

On quitting Cromarty, I had left my uncle James laboring under an attack of rheumatic fever ; but though he had just entered his grand climacteric, he was still a vigorous and active man, and I could not doubt that he had strength of constitution enough to throw it off. He had failed to rally, however ; and after returning one evening from a long exploratory walk, I found in my lodgings a note awaiting me, intimating his death. The blow fell with stunning effect. Ever since the death of my father, my two uncles had faithfully occupied his place ; and James, of a franker and less reserved temper than Alexander, and more tolerant of my boyish follies, had, though I sincerely loved the other, laid stronger hold of my affections. He was of a genial disposition, too, that always remained sanguine in the cast of its hopes and anticipations ; and he had unwittingly flattered my vanity by taking me pretty much at my own estimate,—overweeningly high, of course, like that of almost all young men, but mayhap necessary, in the character of a force, to make headway in the face of obstruction and difficulty. Uncle James, like *Le Balafre* in the novel, would have “ventured his nephew against the wight Wallace.” I immediately set out for Cromarty ; and, curious as it may seem, found grief so companionable, that the four hours which I spent by the way seemed hardly equal to one. I retained, however, only a confused recollection of my journey, remembering little more than that, when passing at midnight along the dreary Maollbuie, I saw the moon in her wane, rising red and lightless out of the distant sea ; and that, lying, as it were, prostrate on the horizon, she reminded me of some o’ermatched wrestler thrown helplessly on the ground.

On reaching home, I found my mother, late as the hour was, still up, and engaged in making a dead-dress for the body. “There is a letter from the south, with a black seal, awaiting you,” she said ; “I fear you have also lost your friend William Ross.” I opened the letter, and found her surmise too well founded. It was a farewell letter, written in feeble characters, but in no feeble spirit ; and a brief postscript, added by a comrade, intimated the death of the writer. “This,”