

Munro Neil

Jaunty Jock and Other Stories



Neil Munro

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JAUNTY JOCK

CHAPTER I

THE WEST BOW BALL

THE last of the West Bow balls before Lady Charlotte ran away with her dancing-master was on a dirty evening in November. Edinburgh was all day wrapped in haar, and now came rain that made the gutters run like mountain burns and overflow into the closes, to fall in shallow cataracts to the plain below. There was a lively trade in the taverns. “Lord! there’s a sneezer for ye!” said the customers ordering in their ale, not really minding the weather much, for it was usual and gave a good excuse for more assiduous scourging of the nine-gallon tree; but their wives, spanging awkwardly on pattens through the mud on their way to the fishwife at the Luckenbooths for the supper haddocks, had such a breeze in their petticoats and plaids they were in a terror that they should be blown away upon the blasts that came up the gulleys between the towering “lands,” and daring slates and chimney-pots, and the hazards of emptied vessels from the flats above, kept close to the wall as luggers scrape the shore of Fife when the gale’s nor’-west.

Lady Charlotte was director of the dance – a creature most majestic, who ballooned about the room as if not her feet but her big hooped petticoat conveyed her, the only woman without a mask; that in her office would be useless. All the other women kept theirs on, with silken cords bit between the teeth (except when a favourite partner caused a titter). Below the velvet, when it tilted up, they showed the cheeks of youth and beauty, sometimes a little high in the bone for classic taste, and a patch on the chin just at the point where to a resolute lad it looked like a defiance. The flute, the hautbois, and the ’cello gave body to the melody of the harpsichord, somewhat flat the whole of them, for the place was sweltering, and the stuccoed ceiling sweated, and the walls.

A gentleman, conspicuous from the fact that he wore no wig, stood in the dusk at the foot of the room, away from the guttering candelabra, and put up his hand to hide a yawn. The minuet was beyond him, and seemed to him who came from the wilds, where the languid had no place in merriment, a somewhat insipid affair. In the card-room, where old dowagers played cards till their girls should be ready to go home, and the young ones sat with their chosen gallants, sipping tea in the latest manner, he had ventured a harmless remark to a lady neither too young nor too lovely to resent a politeness at a masque assembly, and she had fled to her friends as if he were an ogre.

He was neither surprised nor vexed; he was accustomed to have the fair avoid him, though scarcely with such obvious fastidiousness as to-night. It was one of the things to be expected by a man with a crooked nose and the plainness of his other features in conformity with that one, even if he had not happened to be there incognito.

“To the devil!” said he to himself. “I cannot expect them to be civil to any casual Jo at a two-and-sixpenny ball.” And he yawned again, impatient for the coming away of his cousin, whose gallantries to a lady at the other end of the room seemed unending. From that cousin he neither expected the ordinary courtesies of life nor desired them. They were usually as cool to each other as if they had sprung from different clans, and it was only the accident of a law plea affecting the family in its various branches that brought them privately to the capital and to the same lodgings from widely different parts of their native shire, and from widely different ways of life.

Whatever the cousin had to say to madam, she was pretty merry on the head of it, and seemed entranced with her gallant. He was such a coxcomb surely as never before came off the heather, with his Genoa velvet coat, his sky-blue breeches, and a waistcoat of the tartan of his clan, a thin, delicate, lady-like sword at his haunch that better knew the swing of the claymore.

“A rogue, Jock! and a tongue to wile the bird off the tree,” thought the man with the crooked nose, in no envy at all, but just in a distaste at nature’s perversity; and he saw that his cousin and the lady looked at him as if he were the object of their conversation.

To his astonishment, the lady, at the forming of the next quadrille, was brought to him by Lady Charlotte. “You see, if the mountain ’ll not come to Mahomet, Mahomet maun just come to the mountain,” said the directress airily. “Here’s a leddy I’m determined shall not miss her quadrille, and you are very lucky, Mr – Mr –”

“Macdonald,” said he, with a bow and a glance of shrewdness at the young lady, who had plainly made the arrangements herself for the introduction.

“Mr Macdonald – just so! a rare decent clan,” said Lady Charlotte, who prided herself upon the quality of her Scots. “I mind you had the tickets from Lord Duthie; you’re lucky to have the chance of the bonniest partner in the room.”

“I’ll take your word for it,” said he, with another glance at a very soothfast mask that came down on as sweet a pair of lips as ever man took craving for.

At a quadrille he was not amiss if one could get over the crook in his nose and the rugged plainness of his countenance generally. When he was done and brought the lady to a seat, she was good enough to say he danced divinely. She had herself the carriage of a swan, her voice was of a ravishing and caressing quality, with none of the harsh, high-pitched, East-country accent that would have grated on Macdonald’s ears, and yet there was a something shallow in her phrase and sentiment.

“You are very good to say so, ma’am. I rarely dance, and I have seldom danced less at an assembly than I have done to-night,” said he, taking the compliment at its real value, for his dancing was a point on which he had no illusions.

The lady toyed with her fan; her eyes, mischievous and profound as wells and of the hue of plums, sparkled through the holes in her mask.

“Oh la! and you divine at it, I declare! Our Edinburgh belles, then, do not tempt you, Mr Macdonald? But I daresay you will think them quite good enough for our Edinburgh beaux; now, did you ever in your life see such gawks?”

Macdonald rubbed his chin. “On the contrary,” said he, “I was just thinking them uncommon spruce and handsome.”

“You are very tolerant; have you any other virtues to be aired?” said the lady with a smile that puzzled him. “There’s still another dance, I see; her ladyship is fairly in the key to-night; you’ll have time to tell me all of them seriatim, missing out the lesser ones *brevitatis causa*.”

“H’m!” thought he; “her father’s in the law,” and wondered who she was. “I could tell you all of them in the time it would take to dance a step of the Highland Fling,” said he.

“Faith, there’s modesty! Item, Mr Macdonald?” and she sat back in her chair, her hoops bulged out in front of her like the bastion of a fort.

