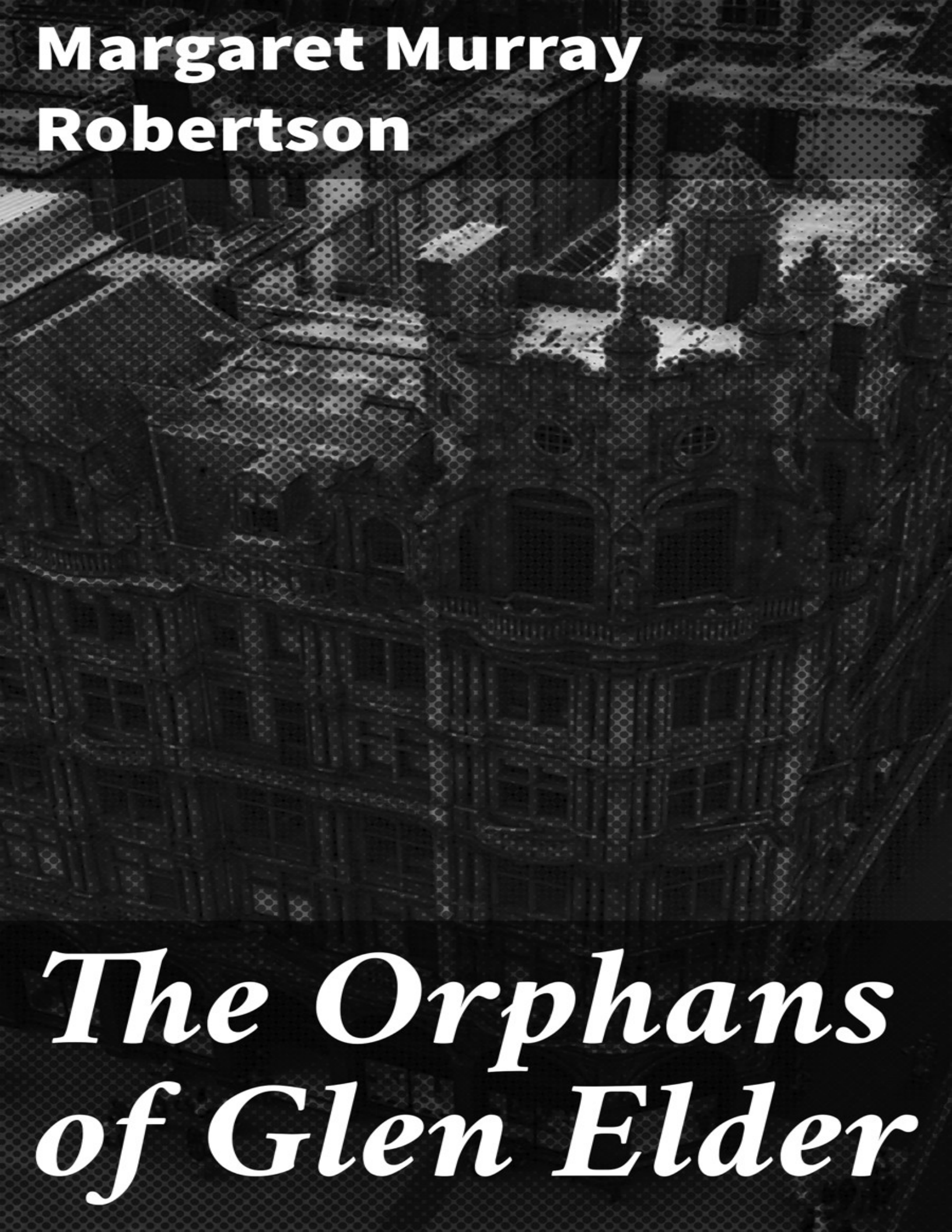




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Robertson**

*The Orphans
of Glen Elder*

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CHAPTER I.

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Aunt Janet's Visit.

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“ UP to the fifth landing, and then straight on. You canna miss the door.”

For a moment the person thus addressed stood gazing up into the darkness of the narrow staircase, and then turned wearily to the steep ascent. No wonder she was weary; for at the dawn of that long August day, now closing so dimly over the smoky town, her feet had pressed the purple heather on the hills that skirt the little village of Kirklands. A neighbouring farmer had driven her part of the way, but she had walked since then seven-and-twenty miles of the distance that lay between her and her home.

