

SAMUEL CROCKETT

THE GREY
MAN

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The Grey Man

CHAPTER I THE OATH OF SWORDS

Well do I mind the first time that ever I was in the heartsome town of Ballantrae. My father seldom went thither, because it was a hold of the Bargany folk, and it argued therefore sounder sense to give it the go-by. But it came to pass upon a time that it was necessary for my father to adventure from Kirrieoch on the border of Galloway, where we dwelt high on the moors, to the seaside of Ayr.

My father's sister had married a man named Hew Grier, an indweller in Maybole, who for gear's sake had settled down to his trade of tanner in Ballantrae. It was to his burying that we went. We had seen him snugly hopped up, and the burial supper was over. We were already in a mind to set about returning, when we heard the sound of a great rushing of people hither and thither. I went aloft and looked through a gable window upon the street. Arms were hastily being brought from beneath the thatch, to which the laws of the King had committed them under the late ordinance anent weapons of war. Leathern jackets were being donned, and many folk cried 'Bargany!' in the streets without knowing why.

My Aunt Grisel went out to ask what the stir might be, and came in again with her face as white as a clout.

'It is the Cassillis folk that are besieging the Tower of Ardstinchar, and they have come near to the taking of it, they say. Oh, what will the folk of Ballantrae do to you, John, if they ken that you are here? They will hang you for a spy, and that without question.'

'That,' said my father, 'is surely impossible. The Ballantrae folk never had any great haul of sense ever since Stinchar water ran; but yet they will hardly believe that Hew Grier, decent man – him that was your marrow and lies now in his resting grave, poor body – took on himself to die, just that I might come to Ballantrae to spy out the land!'

But my aunt, being easily flustered, would not hearken to him, thinking that all terrible things were possible, and so hid the two of us in the barn-loft till it should be the hour of the gloaming.

Then so soon as the darkening came, putting a flask of milk into my pocket and giving a noble satchel of cakes to my father, she almost pushed us out of her back door. To this day I remember how the unsteady glare of a red burning filled all the street. And we could see burghers' wives standing at their doors, all looking intently in the direction of the Castle of Ardstinchar upon its lofty rock. Others set their heads out of the little round 'jaw-holes' that opened in each gable wall, and gossiped shrilly with their neighbours.

My father and I went cannily down by the riverside, and as soon as we turned Hew-the-Friar's corner, we saw all the noble tower of Ardstinchar flaming to the skies – every window belching fire, and the sparks fleeing upward as before a mighty wind, though it was a stirless night with a moon and stars floating serenely above.

Down by the waterside and straight before us we saw a post of men, and we heard them clank their war-gear as they marched from side to side and looked ever up at the castle on its steep, spitting like a furnace, flaming like a torch. So at sight of them my father turned us about sharply enough, because, in spite of what he had said to my Aunt Grisel, he had much reason to fear for his neck. For if, on the night of a Cassillis raid, one of the hated faction should be found in the town of Ballantrae, little doubt there was but that a long tow and a short shrift would be his fate.

We climbed the breast of the brae up from the waterside, intending to make a detour behind the castle. My father said that there would be an easy crossing at Heronford, where he knew a decent man that was of his own party. Thence we could make up the glen of the Tigg Water, which in the evil state of the country was as good and quiet a way back to Minnochside as one might hope to find.

It seemed a most pitiful sight to me, that was but a young lad (and had never seen a fire bigger than a screed of muirburn screeving across the hills with a following wind at its tail), to watch the noble house with all its wealth of plenishing and gear being burned up.

I said as much to my father, who swung along with his head bent to the hill slope, dragging my arm oftentimes almost from the socket, in his haste to get us out of such unwholesome company as the angry folk of Ballantrae.

'It is an enemy's house!' he replied very hastily. 'Come thy ways, lad!'

'But what harm have the Bargany folk done to us?' I asked. For this thing seemed strange to me – that Kennedy should strive with Kennedy, burn castle, kill man, harry mow and manger, drive cattle – and I never be able to make out what it was all for.

'Hold your breath, Launcelot Kennedy!' said my father, testy with shortness of wind and going uphill, 'or right speedily you will find out for what! Is it not enough that you are born to love Cassillis and to hate Bargany?'

'Are the folk of Cassillis, then, so much better than the folk of Bargany?' I asked, taking what I well knew to be the chances of a civil answer, or of a ring on the side of the head.

It was not the civil answer that I got.

And, indeed, it was an ill season for query and question, or for the answering of them. In time we got to the angle of the castle, and there we were somewhat sheltered from the fierce heat and from the glare of light also. From the eminence we had gained, we could look away along the shore side. My father pointed with his finger.

'Boy, do you see yon?' he whispered.

I looked long and eagerly with my unaccustomed eyes, before I could see in the pale moonlight a dark train of horsemen that rode steadily northward. Their line wimpled like a serpent, being pricked out to our sight with little reeling twinkles of fire, which I took to be the moon shining on their armour and the points of their spears.

'See,' said my father, 'yonder goes our good Earl home with the spoil. Would that I were by his side! Why do I live so far among the hills, and out of the call of my chief when he casts his war pennon to the winds?'

We looked all round the castle, and seeing no one, we made shift to get about it and darn ourselves among the heather of the further hillside. But even as we passed the angle and reached a broken part of the wall, there came a trampling of iron-shod hoofs. And lo! a troop of horsemen rode up to the main castle gate, that which looks to the north-west. It was all we could do to clamber out of sight over the broken wall, my father lifting me in his arms. There we lay flat and silent behind a pile of stones, just where the breach had been made – over which we could look into the courtyard and see the splotched causeway and the bodies of the dead lying here and there athwart it in the ruddy light of burning.

Just as the foremost horseman came to the gate, which the riders of Cassillis had left wide open, the roof of red tile fell in with an awesome crash. The flames again sprang high and the sparks soared. Soon all the courtyard was aglow with the red, unsteady leme which the skies gave back, while the moon and stars paled and went out.

'Hist!' whispered my father, 'this is young Bargany himself who comes first.'

I looked eagerly from behind a stone and saw the noblest figure of a young man that ever I saw or shall see, riding on a black horse, sitting framed in the dark of the gateway, the flames making a crimson flicker about him. After a moment's pause he rode within the deserted close, and there

sat his horse, looking up sternly and silently at the leaping flames and hearkening as it were to the crackling of the timbers as they burned.