He counted them on his fingers humorously. “Item, the tolerance you have given me credit for, though you have no example of it as yet, madam; item, an honest liking for my fellows, even the scamps of them; item, a habit of aye paying my way; item –” his forefinger hovered dubiously over the other hand, but never lighted on another virtue. “I declare to you I have got to the end of my list and the man has not yet finished the tuning of his fiddle,” he said, laughing in a way so pleasant it almost made amends for his unhappy nose.

He had taken a seat beside her, she tapped him with her fan upon the knees with an air of the superior that struck him as a little droll, and, looking straight in his face, said in an affected Scots,

as if to take the sting from the words: “A’ very fine, Maister Macdonald, a’ very fine! What have ye given me here but twa-three virtues that come – except maybe the last – so easy to maist folk they’re nae mair to your credit than that you should sup kail wi’ a spoon?”

“A poor show, I confess it, ma’am; if you want a list of more brilliant virtues, you should try my worthy cousin, your last partner,” he replied.

“Do you tell me that – Barrisdale?” said the lady, burring her “r’s” with a gusto to make him certain she had no dubiety regarding his identity.

He could not hide a little start of surprise, for he thought the secret of his cousin and himself being in Edinburgh was known to but two men there, Lord Duthie and Mackee.

“You’re the daughter of Lord Duthie,” said he, remembering her law Latinity.

She was confused at so shrewd a guess, but admitted he was right. “It has long been my wish,” said she, “to have a crack with a Highland rob – , with a Highland person of your experience; and I must confess I asked Lady Charlotte for the introduction, though you may not think it modest. Let me tell you that I’m disappointed; it ill becomes a gentleman of Barrisdale’s reputation to be claiming such paltry common virtues as those you have named to charm the ear of an unknown lady in a mask. They credit ye with Latin and French, and say ye cut a dash whiles in London – oh la! a wonnerfu’ man entirely! – but upon my word, I never thought to get a catechist in my Hielan cateran.”

“Here’s a comedy,” thought he, looking across the room to his cousin. “How in the world did you discover me?” he asked her; “did my cousin – ”

“He did,” said she, “and he told me not to mention it; but you see, I take the privilege of my sex.”

“I cannot but be flattered at your interest, ma’am, I’m sure, and I hope you will not let the thing go further so long as I’m in Edinburgh. Now that I’m discovered, I’m wae to be back to my ruffian gang,” said he, with a quizzing air. “I must have a most tremendous reputation, and I would not wonder if you could go over all my history.”

“I daresay I know the worst of it.”

“Do you? Faith! it’s more than I do myself; might I ask you to be jogging my memory?”

“When I come to think of it,” said she, “the very virtues that you claim are what in the rough bounds of the Hielans may well manifest themselves in fashions that hereabouts in lalland towns we clap men into jyle for.”

“Indeed, I should not wonder, ma’am,” said he; “what’s counted a crime in one parish, even in the Hielans, is often looked on as a Christian act in others not a glen removed.”

“You talk of tolerance, Barrisdale; was it that made you hide in Ben Alder for a twelvemonth the man that shot Breadalbane’s factor?”

“He was a very old man, the factor, Miss Duthie,” said he glibly. “He would have died in another winter, anyway, by all appearances, and not half so handsomely as with a bullet. And the poor fellow who shot him – you would not have us send a man with a wife and ten of a family to the gallows?”

“Lord!” cried the lady, affecting to be out of patience. “You are a rebel too, my father tells me, and all for having back those Papist Stuarts and putting the dear King away out of the country. Is that a sample of your love for your fellowmen?”

“Logic,” thought Macdonald, “is not a branch that’s taught with the virginals and tambouring in lawyers’ families.” “Well, ma’am,” said he, “could you blame me? I have been in France a while myself, and I ken the kind of drink they have to drink there; I would not poison dogs with it. I would have Jamie back for no other reason than to save what relics of his stomach may be to the fore. What’s that but love for my fellows?”

“Was it that made you fight with the London gentleman and send him – poor soul – to his Maker at five o’clock on a cold winter morning?”

“It’s a small world. Who would have thought the gossip of that trivial affair would have travelled to an Edinburgh assembly? Sure you would not have had me put off the occasion till the summer weather; we were both warm enough at the time, I assure you, or that black folly they call a duel had never been engaged in.”

“You have the name of – of – I hate to mention it,” said the lady, now grown eager and biting her under lip.

“Oh, out with it! out with it! Crown Counsel should never be blate, ma’am; on my word, the talent for cross-examination would seem to run in the family.”

“Blackmail and –” said she in a whisper.

“One at a time!” said Macdonald. “That’s the prose way of putting it; up north we put it differently. You call it robbery; we call it rent. Some charge the rent by the pennyland or the acre; we charge it by the sound night’s sleep, and the man who rents immunity from his cattle from Barrisdale gets as good value for his money as the man who rents some acres of dirt from Appin.”

Madam worked her fan industriously – now she was on his heels, and could not spare so plain a mercenary. “You steal cattle,” was her next charge.

“Steal! ma’am,” said Barrisdale, with a frown. “It is not the bonniest word; up north we call it *togail*– lifting. It is an odd world, mistress, and every man of us has to do some sort of lifting for a living – if not in the glen, then in the market-place, where the act is covered in a fine confusion. If we lift a *creach* now and then in Barrisdale there are other clans that lift from us, and at the season’s end no one is much the worse, and there has been much frolic and diversion.”

“On the same reasoning, then, you would justify the attempt at abducting Glen Nant’s rich daughter?” said the lady.

“Do you happen to have seen her?”

“I have,” said the lady, and could not for her life have kept from smiling. “It was the sight of her spoiled what small romantics I had about the Hielan cateran.”

“Are you sure there are none to the fore yet?”

“Not a morsel!” said the lady, looking point-blank at his nose.

“*Mo thruagh!*” said Macdonald tragically; “then are we indeed forsaken.”

“You made a shabby flight, by all accounts, from the lady’s brother.”

“Humph!” said he, for the first time disconcerted; indeed, it was a story no way creditable to Clan Macdonald. “I think,” said he, “we’ll better let that flea stick to the wall,” and looked across the room to where his cousin sat glowering in a manifest anxiety.