But it was not weariness alone that deepened the shadow on her brow as she passed slowly upwards. Uncertainty with regard to the welfare of dear friends had long been taking the form of anxious fears; and now her fears were rapidly changing into a certainty of evil. Her heart sickened within her as she breathed the hot, stifling air; for she knew that her only brother's orphan children had breathed no other air than that, during the long, hot weeks of summer.

At length she reached the door to which she had been directed; and, as she stood for a moment before it, the prayer that had often risen in her heart that day burst, in strong, brief words, from her lips.

There was no sound in the room, and it was some time before her eyes became accustomed to the dim light around her. Then the glimpse she caught, through the half-open door, of one or two familiar objects,—the desk which had been her father's, and the high-backed chair of carved oak in which her mother used to sit so many, many years ago,—assured her that she had reached her journey's end.

On a low bed, just opposite the door through which she gazed, lay a boy, apparently about ten years of age. His face was pale and thin, and he moved his head uneasily on his pillow, as though very weary or in pain. For a time all sense of fatigue was forgotten by the traveller, so occupied was she in tracing in that fair little face a resemblance to one dearly beloved in former years—her only brother, and the father of the child.

Suddenly he raised himself up; and, leaning his head upon his hand, spoke to some one in another part of the room.

“Oh me! oh me!” he said, faintly: “the time seems so long! Surely she must be coming now.”

“It's Saturday night, you ken,” said a soft voice, in reply. “She can't be home quite so soon to-night. But the shadow of the spire has got round to the yew-tree at the gate, and it won't be long now.”

The little head sank back on the pillow again, and there was a pause. “Oh me!” he murmured again. “It seems so

long! I wish it was all at an end."

"What do you wish was at an end?" said the same low voice again.

"All these long days, and my mother's going out when she's not able to go, and you sewing so busy all the day, and me waiting, waiting, never to be well again. Oh, Lily, I wish I was dead."

There was the sound of a light step on the floor, and a little girl's grave, pale face bent over the boy.

"Whist, Archie!" said she, gravely, as she smoothed the pillow and placed his restless head in a more easy posture. "Do you not ken it's wrong for you to say the like of that? It's an awful thing to die, Archie."

"Well, if it's wrong to be weary of lying here, I can't help it," said the child; "but it's surely not wrong to wish to die and go to heaven, yon bonny place."

"But it is wrong not to be willing to live and suffer too, if it be God's will," said his sister, earnestly. "And what would we do if you were to die, Archie, my mother and me?"

"I am sure you could do far better than you can do now. You wouldn't need to bide here longer. You could go to Glen Elder to Aunt Janet, you and my mother. But I'll never see Glen Elder, nor Aunt Janet, nor anything but these dark walls and yon bit of the kirk-yard."

"Whist, Archie," said his sister, soothingly. "Aunt Janet has gone from Glen Elder, and she's maybe as ill off as any of us. I doubt none of us will ever go there again. But we won't think of such sad things now. Lie still, and I'll sing to you till my mother comes home."

She drew a low stool to the side of the bed, and, laying her head down on the pillow beside him, she sang, in a voice low and soft, but clear as a skylark's, the sweetest of all the sweet Psalmist's holy songs. It must have been a weary day for her too. She got through the first two verses well; but as she began,

“Yea, though I walk through death's dark vale,”

her eyes closed, and her voice died away into a murmur, and then ceased. Her brother lay quite still, too; nor did either of them move when the traveller went forward into the room.

Many sad and some bitter thoughts were in her heart, as she stood gazing upon them in the deepening twilight. She thought of the time when her only brother, many years younger than herself, had been committed to her care by her dying mother. She thought of the love they had borne each other in the years that followed; how the boy had come to her for sympathy in his childish joys and sorrows; how he had sought her counsel, and guided himself by it, in riper years. She recalled with sadness the untoward events which had interfered to separate him from her and from his early home as he advanced to manhood. Things had not gone well with him in the last years of his life, and he sank under a burden of care too heavy to be borne by one of his sensitive nature. Now he was dead, and she grieved to think that she, his sister, in her old age of poverty, could not offer a home to his widow and orphan children.

The youth and middle age of Mrs. Blair had been more free from trial than is the common lot; but the last few years

had been years of great vicissitude. She was now a widow and childless; for though it might be that her youngest son was still alive, she did not know that he was; and his life had been the cause of more sorrow than the death of all her other children had been.