Then another and yet another horseman came riding within, some of whom my father knew.

'See you, Launce, and remember,' he whispered; 'that loon there is Thomas Kennedy of Drummurchie, Bargany's brother. Observe his fangs of the wolf. He of all the crew is the wickedest and the worst.'

I looked forth and saw a gaunt, dark youth, with a short upper lip drawn up from teeth that shone white in the leaping flame which harvested the goodly gear of the house of Ardstinchar.

'There also is Blairquhan the Simpleton, Cloncaird of the Black Heart, and Benane the Laird's brother – a very debauched man – and there, I declare, is my Lord Ochiltree. Upon soul and conscience, I wonder what he does here thus riding with the Barganies?'

As soon as the fire died down a little, some of the party began to search about among the defences and outhouses, and a few even entered into the inner part of the tower. In twos and threes they came forth, some bringing a wounded man, some a dead man, till, on the cool, grey stones of the court, there rested five that lay motionless on their backs, and two that moaned a while and then were still. The more lightly wounded were cared for in a chamber within the gate. Then we could see all the gentlemen of the Bargany side dismounted from their horses and standing about those five that were killed.

'Alas for young Girvanmains!' I heard one cry, for we were very near. 'What shall we say to his father? And here also is Walter Pollock, the cunning scrivener – and James Dalrymple, that was a kindly little man and never harmed anyone – the Lord do so to me, and more also, if I write not this killing in blood upon the walls of Cassillis!'

The crowd thinned a little, and I saw it was the Laird himself that spoke.

Then this same young Bargany, who was taller by a head than any there, called for room. So they made a ring, with the dead men in the midst, and Bargany standing a little before. He bent him over the body of Walter Pollock, the young clerk, and drew forth a book from his breast.

'Listen!' he cried, 'all you that love Bargany, and who now behold this deed of dule and cruelty. Here lie our dead. Here is the Book of God that I have taken from one of the servants of peace, cruelly bereft of life by our enemies!'

'I warrant he drew a good sword when it came to the fighting, clerk though he might be,' whispered my father, 'I know the Pollock breed!'

Bargany looked at the book in his grasp and again at the hand which had held it.

'This falls out well,' he said. 'Here in the presence of our dead, upon the Bible that is wet with the blood of the unjustly slain, let us band ourselves together and take oath to be avenged upon the cruel house – the house of over-trampling pride – the house that has ever wrought us woe! Will ye swear?'

He looked round a circle of faces that shone fierce and dark in the lowe of the furnace beyond. As he did so he unsheathed his sword, and pointed with it to the topmost pinnacles of Ardstinchar. In a moment there was a ring of steel all about him, for, quick as his own, every man's hand went out to his scabbard, and in every man's grip there gleamed a bare blade. And the sight thrilled me to see it, ay, more than all the religion I had ever been taught, for I was but a boy. And even though religion be learned in youth, the strength and the use of it comes not till after.

Thus Bargany stood with the brand in his right hand and the Bible in his left, to take, as was ancient custom in our countryside, the solemn oath of vengeance and eternal enmity. And thus he spake, —

'By this Holy Book and by the wet blood upon it, I, Gilbert Kennedy of Bargany, swear never to satisfy my just feud against the bloody house of Cassillis, till of all their defenced towers there stands not one stone in its place, remains alive not one scion of its cruel race. I who stand here, in the presence of these dead men of my folk, charge the Kennedies of the North with the blood of my

kin, the spoiling of my vassals, and the heart-breaking of my father. In the name of God I swear! If I stay my hand and make not an end, the God of Battles do so to me, and more also!

Gilbert Kennedy kissed the book which he gripped in his left hand, and then with sudden gesture of hatred he flung down the sword which he had held aloft in his right. It fell with a ringing dirl of iron upon the stones of the pavement beside the slain men, and the sound of its fall made the flesh creep on my bones.

Then the Laird's wicked brother, Thomas, called the Wolf of Drummurchie, came forward, hatred fairly sparkling in his eyes, and his teeth set in a grin of devil's anger.

'I swear,' he cried, 'to harry John of Cassillis, the enemy that has wrought us this woe, with fire and sword – to cut off him and his with dagger and spear, to light the thack and to lift the cattle. I will be an outlaw, a prey for the hunters for their sake. For Cassillis it was who first slandered me to the King, chased me from my home, and made me no better than a robber man upon the mountains.'

And in turn he kissed the Book, and his sword rang grimly on the pavement beside his brother's. So one by one the men of Bargany took the solemn band of eternal and bloody feud. Presently an old man stood forth. He held a spear in his hand, being, as my father whispered, but a tenant vassal and keeping to the ancient Scottish yeoman's weapon.

'By the blood of my son that lies here before me, by this spear which he held in his dying hand, I, that am but the poor goodman of Girvanmains, before death takes me to where all vengeance is Another's, I swear the vengeance of blood!'

And he cast the spear beside the swords of the gentlemen. Then issuing forth from the chamber over the gate, and leaning heavily upon the arm of a young page boy, there came creeping the strangest shape of a man – his countenance thraved and drawn, his shrunk shanks twisted, his feet wambling one over another like those of a mummer's bear. Bowed double the man was, and he walked with a staff that tapped and rattled tremblingly on the pavement as he came. The men of war turned at the sound, for there had been stark silence among them after old Girvanmains had let his spear fall.

Like one risen from the dead, the old man looked up at the tower which was now beginning to show black against the dulling red glow of the dying fire.

'Thou tower of Ardstinchar,' he cried, lifting up a voice like the wind whistling through scannel pipes, 'they have burned you that erstwhile burned me. Curse me Cassillis and the Lords of it! Curse me all that cleave to it, for their tender mercies are cruel. I, Allan Stewart, sometime Abbot of Crossraguel, lay my curse bitterly upon them for the cruel burning they gave me before their fire in the Black Vault of Dunure. But bless me the House of Bargany, that rescued me from torture and took me to their strong tower, wherein I have to this day found in peace a quiet abiding chamber.'