“Oh, Barrisdale, Barrisdale, can ye no’ be a good man?” said Miss Duthie, in a petty lady-like concern, and unable to keep her eyes from that unlucky nose.

He put up his hand and covered it. She flushed to the neck that he should so easily have divined her, and he laughed.

“It’s no use trying, ma’am,” said he. “Let me be as good as gold and I would never get credit for it from your sex, that must always fancy that a handsome face never goes but with a handsome heart.”

She rose with an air of vexation to leave him, very red below her mask; the last dance was on the point of ending, the dowagers were coming in with their Paisley plaids on their shoulders. “I would never hurt any person’s feelings by allusion to his personal appearance,” she said, as she was turning away.

“I am sure of it, ma’am,” said he; “you are most considerate.”

CHAPTER II THE FIRE

MACDONALD and his cousin Jock walked to their lodging in Halkerston's Wynd without a lantern. The watch cried, "Twal o'clock, twal o'clock, and a perishin' cauld nicht"; they could hear the splash of his shoes in the puddles of the lane although they could not see him. The town now rose above the haar that brooded in the swampy hollow underneath the citadel; the rain was gone, the stars were clear, the wind moaned in the lanes and whistled on the steep. It was like as they were in some wizard fortress cut from rock, walking in mirk ravines, the enormous houses dizzy overhanging them, the closes running to the plains on either hand in sombre gashes. Before them went sedans and swinging lanterns and flambeaux that left in their wake an odour of tow and rosin not in its way unpleasant.

"Yon was a dubious prank upon the lady," said Macdonald, and his cousin laughed uproariously.

"Upon my word, Donald," said he, "I could not for the life of me resist it. I declare it was better than a play; I have paid good money for worse at a play."

"And still and on a roguish thing," said Macdonald, hastening his step. "You were aye the rogue, Jaunty Jock."

"And you were aye the dullard, Dismal Dan," retorted the other in no bad humour at the accusation. "To be dull is, maybe, worse. You had the opportunity – I risked that – to betray me if you liked."

"You knew very well I would not do that."

"Well, I thought not, and if you did not take the chance to clear yourself when you got it, there's no one but yourself to blame. Here was madam – quite romantical about the Highlands, as I found at our first country dance, and languishing to see this Barrisdale that she has heard from some one – (who the devil knows? that beats me) – was to be at Lady Charlotte's ball. 'I'm sorry to say he's my own cousin,' says I – 'a Hielan cousin, it does not count when rogues are in the family.' 'You must point him out to me,' said she. I gave her three guesses to pick out the likeliest in the room, and she took you at the first shot."

"A most discerning young person!" said Macdonald.

"She knew your history like a sennachie, lad, and rogue as she made you, I believe she would have forgiven you all but for that nose of yours."

"Oh, damn my nose!" cried Macdonald. "It's not so very different from the common type of noses."

"Just that! just that! not very different, but still a little skew. Lord! man, you cannot expect to have all the graces as well as all the virtues. Madam picked you out at all events, and I was not in the key to contradict her. She paid you (or was it me?) the compliment of saying you were not at all like her idea of a man with the repute of Barrisdale."

"Very likely! Indeed, I could guess she was more put out at that than at finding herself speaking to a scamp who laughed at his own misdeeds. You made a false move; Jock, had you admitted you were the man, she would not have been greatly mortified. In any case, she thought to improve the occasion with advice. She told me to be good!"

Barrisdale could hardly speak for laughing. "You kept up the play at any rate," said he, "for when I saw her to her chair, 'Yon's an awful man, your cousin,' said she. What do you think of her?"

"Something of a simpleton, something of a sentimentalist, and a very bonny face forbye to judge by her chin – that was all of it I saw."

“She kept too tight a mask for even me to see her face. Man, ye’ve missed her chief charm – she has twa thousand a year of her own. I had it from herself, so you see I’m pretty far ben. With half a chance I could make a runaway match of it; I’m sure I took her fancy.”

“Tuts! Jock. I thought you had enough of runaway matches; take care she has not got a brother,” said Macdonald.

Jaunty Jock scowled in the dark, but made no answer.

Their lodging was in a land deep down in the Wynd. Flat on flat it rose for fourteen stories, poverty in its dunnies (as they called its cellars), poverty in its attics, and between the two extremes the wonderfulest variety of households bien or wealthy – the homes of writers, clerks, ministers, shopkeepers, tradesmen, gentlemen reduced, a countess, and a judge – for there, though the Macdonalds did not know, dwelt Lord Duthie with his daughter. In daytime the traffic of the steep scale stair went like the road to a fair, at night the passages were black and still as vaults. “A fine place the town, no doubt,” said Jaunty Jock, “but, lord, give me the hills for it!”

They slept in different rooms. The morning was still young when one of them was wakened by the most appalling uproar on the stair. He rose and saw his window glowing; he looked from it, and over on the gables of the farther land he saw the dance of light from a fire. He wakened Jaunty Jock. “Get up,” said he, “the tenement’s in blazes.” They dressed in a hurry, and found that every one in the house but themselves had fled already. The door stood open; on the landing crushed the tenants from the flats above, men and women in a state of horror, fighting like brutes for their safety. The staircase rang with cries – the sobbing of women, the whimper of bairns, and at the foot a doorway jammed. Frantic to find themselves caught like rats, and the sound of the crackling fire behind them, the trapped ones elbowed and tore for escape, and only the narrowness of the passage kept the weaker ones from being trampled underfoot. All this Macdonald could define only by the evidence of his ears, for the stair was wholly in pitch darkness.

“By God! we’ll burn alive!” said Jaunty Jock, every shred of his manhood gone, and trembling like a leaf. Their door was in a lobby recessed from the landing – an eddy wherein some folk almost naked drifted weeping to find themselves helpless of getting farther. “Where’s the fire?” asked Macdonald from one of them, and had to shake him before he got an answer.

“Two landings farther up,” said the fellow, “in Lord Duthie’s flat.”

“Lord Duthie’s flat!” cried Macdonald; “and is he safe?”

“He’s never hame yet; at least, I never heard him skliffin’ on the stair, but his dochter cam’ back hersel’ frae the assembly.”