She had been involved in the pecuniary troubles that had borne so heavily upon her brother, and when old age was drawing near she found herself under the necessity of leaving Glen Elder, the home where her life had been passed, to seek a humbler shelter. Since then she had lived content with humble means, as far as she herself was concerned, but anxious often for the sake of those whom she loved and longed to befriend. She had known they must be poor, but she had not heard of their poverty from themselves. They resided in a remote and thinly-peopled district in Scotland, where the means of communication were few and difficult. Nothing but vague reports had reached her. She had hoped against hope till the time came when she could set her fears at rest, or know the worst, by seeing them herself. Now, standing in the bare room, in the midst of many marks of want and sickness, it grieved her bitterly to feel how little she could do to help them.

“God help them!” she said, aloud; and her voice awoke the sleeper before her. For an instant the startled girl stood gazing at the stranger; then, advancing timidly, she held out both hands, exclaiming:

“Aunt Janet!”

“Yes, it is Aunt Janet,” said Mrs. Blair, clasping her in her arms; “if indeed this can be the little Lily I used to like so well to see at Glen Elder. You are taller than my little lassie

was," she added, bending back the fair little face and kissing it fondly. "But this is my wee Lily's face; I should know it anywhere."

"Oh, Aunt Janet!" cried the child, bursting into tears; "I am so glad you are come. We have needed you so much!"

Mrs. Blair sat down on the bed, still holding the child in her arms. Poor Lillas! Tears must have been long kept back, her aunt thought, for she seemed to have no power to check her sobs, now that they had found way. Half chiding, half soothing her with tender words, she held her firmly till she grew calm again.

In a little while the weary child raised herself up, and said:

"Don't be vexed with me, Aunt Janet. I don't often cry like that; but I am so glad you have come. We have needed you sorely; and I was sure you would come, if you only knew."

Mrs. Blair would not grieve her by telling her how little she could do for them now that she had come; but she still held her in her arms, as she bent down to kiss the little lad, who was gazing, half in wonder, half in fear, at the sight of his sister's tears; and as she got a better view of his thin, pale face, she resolved that, if it were possible, he at least should be removed from the close, unhealthy atmosphere of his present home.

"You must be weary, aunt," said Lillas, at last, withdrawing herself from her arms, and untying the strings of her bonnet, which had not yet been removed. "Come and rest here in the arm-chair till mother comes home. Oh, she will be so glad!"

Mrs. Blair suffered herself to be led to the chair which had been her mother's; and, as she rested in it, she watched with much interest the movements of the little girl. In a few minutes there was a fire on the hearth, and warm water prepared, and then, kneeling down, she bathed the hands and face and weary feet of her aunt. Mrs. Blair felt a strange, sweet pleasure in thus being waited on by the child. Many months had passed since she had looked on one united to her by the ties of blood; and now her heart was full as she gazed on the children of her brother. There was something inexpressibly grateful to her in the look of content that was coming into the grave, wistful eyes of the little lad, and in the caressing touch of Lily's hand. In the interest with which she watched the little girl as she went about intent on household cares, she well-nigh forgot her own weariness and her many causes of anxiety. There was something so womanly, yet so childish, in her quiet ways, something so winning in the grave smile that now and then played about her mouth, that her aunt was quite beguiled from her sad thoughts. In a little while Lily went to the door, and listened for her mother's returning footsteps.

"I wonder what can be keeping her so late?" she said, as she returned. "This is not a busy time, and she said that she would be early home. Sometimes she is very late on Saturday night."

Once more she went to the head of the stairs, to listen; and then, returning, she sat herself on a stool at her aunt's feet.

"And so you are very glad to see me, Lily?" said Mrs. Blair, smiling upon the child's upturned face.

The bright smile with which the girl answered faded quickly as her aunt continued: "And you are very poor now, are you?"

"Yes, we are poor; and, yet, not so very poor, either. We have had some work to do, my mother and I; and we have never been a whole day without food. If Archie were only well again! That's our worst trouble, now. And mother, too, though she won't own to being ill, often gets very weary. But now that you are come, all will be well again."

"And maybe you'll take us all home to Glen Elder for a wee while, as you used to do," said Archie, speaking for the first time since his aunt's coming.

"Archie so pines for the country," said Lillas; "and we can hardly make ourselves believe that you live anywhere but at Glen Elder."