'Mark well, boy,' whispered my father; 'remember this to tell it in after days to your children's children. Your eyes have seen the Abbot of Crossraguel whom the King of Carrick, the father of our Earl John, roasted quick in the vault of Dunure – a deed which has wrought mickle woe, and will yet work more.'

And even as my father spoke I saw the old cripple hirple away, the young Laird himself helping him with the kindest courtesy.

Then, last of all that spake, came a voice from one who had remained in the gloomy archway of the gate, by the entering in of the courtyard. He that broke the silence was a tall man who sat on a grey horse, and was clad from head to foot in a cloak of grey, having his face shaded with a high-crowned, broad-brimmed hat of the ancient fashion.

'Give me the Book and I also will swear an oath!' he said, in a voice which made all turn towards him.

'Who may that man be? I ken him not,' said my father, for he had named all the others as they came within.

So one gave the man the blood-stained Bible, and he held it in his hand a moment. He was silent a space before he spoke.

'By this Christian Book and among this Christian people,' he cried, 'I swear to root out and slay utterly all the house of Cassillis and Culzean, pursuing them, man, woman and child, with fire and sword till they die the death of pain and scorn, or I who swear die in the accomplishing of it.'

The unknown paused at the end of this terrible oath, and gazed again at the Book. The dying flame within the castle flared up for a chance moment as another rafter caught fire.

'Fauch!' said he of the grey cloak, looking at the Bible in his hand, 'there is blood upon thee. Go thou into the burning as the seal of our oaths. A bloody Bible is no Christian book!'

And with that he threw the Bible into the red embers that glowed sullenly within the tower.

There broke a cry of horror from all that saw. For though in this dark land of Carrick deeds of blood were done every day, this Bible-burning was accounted rank blasphemy and ungodly sacrilege. But I was not prepared for its effect upon my father. He trembled in all his limbs, and I felt the stones shake upon which he now leaned breast high, careless who should see him.

'This is fair devil's work,' he muttered. 'The fires of Sodom, the brimstone of Gomorrah shall light upon us all for this deed!'

He would have said more, but I never heard him finish his words. Sudden as a springing deer, he tore from the covert of the wall by my side and bounded across the court, threading the surprised group and overleaping the swords and the bodies of the slain men. He disappeared in a moment through the door into the tower, within which the flames still glowed red, and from which every instant the crash of falling timber and the leaping flames answered each other.

Ere my father sprang back, his figure stood plain and dark against the fire within, like that of a smith at his forge seen in the bygoing upon a snowy night. He held the unburned Bible clasped to his breast, but his left hand hung straight down by his side.

A moment after he had sprung from a window and fallen upon his face on the pavement with the Bible beneath him.

A dozen men ran towards him and seized him – Thomas of Drummurchie the first among them.

'A traitor! A spy!' he cried, lifting a sword from the pile with clear purpose to kill. 'To the death with him! It is John Kennedy of Kirrieoch – I ken him well, a rank Cassillis thief!'

And he would have slain my father forthwith, but that I ran among his legs and gripped him so close to me that he fell clattering on the pavement among the swords. Then I went and took my father's hand, standing by his side and crying out the while, —

'Ye shallna, ye shallna kill my father. He never did ye harm a' the days o' his life!'

'Who are you, and what do you here?' asked young Bargany in a voice of command, when they had set my father on his feet.

'I am John Kennedy of Kirrieoch on Minnochside, and I came to Ballantrae to bury the corpse of my sister's man, Hew Grier, merchant and indweller there, that was this day laid in the earth.'

So, right quietly and calmly, my father spoke among them all.

'But what seek you in my burned Castle of Ardstinchar and alone with these dead men?' asked the young Bargany.

With a quietness that came of the hills my father told the chieftain his plain tale, and his words were not words that any man could gainsay.

Then Bargany answered him without consulting the others, as none but a great chief does whose lightest word is life or death.

'Ye are here within my danger, and had I been even as your folk of Cassillis, ye should have died the death; but because ye stopped devil's work and, it may be, kept away a curse from us for the burning of the Holy Book, ye shall not die in my house. Take your life and your son's life, as a gift from Gilbert Kennedy of Bargany.'

My father bowed his head and thanked his house's enemy.

'Bring a horse,' cried the Laird, and immediately they set my father on a beast, and me in the saddle before him. 'Put the Bible for a keepsake in your winnock sole, turn out the steed on

Minnochside, and come no more to Ballantrae in time of feud, lest a worse thing befall you!' So said he, and waved us away, as I thought grandly.

Some of the men that had sworn enmity murmured behind him.

'Silence!' he cried, 'am not I Lord of Bargany? Shall I not do as I will? Take your life, Kirrieoch. And whenever a Bargany rides by your door, ye shall give him bite and sup for the favour that was this night shown you in the courtyard of Ardstinchar.'

'Ye shall get that, Bargany, and welcome, whether ye let me gang or no!' said my father. And pressing the Book to his bosom, and gathering up the reins in his unwounded hand, we rode unquestioned through the arch of the wall into the silence of the night. And the hill winds and the stillnesses without were like God's blessing about us.

But from a knoll on the left of the entrance the man of the grey habit, he who had thrown the Bible, sat silent upon his horse and watched. And as we looked back, he still sat and watched. Him my father took to have been the devil, as he said to me many times that night ere we got to Minnochside.

Also ere we left the clattering pavement behind, looking out from the postern door we saw the thrawn visage of him who was Allan Stewart, the tortured residue of the man who had once been Abbot of Crossraguel, and in stature like a square-shouldered tower.

And this is the way my father brought home the burnt Bible to the house of Kirrieoch. There it bides to this day, blackened as to its bindings and charred at the edges, but safe in the wall press at my father's bed-head, a famous book in all the land, even as far as Glencaird and Dranie Manors upon the Waters of Trool.

But it brought good fortune with it – a fortune which, God be thanked, still remains and grows. And as for my father, he never lifted sword nor spear against the house of Bargany from that day to this, because of the usage which Gilbert Kennedy gave him that night at the burning of Ardstinchar.

Nevertheless, for all that, he exercised me tightly in the use of every weapon of war, from the skill of the bow to the shooting of the hackbutt. For it was his constant intent to make me an esquire in the service of Sir Thomas Kennedy of Culzean,¹ reputed the wisest man and the best soldier in all the parts of Carrick and Ayr. As, indeed, I have found him.