“Is she safe?” asked Macdonald.

“Wha’ kens that?” replied the man, and threw himself into the stair, the more able now to fight because of his rest in the eddy.

“It looks gey bad for your runaway match, Jock,” said Macdonald. “Here’s a parcel of the most arrant cowards. My God, what a thin skin of custom lies between the burges and the brute beast. That poor lass! It’s for you and me, Jock, to go up and see that she’s in no greater danger than the rest of us.”

He spoke to deaf ears, for Jock was already fighting for his place among the crowd. His cousin did the same, but with another purpose: his object was to scale the stair. He pushed against the pressure of the panic, mountains were on his shoulders, and his ribs were squeezed into his body as if with falling rocks. His clothes were torn from his back, he lost his shoes, and a frantic woman struck him on the face with the heavy key of her door that with a housewife’s carefulness she treasured even when the door it was meant for was burned, and the blood streamed into his eyes.

He was still in the dark of the stair; the fire at least was not close enough to stop his mounting, so up he felt his way in a hurry till he reached Lord Duthie’s flat. A lobby that led to the left from the landing roared with flame that scorched him; a lobby on the right was still untouched. He hammered at the only shut door but got no answer, plied the risp as well with the same result, then

threw it in with a drive of the shoulders. He gave a cry in the entrance and, getting no response, started to go through the rooms. At the third the lady sat up in her bed and cried at the intruder.

“The land’s on fire, ma’am,” said he quietly in the dark.

“Fire!” she cried in horror. “Oh, what shall I do? Who are you?”

“Barrisdale,” said he, remembering his role and determined to make this his last appearance in it. “You have plenty of time to dress, and I’ll wait for you on the landing.”

He went out with a sudden project in his mind, ran down the stair with its litter of rags and footwear and found it almost vacant, the obstruction at the bottom being cleared. “Take your time, my friends,” said he, “there’s not the slightest danger; the fire will not get this length for half an hour yet.”

His cousin came back from the crush. “As sure’s death, I’m glad to see you and sorry I never bided,” said he. “You never came on her; I knew very well she must have got out at the outset.”

“Indeed!” said Barrisdale. “As it happens, she’s yonder yet, and I had the honour to wake her; I fancy she’s taking her hair from the curl-papers at this moment. You never had a better chance of getting credit for a fine action very cheaply. It was in the dark I wakened her; I told her I was Barrisdale and would return when she was dressed. You may go back to her.”

“Man, I wouldn’t mind,” said the cousin; “but what’s the object?” he added suspiciously.

“Only that I’m tired of being Barrisdale to suit you. If you like to be Barrisdale and carry your own reputation, you’ll have the name of saving her life – one thing at least to your credit that’ll maybe make her forget the rest. With a creature so romantical, I would not wonder if it came to the runaway match after all.”

“Faith, I’ll risk it,” said Jaunty Jock, and ran up the stair. He came down with the lady on his arm, and took her to a neighbour’s.

“And did you confess to your identity?” asked his cousin when they met again.

“I did,” he answered gloomily.

“Surely she did not boggle at the Barrisdale; I was certain it would make little odds to a lady of her character.”

“Oh, she was willing enough, but it’s not a match,” said Jaunty Jock. “After this, I’ll always see the mask off first; she had a worse nose than yourself!”

YOUNG PENNYMORE

OF the half-dozen men of Mid-Argyll condemned on one account or another for their part in the Rebellion, the last, and the least deserving of so scurvy a fate, was young John Clerk of Pennymore. He had been out in the affair more for the fun of the thing than from any high passion of politics; he would have fought as readily for the Duke as for the Young Pretender if the Duke had appealed to him first; he was a likeable lad to all who knew him, and the apple of his mother's eye.

The hanging of young John Clerk seemed at the time all the more harsh a measure since he was not charged directly with rebellion, but with being actor or art and part in the death of the Captain of Clonary, who was shot on his way from Culloden by a gang of lurking Jacobites of whom the lad was one, and maybe innocent. The murderers scattered to the mist and to the sea. For six years Clerk sequestered in the land of France, and was caught at last in a tender filial hour when he had ventured home to see his folk. A squad of the Campbells found him skulking in the wood of Pennymore on the very afternoon of his return; he had not even had the time to see his people, and the trinkets and sweetmeats he had meant for his mother were strewn from his pockets among the bracken as he was being dragged before the Lords.

They looked at him – these dour and exigent gentlemen – with eyes that held no pity, not men at all for the nonce, but bowelless, inexorable legal mechanism; and Elchies, squeaking like a showman at a fair, sentenced him to the gallows.

“John Clerk,” he said, “you have had an impartial trial; you have been defended by an able advocate, who has made the most of a wretched cause; the jury has found you guilty as libelled, and it only rests with this court to pronounce sentence accordingly. You may yet, during the brief period you have to live, best serve your country and your friends by warning them against those pernicious principles which have brought you to this untimely end, and may the Lord have mercy on your soul!”

Then the doomster declared doom – that young John Clerk be handed over to the Sheriff-Depute, hanged by the neck on the burgh gibbet at Creag-nan-caoraich on the 5th September, and thereafter left for a time in chains.

The lad made a bow to his judges, gave a last quick, eager glance about the court to assure himself his parents were not there, and then he was hurried down the trap-door to the cells.

* * * * *

There was still a month to go before the day of execution, and the Clerks of Pennymore – the proud and bitter dame and her pious husband – scoured the shire in search of sympathetic gentlemen of influence, and forswore sleep itself in their efforts to secure reprieve. They seemed, poor souls! miraculous in their great endurance, singly or together tramping here and there on a quest no neighbour dared to share, tragic to see upon the highway, horrible to hear at midnight when their cart went rumbling through the sleeping clachans. Sympathy was plentiful, but influence was shy, and the hopes of Pennymore were narrowed at last to Campbell of Lochgair, a lawyer himself, with the ear of His Grace and the Crown authorities.