"My home now is very unlike Glen Elder," said Mrs. Blair, sadly. "But there is fresh air there, and there are bonny heather hills; so cheer up, Archie, laddie; it will go hard with me if I canna get you to Kirklands for a while at least, and you'll be strong and well before winter yet."

The boy smiled sadly enough, and the tears started in his eyes; but he did not answer.

"Archie is thinking that, maybe, he'll never be well again," said his sister. "The doctor says he may be a cripple all his life."

This was a new and unexpected sorrow to Mrs. Blair; and her countenance expressed the dismay she felt, as she questioned them about it.

"It was the fever. Archie was ill with the fever all the winter; and when the spring came he didn't get strong

again, as we had hoped, and the disease settled in his knee. The doctor said if he could have got away into the country he might have grown strong again. And maybe it's not too late yet, added the little girl, eagerly. I'm sure the very sight of the hills, these bonny summer days, might make one strong and well."

"Well, he'll get a sight of the hills before very long, I trust; and I don't despair of seeing him strong and well yet," said Mrs. Blair, hopefully; and the children, reassured by her cheerful words, smiled brightly to each other, as they thought of the happy days in store for them.

Death had visited the homes of both since Mrs. Blair and her sister-in-law met last, and to both the meeting was a sad one. Lillas' mother was scarcely more calm than Lillas had been, as she threw herself into the arms of her long-tried friend. Her words of welcome were few; but the earnest, tearful gaze that she fixed upon her sister's face told all that her quivering lips refused to utter.

When the first excitement of their meeting was over, Mrs. Blair was shocked to observe the change which grief and care had made in her sister's face and form. She looked many years older than when she had last seen her. There was not a trace of colour on her cheek or lip, and her whole appearance indicated extreme weariness and languor. Little was said of the exertions and privations of the last few months; but that these must have been severe and many was to Mrs. Blair only too evident. The food placed upon the table was of the simplest and cheapest kind, and of a quality little calculated to tempt the appetite of an invalid;

and she noticed with pain that it was scarcely tasted either by the sick boy or his mother.

"You are not well to-night, mother," said Lillas, looking anxiously at her as she put aside the untasted food.

"Yes, dear, I am as well as usual; but I am tired. The night is close and sultry, and the walk has tried me more than usual. I have not hard work now," she added, turning to Mrs. Blair. "This is not a busy time, and my employer is very considerate; but her place of business is quite at the other end of the town, and it's not so easy walking two or three miles on the pavements as it used to be among the hills at home."

"I fear you carry a heavier heart than you used to do in those days," said Mrs. Blair, sadly. "But are you not trying your strength more than you ought with these long walks?"

Mrs. Elder might have replied that she had no choice between these long walks and utter destitution for herself and her children; but she said, cheerfully, that it was only since the weather had become so warm that she had found the walk at all beyond her strength, and the hot weather would soon be over now.

"It's the country air mother wants, as well as me," said Archie; and the gaze which the weary mother turned upon her sister was as full of wistful longing as the little lad's had been. After a little pause, she said:

"Sometimes I think it would be great happiness to get away to some quiet country place, where I might earn enough to support myself and them. The din and dust of this noisy town are almost too much for me, sometimes; and I am not so strong as I once was. I think it would give me new

life to breathe the air of the hills again. But if such is not God's will, we must even be content to bide here till the end comes." And she sighed heavily.

"Whisht, Ellen, woman," said her sister: "don't speak in such a hopeless voice as that. Whatever comes, God sends; and what he sends to his own he sends in love, not in anger. He has not left you to doubt that, surely?"

"Oh, no: I am sure of that. I have seen that it has been in love that he has dealt with us hitherto." And in a moment she added, a bright smile lighting up her pale face as she spoke:

"And I think I can count on a place prepared for me at last by my Saviour; but, for my children's sakes, I would like to wait a while. I would like to take them with me when I go."

"It may be that one of them will get there before you," said her sister. "He knows best, and will send what is best for his own."

"Yes, I know it," said Mrs. Elder in a startled voice, as she turned to look at the pale face of her boy, now almost death-like in the quietness of sleep. The silence was long and tearful; and then she added, as if unconscious of the presence of another:

"So that we are all guided safely to His rest at last, it matters little though the way be rough. 'I will trust, and not be afraid.'"

Long after the tired children slept, the sisters sat conversing about many things. Not about the future. Firm as was their trust in God, the future seemed dark indeed, and each shrank from paining the other by speaking her fears