And this saving of the burning Bible was, as I guess, the beginning of my respect for religion – which, alas! I fear this chronicle will show to have been both a late-garnered and a thin-sown crop.

¹ Culzean is pronounced Culayne, as though to rhyme with 'domain.'

CHAPTER II

THE LASS OF THE WHITE TOWER

Now, as the manner is, I must make haste to tell something of myself and have by with it.

My name is Launcelot Kennedy, and I alone am the teller of this tale. In a country where all are Kennedies, friends and foes alike, this name of mine is no great head-mark. So 'Launcelot of the Spurs' I am called, or sometimes, by those who would taunt me, 'Launcelot Spurheel.' But for all that I come of a decent muirland house, the Kennedies of Kirrieoch, who were ever lovers of the Cassillis blue and gold – which are the royal colours of France, in memory of the ancient alliance – and ever haters of the red and white of Bargany, which we hold no better than butchers' colours, bloody and desolate.

The story, or at least my own part in it, properly begins upon the night of the fair at Maybole – whither to my shame I had gone without troubling my master, Sir Thomas Kennedy of Culzean, with the slight matter of asking his permission. Indeed, none so much as knew that I had been to the town of Maybole save Helen Kennedy alone; and she, as I well knew (although I called her Light-head Clattertongue), would not in any wise tell tales upon me. There at the fair I had spent all my silver, buying of trittle-trattles at the lucky-booths and about the market-stalls. But upon my return I meant to divide fairly with Helen Kennedy, though she was fully two years younger than I – indeed, only sixteen years of her age, though I grant long of the leg and a good runner.

So, being advised of my excellent intentions, you shall judge if I was not justified of all that I did to be revenged on the girl afterwards.

It was the early morning of a March day when I came to the foot of the Castle of Culzean. I went with quiet steps along the shore by the little path that leads to the coves beneath. I carried the things that I had bought in a napkin, all tied safely together. Now, the towers of Culzean are builded upon a cliff, steep and perilous, overlooking the sea. And I, being but a squire of eighteen (though for my age strong and bold, and not to be beaten by anything or feared by any man), was lodged high up in the White Tower, which rises from the extremest point of the rock.

Now, as I say, I had not made mention of the little matter of my going abroad to Sir Thomas, both because it was unnecessary to trouble him with so small a thing, and also on account of the strictness of his opinions. It was, therefore, the more requisite that I should regain my chamber without putting lazy Gilbert in the watch-house at the gate to the trouble of letting fall the drawbridge for me. I did not, indeed, desire to disturb or disarrange him, for he would surely tell his master, being well called Gabby Gib-cat, because he came of a race that never in their lives has been able to hold a secret for a single day in the belly of them – at least, not if it meant money, ale, or the goodwill of their lord.

So it happened that before I went to Maybole I dropped a ladder of rope from the stanchions of my window, extremely strong and convenient, which came down to a ledge someway up among the rocks, at a place which I could easily reach by climbing. Thither I made my way while, as I tell you, the night was just beginning to dusk toward the dawning. I had all my buyings in my arms, tied up well and that tightly in the napkin, just as I had carried them from the lucky-booths of Maybole. I tied the outer knot of my bundle firmly to the last rung of the ladder, praying within me that Sir Thomas might be fast asleep. For I had to pass within three feet of his window, and, being an old man, he was somewhat wakerife in the mornings, easily started, and given to staring out of his lattice without method or sense, in a manner which had often filled me with pain and foreboding for his reason.

But by the blessing of God, and because he was somewhat tired with walking in the fields with his baron-officer the night before, it happened that Sir Thomas was sound asleep, so that I was nothing troubled with him. But immediately beneath me, in the White Tower, were the rooms of his two daughters, Marjorie and Helen Kennedy; and of these Helen's room was to the front, so that my

rope ladder passed immediately in front of her window, while the chamber of Marjorie was to the back, and, in this instance, concerned me not at all.

So as I scrambled up the swinging ladder (and, indeed, there are not many that would venture as much on a cold March morning) I passed Helen Kennedy's window. As I went by, the devil (as I take it) prompted me to scratch with my toe upon the leaden frame of her lattice, for the lass was mortally afraid of ghosts. So I pictured to myself that, hearing the noise at the window, she would take it for the scraping of an evil spirit trying to find a way in, and forthwith draw the clothes over her head and lie trembling.

Pleasing myself, therefore, with this picture, I scraped away and laughed within myself till I nearly fell from the ladder. Presently I heard a stirring within the chamber, and stopped to listen.

'She has her head under the clothes by now,' I said to myself, as I climbed on up to my own window, which I found unhasped even as I had left it. I entered, gripping the edge of the broad sill and lifting myself over with ease, being very strong of the forearm. Indeed, I had won a prize for wrestling at the fair that day, in spite of my youth – a thing which I intended to keep secret till Helen Kennedy should begin to taunt me with being but a boy and feckless.

It chanced, however, that I, who had been thus victorious with men older than myself, was now to be vanquished, conquered, and overset, by one who was two years younger, and she a lassie. Then being safe in my chamber, I began to pull up the ladder of cords with all my goods and chattels tied at the end of it. And my thoughts were already running on the good things therein – cakes and comfits, sweetmeats, some bottles of Canary wine, and gee-gaws for the adorning of my person when I rode forth – the latter not for pride, of which I have none, but in order that I might ride in good squirely fashion, and as became the gentleman attendant of so great a lord as Sir Thomas Kennedy of Culzean, Tutor of Cassillis, brother of the late, and uncle of the present Earl of that name.

I drew up my rope ladder all softly and with success, because from the stanchions it swung clear of the walls of the castle, for the reason that my turret jutted a little way over, as is the custom with towers of that architecture. And so all went well till my bundle came opposite the window of Helen Kennedy's room. There it was suddenly caught and gripped tight, so that I could in no wise pull it further. Nevertheless I wrestled with it so strongly, even as I had done with grown men at Maybole, that the cord suddenly gave way. And what with the stress and pith of pulling, I fell *blaff* on my back, hitting my head upon one of the low cross-beams of my little chamberlet.