Lochgair, more, as it strangely seemed, for the sake of the peevish dame than for her husband's, promised his active interest, and almost guaranteed release, and in the latter days of August went to Edinburgh to wait on the Lord Advocate, who was Prestongrange. It was the year of the stunted corn – 1752 – and never in the memory of man had been such inclement weather. The seas would seem to have forgotten the ways of peace; the glens were flooded, and the Highlands for a space were cut off from the Lowland world, and in a dreary privacy of storm. So the days

passed – for most folk as if Time itself were bogged among the mire – for the man and wife in Pennymore as the flap of wings. They longed each evening for the morrow since it might bring welcome news, and yet they grudged the night and looked with terror on the dawn, since it brought the horrid hour a vigil closer.

And there were no tidings from Lochgair!

“I might have known! I might have known! – a traitor ever, like his clan!” cried the mother, all her patience drained to the bitter dregs, wringing her hands till the blood came to the knuckles. “Lochgair will see the laddie hanged, and never jee his beaver. Too well I know his promises! We’re here forgot, the pair of us, and all the world sleeping sound, no way put about at the thought of young John Clerk. Deserted of men! deserted of men!” and her cry rose like a dirge in their lonely dwelling.

“But not of God and His grace,” said her husband, shrinking before the fury of her eye. “I have trusted Lochgair in this with all my heart, and he cannot betray us. He knows that his breath is all that lies between our laddie and eternity.”

“Oh, trust!” she hissed. “I ken the man; but I have trusted too, this fortnight, till my very heart is rent, yet God Himself cannot put off the 5th September.”

“Yea, even that, if it be His will; our times are in His hands,” said the pious husband, and turned him again to his Bible. But the woman’s doubts were justified, and on the morning of the day before their son should perish, they yoked the horse and drove in the cart to the burgh town to see him for the first time in the cell he had shared with some doomed sheep-stealers.

Six miles lay between their home and the tolbooth gates, and yet it was in pitch-black night they came to the confines of the burgh, for they dreaded the pitying eyes of men and women. And all the way the woman fondled something in her plaid. They saw, afar, and few, and melancholy, wan lights in the burgh lands, blurred by the weeping rain; and at this spectacle – which told them the world went on its ordinary way and thought of breakfast, while their lad sat counting the hours, and they were engaged with misery – the man put his hand on the woman’s shoulder with a grip of steel, and she gave the last sob that was ever heard from her. For ever after she was a woman made of stone. The horse, as if it shared their feeling, stopped on the highway, reared itself in terror of something unseen, and snapped its belly-band, and the cart stood still under heaving beeches whose windy branches filled the dark with noise and cried down the very waves which roared on Creag-nan-caoraich.

The man jumped from the cart and fumbled with the harness, to find that further progress, wanting a girth, was not to be contemplated.

“I will walk into the town,” he said, “and get a rope, if you sit here till I return. You will not mind my leaving you, Margaret?”

“Mind!” she exclaimed with bitterness; “I have learned my lesson, and there is no more to mind.” But she fondled the thing concealed in her plaid, and her man walked quickly towards the wan lights of the tenements, leaving her all alone.

For a moment only she heard his footsteps, the sound of them soon lost in the din of nature – the uproar of the forest trees, whose ponderous branches creaked; the wind, canorous, blowing between the mountains; the booming crepitation of the sea upon the rocks. And yet no sense of solitude depressed her, for her mind was occupied by one triumphant thought – that young John Clerk should at least be spared the horror and shame of a public execution.

She had drawn, at first, the drenched plaid over her head to shield her and shut her in from the noise of tempest; but her hands in a little while were so busily engaged with her secret possession that the tartan screen at last rolled back on her shoulders, and she was aware of another sound than those of nature – the near, faint clang of chains. It was scarcely audible, but unmistakable – the beat of a loose end of iron links against wood, somewhere above her head, as she sat in the cart

by the side of Creag-nan-caoraich. She stared up into the darkness and saw nothing, then stood to her feet and felt above her with trembling hand.

Her fingers searched along a beam with a rope attached to it, whose meaning flooded to her brain with a gush that stunned; she touched a dead man's feet! and the pitiless clouds that had swept all night across the heavens heaved for a moment from the face of the reeling moon, and she saw the wretch upon the gibbet!

"My son! my son!" she screamed till the rocks and trees gave back the echo, and yet the distant lights of the burgh town glowed on with unconcern.

* * * * *

Her cries had ceased; she was sunk in a listless torpor in the bottom of the cart when her man returned in a state as wretched as her own, running with stumbling feet along the rutted highway.

"My God! my God!" said he, "I have learned of something dreadful!"

"I have learned it for myself," said his wife. "You're a day behind the fair."

"Not one day, but eleven of them," said her husband, hardly taking her meaning. "It is the fifteenth of September, and I'm so fearful of the worst. I dared not rap at a door in the town and ask."

"The fifteenth of September," she repeated dully; "we have not slept so sound this month back that we could miss a fortnight. Have you lost your reason?"

"I have seen a placard put up on the mercat cross," said her husband, with his brow upon the horse's back. "I read it in the light of the tolbooth windows, and it tells that the Government have decreed that, the day after September 2nd should be September 14th. Eleven days are dropped; it is called – it is called the Gregorian Calendar, and I have forgotten about the rope."

The woman harshly laughed.

"Are you hearing me, Margaret?" he cried, putting up his arms to seize her, feeling some fresh terror.

"Gregorian here, Gregorian there!" she exclaimed. "Whose Calendar but the cursed Campbells', who have bonnily diddled me of my son! Our times are in God's hands, you said; you are witness now they are in the devil's!"

"But it may be I was right, and that this is our Father's miracle; John could not be – could not die but on the day appointed, and no such day, it seems, was on the Calendar. But I dared not ask, I dared not ask; I was dumfounded and ran to you, and here I am even without the rope."

Again the woman harshly laughed.

"You need not fash about the rope, good-man," said she; "at your very hand is plenty for your purpose, for there my son is, young John Clerk, and he hangs upon the tree."

The woman would not put a hand upon the body. Without her aid her husband lowered the burden from the gibbet, laid it in the cart and covered it with his plaid; and when a girth for the horse had been improvised from a part of the shameful halter, the two of them turned for home, walking side by side through the dawn that now was coming, slow and ashen, to the east.