This made me very angry indeed, but I leave you to judge how much more angered I was, when I found that the cords of my rope ladder had been cleanly severed with a knife, and that my bundle and all it contained had been most foully stolen from me.

I looked out of the window, rubbing my sore head the while with my hand.

'Nell Kennedy!' I called as loudly as I dared, 'you are nothing but a thief, and a mean thief!'

The lass put her head out of the window and looked up at me, so that her hair hung down and I saw the soft lace ruffle of her night apparel. It was long and swayed in the wind, being of a golden yellow colour. (The hair, I am speaking of, not, by'r Lady, the bedgown.)

'Mistress Helen Kennedy from you, sirrah, if you please!' she said. 'What may be the business upon which Squire Launce Spurheel ventures to address his master's daughter?'

'Besom!' said I, taking no heed of her tauntings; 'thief, grab-all, give me back my bundle!'

My heart was hot within me, for indeed I had intended to share everything with her in the morning, if only she would be humble enough and come with me into the cove. Now, there is nothing more angering than thus to be balked on the threshold of a generous action; and, indeed, I was not given to the doing of any other kind – though often enough frustrated of my intention by the illsetness of others.

'Thou wast a noble ghost, Spurheel,' she cried, mocking me. 'I heard thee laughing, brave frightener of girls! Well, I forgive thee, for it is a good bundle of excellent devices that thou hast carried for me all the way from the fair at Maybole. Everything that I craved for is here, saving the

brown puggy-monkey wrought with French pastry and with little black raisins for the eyes which I heard of yesterday!'

'I am glad I ate that by the way,' I said, in order to have some amends of her; for, indeed, there was no such thing in the fair, at least so far as I saw.

'May it give thee twisty thraws and sit ill on thy stomach, Spurheel!' she cried up at me. For at sixteen she was more careless of her speech than a herd on the hill when his dogs are not working sweetly.

Nevertheless she spoke as though she had been saying something pleasant and, by its nature, agreeable to hear.

For I do not deny that the lass was sometimes pleasant-spoken enough – to others, not to me; and that upon occasion she could demean herself as became a great lady, which indeed she was. And when no one was by, then I took no ill tongue from her, but gave as good as I got or maybe a kenning better.

I could hear her at the window below taking the packages out of the bundle.

'Ye have good taste in the choice of cakes!' she said, coming to the window again. 'The sweetmeats are most excellent. The pastry melts in the mouth.'

As she looked out, she munched one of the well-raised comfits I had bought for my own eating. At Culzean we had but plain beef and double ale, but no lack of these. Also puddings, black and white.

'See, it flakes tenderly, being well readied!' she cried up at me, flipping it with the forefinger of her right hand to show its delicate lightness. She held the cake, in order to eat it, in the palm of her left hand.

At which, being angered past enduring, I took up an ornament of wood which had fallen from the back of an oak chair, and threw it at her. But she ducked quickly within, so that it went clattering on the rocks beneath.

She looked out again.

'Ah – um – blundershot!' she said, mocking me with her mouth. 'Remember you are not shooting at a rantipole cockshy at Maybole fair.'

'Give me my property,' I replied with some dignity and firmness, 'else in the morning I will surely tell your father.'

'Ay, ay,' cried she, 'even tell him about Maybole fair, and coming home through the wood with your arm round the waist of bonny Kate Allison, the Grieve's lass! He will be most happy to hear of that, and of the other things you have been doing all the night. Also to be thy father confessor and set thee penance for thy deed!'

'It is a lie!' I said, angry that Nell Kennedy should guess so uncomfortably near to the truth.

'What is a lie, most sweet and pleasant-spoken youth?' she queried, with a voice like Mistress Pussie's velvet paws.

'The matter you have spoken concerning the Grieve's lass. I care nothing for girls!'

And I spoke the truth – at the moment – for, indeed, there were things bypast that I was now sorry for.

She went in and explored further in my bundle, while I stood at the upper window above and miscalled her over the window sill as loudly as I dared. Every little while she ran to the window to examine something, for the light was now coming broad from the east and flooding the sea even to the far blue mountains of Arran and Cantyre.

'Ribbons – and belts – and hatbands, all broidered with silk!' she cried. 'Was ever such grandeur known in this place of Culzean? They will do bravely for me, and besides they will save thy back from the hangman and the cart-tail whip. For thou, Spurheel, art not of the quality to wear such, but they will do excellently for the pearling and ribboning of a baron's daughter. Nevertheless, heartily do I applaud your taste in taffeta, Spurheel, and let that be a comfort to thee.'

'Was there ever such a wench?' I said to myself, stamping my foot in anger.

Last of all Nell brought to the window the three bottles of Canary wine, for which I had paid so dear.

'What is this?' she cried, with her head at the side in her masterful cock-sparrow way. 'What is this? Wine, wine of Canary – rotten water rather, I warrant, to be sold in a booth at a fair? At any rate, wine is not good for boys,' she added, 'and such drabbled stuff is not for the drinking of a lady – wouldst thou like it, Spurheel?'

She ducked in, thinking that I was about to throw something more at her – which, indeed, I scorned to do, besides having nothing convenient to my hand.

'Look you, Squire Launce,' she said again, crying from the window without setting her head out, 'you are something of a marksman, they say. There never was a nonsuch like our Spurheel – in Spurheel's own estimation. But I can outmark him. Fix your eye on yon black rock with the tide just coming over it – one, two, and three – !'

And in a moment one of my precious broad-bellied bottles of wine played clash on Samson's reef two hundred feet below the White Tower. I was fairly dancing now with anger, and threatened to come down my rope ladder to be even with her. Indeed, I made the cord ready to throw myself out of the window to clamber down. But even as I did so, the glaiked maiden sent the other two jars of Canary to keep company with the first.

Then she leaned out and looked up sweetly, holding the sash of the window meantime in her hand.

'You are going to visit my father in the morning, doubtless, and tell him all about the bundle and the Grieve's lass. Good speed and my blessing!' she cried, making ready to shut the window and draw the bolt. 'I am going to sleep in Marjorie's room. The gulls are beginning to sing. I love not to hear gabble – yours or theirs!'

But I leave you to guess who it was that felt himself the greater gull.

CHAPTER III

THE SECOND TAUNTING OF SPURHEEL

Now I shall ever affirm that there was not in all this realm of Scotland, since the young Queen Mary came out of France – of whom our grandfathers yet make boast, and rise from their chairs with their natural strength unabated as they tell – so lovely a maid as Marjorie Kennedy, the elder of the two remaining daughters of Sir Thomas, the Tutor of Cassillis. Ever since I came to the house of Culzean, I could have lain down gladly and let her walk over me – this even when I was but a boy, and much more when I grew nigh to eighteen, and had all the heart and some of the experience of a man in the things of love.

And how the lairds and knights came a-wooing her! Ay, even belted earls like Glencairn and Eglintoun! But Marjorie gave them no more than the bend of a scornful head or the waft of a white hand, for she had a way with her that moved men's brains to a very fantasy of desire.

For myself, I declare that when she came down and walked in the garden, I became like a little wagging puppy dog, so great was my desire to attract her attention. Yet she spoke to me but seldom, being of a nature as noble as it was reserved. Silent and grave Marjorie Kennedy mostly was, with the lustre of her eyes turned more often on the far sea edges, than on the desirable young men who rode their horses so gallantly over the greensward to the landward gate of Culzean.

But it is not of Marjorie Kennedy, whom with all my heart I worshipped (and do worship, spite of all), that I have at this time most to tell. It happened on this day that, late in the afternoon, Sir Thomas, my master, came out of the chamber where ordinarily he did his business, and commanded me to prepare his arms, and also bid the grooms have the horses ready, for us two only, at seven of the clock.

'That will be just at the darkening,' I said, for I thought it a strange time to be setting forth, when the country was so unsettled with the great feud between the Kennedies of Cassilis and the young Laird of Bargany and his party.

'Just at the darkening,' he made answer, very shortly indeed, as though he would have minded me that the time of departure was no business of mine – which, indeed, it was not.

So I oiled and snapped the pistolets, and saw that the swords moved easily from their sheaths. Thereafter I prepared my own hackbutt and set the match ready in my belt. I was ever particular about my arms and of those of my lord as well, for I prided myself on never having been faulted in the performing of my duty, however much I might slip in other matters that touched not mine honour as a soldier.

Once or twice as I rubbed or caressed the locks with a feather and fine oil thereon, I was aware of a lightly-shod foot moving along the passage without. I knew well that it was the lassie Helen, anxious, as I judged, to make up the quarrel; or, perhaps, with yet more evil in her heart, wishful to try my temper worse than before.

Presently she put her head within the door, but I stood with my back to her, busy with my work at the window. I would not so much as look up. Indeed, I cared nothing about the matter one way or the other, for why should a grown man and a soldier care about the glaiks and puppet-plays of a lassie of sixteen?

She stayed still by the door a moment, waiting for me to notice her. But I did not, whereat at last she spoke. 'Ye are a great man this day, Spurheel,' she said tauntingly. 'Did ye rowell your leg yestreen to waken ye in time to bring hame the Grieve's lassie?'

I may as well tell the origin now of the name 'Spurheel,' by which at this time she ordinarily called me. It was a nothing, and it is indeed not worth the telling. It chanced that for my own purpose I desired to wake one night at a certain time, and because I was a sound sleeper, I tied a spur to my

heel, thinking that with a little touch I should waken as I turned over. But in the night I had a dream. I dreamed that the foul fiend himself was riding me, and I kicked so briskly to dismount him that I rowelled myself most cruelly. Thus I was found in the morning lying all naked, having gashed myself most monstrously with the spur, which has been a cast-up against me with silly people ever since.

Now this is the whole tale why I was called 'Spurheel,' and in it there was no word of the Grieve's daughter – though Kate Allison was a bonny, well-favoured lass too, and that I will maintain in spite of all the gibes of Helen Kennedy.

'I will bring you the spoons and the boots also to clean,' she said, 'and the courtyard wants sweeping!'

In this manner she often spoke to me as if I had been a menial, because when I did my squire's duty with the weapons and the armour, I would not let her so much as touch them, which she much desired to do, for she was by nature as curious about these things as a boy.

So for show and bravery I tried the edge of my own sword on the back of my hand. Nell Kennedy laughed aloud.

'Hairs on the back of a bairn's hand!' quoth she. 'Better try your carving knife instead on the back of a horse's currying comb!'

But I knew when to be silent, and she got no satisfaction out of me. And that was ever the better way of it with her, when I could sufficiently command my temper to follow mine own best counsel.

So the afternoon wore on, and before it was over I had time to go out into the fields, and also towards evening to the tennis-court – where, to recreate myself, I played sundry games with James and Alexander Kennedy, good lads enough, but ever better at that ball play which has no powder behind it.

At the gloaming the horses were ready and accoutred for the expedition. The Tutor of Cassillis and I rode alone, as was his wont – so great was his trust in my courage and discretion, though my years were not many, and (I grant it) the hairs yet few on my chin. It was still March, and the bitter winter we had had seemed scarcely to have blown itself out. So that, although the crows had a week before been carrying sticks for their nesting in the woods of Culzean, yet now, in the quick-coming dark, the snowflakes were again whirling and spreading ere they reached the ground.

As we rode through the courtyard and out at the gate, I heard the soft pit-pat of a foot behind us, for I have a good ear. I heard it even through the clatter of the hoofs of our war horses. So I turned in my saddle, and there behind us was that madcap lass, Nell Kennedy, with her wylicoats kilted and a snowball in her hand, which she manifestly designed to throw at me. But even as I ducked my head the ball flew past me and hit Sir Thomas's horse 'Ailsa' on the rump, making him curvet to the no small discomfort of the rider.

'What was that, think ye, Launcelot?' my master asked in his kindly way.

'It might have been a bat,' I made answer – for it was, at least, no use bringing the lassie into the affair, in spite of what she had done to me that morning. Besides, I could find out ways of paying my debts to her without the telling of tales, and that was always one comfort.

'It is a queer time of year for bats,' answered Sir Thomas, doubtfully. But he rode on and said no more. I kept behind him, ducking my head and appearing to be in terror of another snowball, for the ground was now whitening fast. Nell Kennedy followed after, making her next ball harder by pressing it in her hand. So we went till we came to the far side of the drawbridge and were ready to plunge into the woodlands.