The man was dumb, and walked without volition, wrestling with satanic doubts of a Holy Purpose that had robbed him of his son with such unnecessary and ghastly mockery; the woman cuddled her cold secret in her bosom, stared glassily at the coming day, and for a time let fury and despair whirl through her brain like poison vapours.

"I will never rest," she cried at last, "till Lochgair has paid the penalty for this trick upon us. My laddie's death is at his door!"

Her man said nothing, leading the horse.

"At his door!" she cried more vehemently. "Are you hearing me? He has slain my son in this shameful way as surely as if he had tied the rope himself."

Her husband made no answer; he found in her words but the thought of one for the time demented, and he walked appalled at the chaos into which the precious edifice of his faith had tumbled. Rudely she plucked his arm and screamed in his ear —

“What will you do to Campbell?”

“To Campbell?” he repeated vaguely. “God forgive him his false hopes and negligence, but it was not he who condemned our son.”

“But for him,” said the woman, “my son would have died like a gentleman, and not like a common thief.”

“I do not understand,” said her husband blankly.

“No, you never understand,” she sneered, “that was ever your failing. Do you think that if I had not the promise of Lochgair, I should let my laddie die upon the gallows? The first of his race! the first of his race! I had brought with me his pistol that he might save himself the scandal of the doomster’s hand,” and she took the weapon from her bosom.

Her husband looked at it, grasped at once the Spartan spirit of her scheme, and swithered between chagrin that it had been foiled, and shame that the sin of self-slaughter should for a moment seem desirable.

“Oh, Margaret!” he cried, “you terrify me. Throw that dreadful weapon in the sea,” and he made to take it from her, but she restored it to her plaid.

“No, no,” she cried, “there may be use for it —”

“Use for it!” he repeated, and she poured into his ear the torrent of her hatred of Lochgair. “He could have won my laddie off,” she said; “we had his own assurance. And if we had not put our trust in him, we would have gone to others — Asknish or Stonefield, or the Duke himself — the Duke would have had some pity on a mother.”

“Lochgair may have sore deceived us,” said her husband, “yet he was but an instrument; our laddie’s doom was a thing appointed from the start of Time.”

“Then from the start of Time you were doomed to slay Lochgair.”

“What! I?” quo’ he,

“One or other of us. We are, it seems by your religion, all in the hands of fate and cannot help ourselves. Stand up like a man to this filthy Campbell, and give him the bullet that was meant for a better man.”

“You are mad, goodwife,” said her husband; “I would shed no man’s blood.”

“I speak not of men,” said she, “but of that false fiend Lochgair who has kept us on the rack, and robbed Time itself of a fortnight to make his clan diversion. Oh, man! man! are you a coward? Challenge him to the moor; remember that at the worst my son who lies in the cart there could have died in decency and not at the doomster’s hand if Lochgair had not misled us —”

“Woman!” cried her husband, “get behind me!” and took refuge in a gust of mumbled prayer.

They were now upon the Kenmore shore where the sea came deep against the rocks; no living soul had met them on their passage down the coast with their disgraceful burden, and alarmed at the prospect of encounter with any curious wayfarer, they drew the cart behind a thicket, to let an approaching horseman pass without his observation. Far off they heard the clatter of his horse’s hoofs, and while yet he was a good way distant the questing eye of the woman saw he wore a beaver hat, and a familiar coat with silver buttons!

“Look! look!” she cried, “here comes the very man, delivered to our hands.”

“I will not touch him! I will not touch him!” said her husband, cowering behind the bushes.

“Then will I!” said she, and drew the pistol from her breast, and her husband wrestled with her for the weapon.

Lochgair in a furious haste came galloping, his vision engaged on the road before him, and would have swept on his way unnoticed the cart, its burden, or attendants, but for the altercation

in the thicket. He checked his horse, turned round on the saddle, and peered among the branches, where the husband, breathing hard, had got possession of the weapon.

“He has slain my son, but I will spare him,” said the husband, and the woman put her mouth against his ear.

“No son of yours,” she whispered, “that is the curse of it! – but his own!”

“My God!” cried her husband, and fired at the horseman’s breast. He fell like a sack of oats on the roadway, and his horse flew off among the brackens.

For a while the world seemed in a swoon. In a swoon the waves lapped up against the rocks; in a swoon the leafage moved; in a swoon the sea-birds cried, and the man and woman, desperate, sought to hide the evidence of their crime. They turned the dead man over on his back, emptied his pouches, filled his clothes with stones, then threw him, with the pistol, in the sea.

“Home! home!” the wife commanded, placing the dead man’s papers in her plaid, and she walked, without remorse, by the side of her whimpering man, to Pennymore. She stirred the embers of the fire, and one by one destroyed the dead man’s documents, until the very last, and that she glanced at horror-stricken, for it was her son’s reprieve!

With a scream she rushed outside and turned her husband’s plaid from the face of the dead man in the cart – and it was not young John Clerk!

A RETURN TO NATURE

I

THIS Highland country is so peaceful and content, its folk are so staid in welldoing, property is so safe, and the human passions – at least the more savage of them – are kept so strictly in control, that most of us forget how lately we rose from the rude condition of nature. It is really but a brief span of years that separates us from our fathers who slept with an ear to the heather, hunted in the forests for their very lives, fought in stupid causes as heartily as we go football-playing, or forayed over narrow borders into parts of the country distinguished from their own but by a difference in the colour of the tartan. Who thinks of the ancient cateran fire smouldering under a frock-coat, or would imagine that the cry of “Cruachan!” in the ears of a quiet and prosperous sheep-farmer at a country fair will sometimes splash deep in the wells of his being, and stir up the red ghosts of war and vengeance that have not walked for generations? I have seen that marvel often, though always with new astonishment. I can amuse myself sometimes by saying one word of great meaning to the members of a family that has not broken the law since the year 1745, and see, in a moment, bitterness where before was indifference, anger in the gentlest girls, and in their brothers a hate almost as unreasoning and hot as that of Cain. A flash – just one flash of the spirit that we do not control, but with no consent of the flesh – and then they will laugh at their own folly.