Then I gave the whistle which tells that all is well on the landward side, and is the signal for the bridge to be raised. Gabby Gib-cat heard and obeyed quickly, as he was wont to do when his master was not far away. At other times he was lazy as the hills.

The bridge went grinding up, and therefore the Gib-cat would immediately, as I knew, stretch himself for a sleep by the fire. So there I had Mistress Nell on the landward side of the drawbridge and the gate up, with the snow dancing down on her bare head and her coats kilted for mischief.

I lagged a little behind Sir Thomas, so that I could say to Nell, whose spirits were somewhat dashed by the raising of the bridge, 'Step down to the water side and bring up the three bottles of Canary, or go over to the farm and keep the Grieve's lass company. She may perchance be lonely.'

So waving my hand and laughing, I rode off and left her alone. I hoped that she cried, for my heart was hot within me because of the good things on which I had expended all my saving, and which I had in all kindness meant to share with her.

Yet we had not reached the great oak in the park before she was again by my side.

'Think ye I canna gang up the ladder in the White Tower as well as you, Spurheel. It is just kilting my coats a kennin' higher!'

And I could have bitten my fingers off that I had forgotten to pull it in again to my chamber. For in the morning I had mended and dropped it, not knowing when it might be needed.

CHAPTER IV

THE INN ON THE RED MOSS

And now to tell of sterner business. For light-wit hawing with a lass bairn about a great house is but small part of the purpose of my story – though I can take pleasure in that also when it chances to come my way, as indeed becomes a soldier.

We rode on some miles through the woods. It still snowed, and straying flakes disentangled themselves from among the branches and sprinkled us sparsely. It grew eerie as the night closed in, and we heard only the roar of the wind above us, the leafless branches clacking against one another like the bones of dead men.

It was not my place to ask whither we were going, but it may be believed that I was anxious enough to learn. By-and-by we struck into the moorland road which climbs over the Red Moss in the direction of the hill that is called Brown Carrick. The snow darkness settled down, and, but that once I had been friendly with a lass who lived in that direction, and so was accustomed to night travel in these parts, I should scarce have known whither we were going.

But I understood that it could only be to the lonesome Inn of the Red Moss, kept by Black Peter, that Culzean was making his way. As we began to climb the moor, Sir Thomas motioned me with his hand to ride abreast of him, and to make ready my weapons, which I was not loth to do, for I am no niddlerling to be afraid of powder. When at last we came to the Inn of the Red Moss, there were lights shining in the windows, and looking out ruddy and lowering under the thatch of the eaves. It was ever an uncanny spot, and so it was more than ever now.

But for all that the Red Moss was populous as a bees' byke that night, for men and horses seemed fairly to swarm about it. Yet there was no jovial crying or greeting between man and man, such as one may hear any market day upon the plainstones of Ayr.

The men who were meeting thus by dark of night, were mostly men of position come together upon a dangerous and unwholesome ploy. As soon as I saw the quality of the gentlemen who were, assembled, I knew that we had come to a gathering of the heads of the Cassillis faction. Nor was it long before I saw my lord himself, a tall, well-set young man, inclining to stoutness, and of a fair complexion with closely-cut flaxen hair.

The Laird of Culzean, my master, lighted down and took the Earl by the hand, asking in his kindly way, —

'Is it well with you, John?'

For in his minority he had been his tutor and governor, and in after years had agreed well with him, which is not so common.

'Ay, well with me,' replied the Earl, 'but it is that dotard fool, Kelwood, who has gotten the chest of gold and jewels, which in my father's time was stolen from the house of Cassillis by Archibald Bannatyne, who was my father's man. He died in my father's hands, who was not a cat to draw a straw before. Nevertheless, even in the Black Vault of Dunure he could not be brought to reveal where he had hidden the chest. But now Kelwood, or another for him, has gotten it from Archie's widow, a poor woman that knew not its worth.'

'But Kelwood will deliver it, John. Is he not your man? Trouble not any more about the matter,' counselled the Tutor, who was ever for the milder opinion, and very notably wise as well as slow in judgment.

'Nay,' said the Earl, 'deliver it he will not, for Bargany and Auchendrayne have gotten his ear, and he has set his mansion house in defence against us. I have called you here, Tutor, for your good advice. Shall we levy our men and beset Kelwood, or how shall we proceed that I may recover that which is most justly mine own?'

For it was ever the bitterest draught to the Earl to lose siller or gear. The Tutor stood for a moment by his beast's neck, holding his head a little to one side in a way he had when he was considering anything – a trick which his daughter Nell has also.

'How many are ye here?' he said to the Earl.

'We are fifteen,' the Earl replied.

'All gentlemen?' again asked the Tutor.

'All cadets of mine own house, and ready to fight to the death for the blue and gold!' replied the Earl, giving a cock to the bonnet, in the side of which he had the lilies of France upon a rosette of blue velvet, which (at that time) was the Cassillis badge of war.

As the Earl spoke, I, who stood a little behind with my finger on the cock of my pistol, saw my lord raise a questioning eyebrow at me, as if to ask his uncle who the young squire might be whom he had brought with him.

'He is the son of John Kennedy of Kirriech, and with us to the death,' said my master.

For which most just speech I thanked him in my heart.

'The name is a good one,' said the Earl, with a little quaintish smile. And well might he say so, for it was his own, and my father of as good blood as he, albeit of a younger branch.

Presently we were riding forth again, seventeen men in our company, for the Earl had not counted the Tutor and myself in his numeration. We rode clattering and careless over the moors, by unfrequented tracks or no track at all. As we went I could hear them talking ever about the treasure of Kelwood, and, in especial, I heard a strange, daftlike old man, whom they called Sir Thomas Tode, tell of the Black Vault of Dunure, and how lands and gear were gathered by the tortures there. His tales and his manners were so strange and unseemly, that I vowed before long to take an opportunity to hear him more fully. But now there was much else to do.

Betimes we came to the tower of Kelwood and saw only the black mass of it stand up against the sky, with not a peep of light anywhere. Now, as you may judge, we went cannily, and as far as might be we kept over the soft ground. The Tutor bade us cast a compass about the house, so that we might make ourselves masters of the fields, and thus be sure that no enemy was lying there in wait for us. But we encompassed the place and found nothing alive, save some lean swine that ran snorting forth from a shelter where they had thought to pass the night.