It was some such flame of the ancient elemental passions, doubtless, that accounted for the transgression of Macaulay, the factor of the Captain of Kilree – an outbreak of the Islands that I think has had no parallel in the annals of Scotland for more than a hundred years. I did not know Macaulay in his prime. When I was a boy he was an ancient, bent, and spiritless man, with a singularly devout reputation, and a grim, humorsome Lowland wife; but everybody round the countryside knew his story, and we boys used to look at him from afar off, amazed, admiring, and half-incredulous, like children who have heard tales of giants who could stride from hill to hill, and have at last been taken to see one in a show. In his shabby green business suit of broadcloth and beaver hat, or leaning on his cane at the church gate, with snuff strewn down his waistcoat, there was nothing at all about his personality to suggest the terrific and romantic. Maybe, as our elders used to say, the nose did hint at the eagle, the flaring nostril say something of the morning sniffed suspiciously among alders where the skulker hid, a certain twitch of the bushy eyebrows express a fearful soul that one time stood alone on hill-tops and saw the whole visible world its enemy; but to our vision, at least, the man was “done,” as we say, and by his look might have been a prosperous weaver in the decline of years.

Yet he had an experience, the narration of which by our elders gave him the glory of Rob Roy to our imaginations. He had, in a sublime hour of his life, burst the bonds that make some of us fret in the urging weather of spring, that most of us chafe at in childhood, when the old savage wakes and cries, but grow at last to tolerate and even cherish; and he had taken the world for his pillow – as the Gaelic phrase goes – and short of the vital blood of man had dipped in the early sins.

II

Alexander Macaulay was his name; in the common conversation of the people he was known as Alasdair Dhu, or Black Alick, for till he was nearly seventy his hair was like the bramble-berry. Of his forebears in the island everybody knew; they had owned Kincreggan for at least five hundred years, until, in his grandfather's time, they were proscribed and rendered fugitive, made Children of the Mist, nameless vagabonds frequenting desolate straths, making uneasy beds on hunted moors, their home reft from them more by the quirk of the law than by valour, and the walls of it grown with nettle and fern on the verge of the forest of Kilree. Himself he had been brought up far apart from the scenes of his cateran family, in a decent humdrum fashion in the Low County, where he had studied the law, and whence he had come to his native isle a writer. Silent, they said of him – silent and dour, except in congenial company, when his laugh was as ready as any one's, and his sense of a joke singularly shrewd. Just a plain, douce, decent lawyer body, given pedantically to the quotation of Latin maxims affecting his profession; married, as I have said, to a Lowland wife; his business comfortable, bringing him much about the Islands in boats and gigs. He was “doer” – which is to say, man of business, or agent – for several of the most notable families in the shire in his later years; but at the time I speak of he was factor for Kilree alone.

When I have added that he was forty years of age when he had his odd relapse, could sing a fine bass to the Psalmody on a Sabbath, was great for books, and thought no hour of the day so happy as when he could get into his slippers and his feet on the fender, and drink a dish of tea – a beverage for which he had a passion many men have for wine – I have summed up all that was apparent to his neighbours in the character of Alexander Macaulay. And yet they left out a great part of the real Macaulay in their estimate of the factor of Kilree.

It happened on a dirty wet day in the month of May that Kilree the Captain himself was on the island, and came to Macaulay's office to consult regarding some improvements – as he esteemed them – that he had for long contemplated on the inland side of his estate. He was in the Army, a good and gallant soul, young and sentimental, with what is even now common enough in the Highlands and Islands, a great regard for old romantics.

“And I start at once to put the fence from Cairn Dearg to Carsaig,” said he by-and-by, carelessly walking up and down Macaulay's room, and looking through the window at the sea-birds flying noisily along the shore.

The lawyer gave a little start in his armchair, and upset a bottle of red ink. It was dripping from the desk to his knees, and he hurriedly swept his hand across the stream of it, then dashed the flood with sand. “To Carsaig, did you say?” he asked, taking up his penknife in his reddened hand and nervously starting to shape a quill.

“Yes,” said the Captain, suspecting nothing. “Time's slipping past, and I'm determined to put off no longer carrying out my father's old notion of having the fence as far as the two rivers.”

“And what about Kincreggan?” asked the lawyer, suddenly grown the colour of clay, but sitting still at his desk, his eyes on his reddened hand, some strange freak of the fancy, as he used to say in after years, filling his head with the salt scent of blood. Kincreggan, his people's home before they were broken, and tenants of the mist alone, was in a little glen of Carsaig. In his mind in a moment he saw it perched above its waters, empty and cold and grey, with only memory under its rotting rafters.

“Oh, Kincreggan! Damn Kincreggan!” said the Captain, quite forgetting that ever a Macaulay was bred there. “Kincreggan comes down, of course; I'm going to put a shepherd's cottage there.”

“What! you will pull down Kincreggan House,” cried the lawyer, jumping to his feet so suddenly that his chair upset behind him. “Kincreggan!” he repeated, with a kind of whimper; and the Captain turned sharply round at the strangeness of the cry, and saw another man than his

customary factor – a fellow all thong in every sinew of his neck and face, his hair tossed on his temples, his arms strained back, and a bloody hand clenched, his whole body stiff as if he were about to spring. And his eyes were wells of fire.

“Good God! what cat-a-mountain have I here in Alasdair Macaulay?” thought the Captain, startled, and then remembered whose Kincreggan had been.

“Kincreggan!” said the lawyer again, and followed with a phrase of the Gaelic language that he had never been known to speak since he left the island, a child, for Edinburgh.

“Upon my word,” said the Captain, “but I clean forgot the old connection! How was I to know my factor had the least objection? Come, come, Mr Macaulay, we cannot permit a foolish old sentiment about a ruin of stones to stand in the way of honest improvement. It is not as if Kincreggan was a castle or a cathedral. I have my own repugnances about spoiling old landmarks, but Kincreggan – ! Come, come, Mr Macaulay, what scruple need there be about a place like yon! Beyond yourself there is not a single soul of the old breed left, and you never saw a fire in it – no, nor your father before you!”

No miracle imaginable could have surprised him more than this – that a plain man of the law in broadcloth in a carpeted office, with a pile of black deed-boxes behind him, and the statutes of the land calf-bound on a shelf at his elbow, a pen in his hand, and a fob-chain dangling below his waistcoat, could have so remarkable a sentiment about an old ruin as these dramatics of his seemed to suggest.

“Pooh! Mr Macaulay,” said he, “ye need not make any fracas about it now, for Mackay has his orders, and starts at Kincreggan immediately; the roof will be off in a day or two. And as for these silly clan sentiments, I have lost money by them ere this: I will let them influence me no more; I do not value them that, Mr Macaulay!” And so saying, he cracked his fingers in his factor’s face.

Alasdair Dhu felt his blood boil in his head till his skull seemed like to burst; the stain on his hand enlarged to a crimson cloud that filled the chamber, as he used in later years to say himself, and a strange roaring came into his ears. Suddenly he gave the cry of his clan, ran up against Kilree, and with the penknife stabbed him in the bosom.

Without a pause so little as to look at the victim of his frenzy, he passed quickly into his house, whereof his writing chamber was a part. His wife sat sewing. He looked at her with an ecstasy in his eyes: “I’m sick-tired of this,” cried he; “my grief! but I have been wasting time.” And so saying, he turned on his heel and ran out to the garden behind the house. Knowing nothing of the Captain’s state, she ran out after her husband, and saw him leap the wall like a young roe. His clerk, a lad Macdonald, was out in the garden for peats for the office fire. “Look at your master!” she cried, and together they watched the lawyer throw off his coat as he ran, and disappear at last in the fir planting on the other side of the road, whence it rose on the face of the hill.

“What a caper!” she exclaimed. “Tut! tut! – he’s daft – clean daft! I always thought there was a lot of his grandfather, Ranald, in him. And such a day! He’ll get wet to the skin.”

III

Kincreggan is in a cleft of the mountain where the River Glas is joined by the Water of Maam, its situation chosen with cunning for that purpose it used so well to serve. For weeks after the lawyer had ludicrously cast off his coat on the highway and disposed of his trows in the planting behind his office, and was seen making for Kilree forest wrapped ingeniously in a web of tartan filched from a weaver's waulking-wicker, Kincreggan, for all the Isles, at least, was the most interesting place in the world. People quitted work, put on their Sabbath clothes, and came a long day's journey to see it, not approaching it by the narrow pass that led to its front walls, but laboriously climbing the hills from whose tops they could in safety get a view of the old place where there had so suddenly flared up fires dead two hundred years.

What they saw – all they could see – was a grey whinstone tower built extraordinarily with its back against Cnoc Dearg, a red precipice hundreds of feet high, a gable and front to the very edge of the rock that hung over a deep dark pool made by the falls at the fork of the rivers, its main gable opening on the cattle-fold and the pass that gave the only entrance to Kincreggan. They saw a place as ill to storm as though it crowned a mountain, a place devised strictly for hours of war – but still a beautiful place, wherein a person of fancy might be content to dwell for ever as in a petty kingdom, the fish of the pool his, the birds that clucked or sang in the alder thickets round the fold at the mountain foot, the deer that came down for the sun of the afternoon, the cattle that lowed in the pen.

And Alasdair Dhu had the cattle! The people could see them plainly from the hill, and in certain puffs of the spring wind hear their *geumnaich* – the sad complaint that Highland kyloes make on strange pastures, remembering the sweeter taste of the grass of home. The cattle were Kilree's. They had gone from his hill at night as by magic, and in the morning they were in Kincreggan fold, where stolen herds were harboured before the old Macaulays went into the mist, and where there had not been a hoof in four generations. With the cattle, furthermore, went missing a number of muskets from the armoury of Kilree. Macaulay the lawyer was back at his forefathers' business!

The first thing a man to-day would do in the like circumstances would be to call for the police; but even to-day, in the Islands, the police are rare and remote from Kilree, and at that time it was as ill to reach them as to reach St Kilda, even had there been no popular conviction that the civil law alone is all that a Highland gentleman can with propriety call into action. So Kilree for a while did nothing but nurse his wound, and Macaulay lurked in his fastness alone, no one – by the Captain's orders – lifting a hand against him. But the stabbing of his master and the lifting of his bestial were only the start of his escapade, which became the more astonishing after his clerk, the lad Macdonald, out of Moidart, was sent to him on a curious mission.

Macdonald was a fellow without fear, and it must be added, without brains either, otherwise he might never have done a thing that made all the Isles laugh at him when they heard later what he had carried, and another thing that bears out my premiss that the primitive man is immediately below a good many well-laundered modern shirts.

"I think I could bring that madman of mine to his senses," Macaulay's wife said to the clerk one day.

"The sooner the better, then," said Macdonald, "for there's much to do before the rent collection." He spoke as if his master were only out upon a drinking-bout.

"If I just had him here for ten minutes!" said Mrs Macaulay.

"You might – you might venture to go to Kincreggan and see him," suggested the clerk.

"I have more regard for my life," said the woman. "I'm ower much of the Lowlander to trust myself in a den with a mad Highlander – even if he's my own man. Forbye" (here she smiled), "forbye, I've tried it already. I have been twice at Kincreggan in the early morning, and he kept me

fifty yards off the walls with his gun. But I would not care to have that mentioned in the place; it's perhaps as little to my credit as to his own. Oh, if I had him under this roof again for ten minutes, or could get a certain thing delivered in his hands – ” She broke off, and looked into Macdonald's face quickly as with an inspiration.

“What is it?” asked the clerk.

“A little packet,” she replied; “just a small packet you could carry in your hand.”

“*Buidseachas* – I mean witchcraft?” said Macdonald, who had brought a good many superstitions from Moidart.

“Well, well – in a way, a sort of witchcraft,” she admitted, with a smile. “It is part of a charm that wiles men from their wild ways.”

“I don't know but what I might risk taking it to him, then,” said Macdonald, and so it happened that that very evening he found himself challenged fifty yards from the wall of Kincreggan, with a pair of slippers wrapped carefully in paper in his hands – nothing more.

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