Then I and the young Laird of Gremmat, being the best armed and most active there, were sent forward to spy out the securest way of taking the tower. I liked the job well enough, for I never was greatly feared of danger all my days; and at any rate there is small chance of distinction sitting one's horse in the midst of twenty others in an open field.

So Gremmat and I went about the house and about, which was not a castle with towers and trenches, like Dunure or Culzean, but only a petty blockhouse. And I laughed within myself to think of such a bees' byke having the mighty assurance to dream of keeping a treasure against my Lord Cassillis, as well as against the Tutor of that ilk and me, his squire.

There was no drawbridge nor yet so much as a ditch about Kelwood Tower, but only a little yett-house with an open pend or passage, that gave against the main wall of the building. Within this passage, could we gain it, I knew that we should be well protected, and have time to burst in the wall, even if the door withstood us. For once within the archway, I could not see how it was possible for those in the house to reach us, in any way to do us harm.

Gremmat and I therefore went back to our company with the news, but the best of it – the part concerning the yett-house – I kept to myself. For the Laird of Gremmat, though a tough fighter, was not a man of penetration, so that I well deserved the credit of telling what I alone had seen.

When I told the chiefs of my discovery, my Lord of Cassillis said nothing but turned abruptly to the Tutor, thinking nothing of my tidings or of the danger I had been in to bring them. Nevertheless Sir Thomas, my master, turned first to me, as was his kindly custom.

'It is well done of you, Launcelot. The sheep herding on Kirrieoch has given you an eye for other things,' he said.

And at that I think the Earl gave me a little more consideration, though all that he said was no more than, 'Well, Tutor, and what do you advise?'

'I think,' said the Tutor, 'that you and the younger men had best take Launcelot's advice, and conceal yourselves in the pend of the yett-house, with picks and, perhaps, a mickle tree for a battering-ram, while I and a trumpeter lad summon Kelwood himself to surrender. In that clump of trees over there we shall be out of reach of their matchlocks.'

So the Earl took the advice, and in a little we were in the black trough of the pend, with an iron-bolted door in front and the rough, unhewn stones of the wall on either side of us.

Then the Tutor's trumpet blew one rousing blast and then another, till we could hear the stir of men roused out of their sleep in the tower above us. But we ourselves held our breaths and kepted very quiet.

Once more the trumpet blew from the clump of oak trees over against the main gate.

'Who may ye be that blaws horns in the Kelwood without asking leave of me?' cried a voice from the narrow window in the wall above us.

And my master, Sir Thomas, answered him from the coppice, —

'It is I, Kennedy of Culzean, that come from your liege lord to demand the treasure that is his, stolen from his house by his false servant and now reset by you, Laird Currie of Kelwood.'

The Laird laughed contumeliously from his turret window.

'An' the Earl wants his treasure, let him come and fetch it,' said he.

At which answer it was all that we could do to keep the Earl quiet. He was for setting the squared tree to the door at once.

'Kelwood,' again we heard the voice of Sir Thomas, 'I ken well who has deceived you in this matter. Listen to no glosing words. No man can strive with the Kennedy and prosper in all these lands 'twixt Clyde and Solway.'

'Which Kennedy?' cried Kelwood, from his window, fleeringly. And this set the Earl more bitterly against him than ever, for it was as much as to say that the Bargany Kennedies were equal in power and place to his own house of Cassillis.

'Lift the trees and to it!' he cried, and with that, being a strong man of his own body, he garred a great fore-hammer dirl against the iron of the door. And though he had many faults, this forwardness should be minded to him for good. Then there was a noise indeed, coulters and fore-hammers dinging merrily against the door, while from aloft came shouts and the rolling of heavy stones down about us; but by my strategy there was not one came near to hurting us. The defenders might have been so many sparrows fying the roof, for all the harm they did to us. But nevertheless, they banged away their powder and shouted. We that were with the Earl shouted none, but kept dourly to our work. Stark and strong was the bolted door of Kelwood, and all the might of our men could do it no injury, nor so much as shake the hinges. It must have been the work of a deacon among the hammermen.

But I felt that we were against the wall of the kitchen, for one side of the passage was warm, on my right hand, and the other clammy and cold. So I cried on them, to leave the door and pull down the stones of the jamb on my right. Then since I had given them good advice before, and they knew that I was of the household of the wise man of Culzean, they were the more ready to take the counsel, though they thanked me not a word, but only lifted the tree and drave at it.

'Make first a hole with the crowbars,' said I. 'Pull down the stones; they are set without lime under the harling.'

So they did it, and we found the first part of the wall as I had said, not difficult of conquest; but the inner, being cemented with shell lime, was like adamant. Therefore, with a shout, we set the tree to it, swinging it in our hands. After many attempts we sent the butt of it crushing through, and then, before the enemy could come to the threatened place, we had made a hole large enough for a

man to enter on his hands and knees. I was leaping forward to be first within, but Gremmat got in front of me and crawled through. Whereat the Laird of Kelwood himself came at him with his gun, and shot Gremmat in the kernel of the thigh, so that he dropped in a heap on the floor, and was ever thereafter unable of his legs. But I that came second (and right glad was I then that I had not been first) rose and set my point at Kelwood, for he was tangled up with the reeking musket. I had him pierced before ever he had time to draw, and was set in defence for the next that might come, when the Earl and the other gentlemen came rushing past us both, and completely invaded the place of Kelwood, so that all within it immediately surrendered.

Then the Earl was like a man gone mad to find the chest, and questioned the Laird, who, as was somewhat natural, could do nothing but groan on the floor, with my sword-thrust through his shoulder. But in a little they found the box in a cunning wall-press under his bed, where it could not be reached except by moving the whole couch from its place and sliding a panel back – which being done, the secret cavity was made plain.

It had been a harder task to transport young Gremmat back with us than it was to take the treasure – which was in a small enough compass, though heavy beyond belief. But after going a mile or two we left the young wildcap at the house of a good and safe man, who made himself bound to the Earl for his safe keeping till he should be whole of his wound.

CHAPTER V

THE THROWING OF THE BLOODY DAGGER

Indeed it had been no likeable job to deny Cassillis that night. For with the fighting, the treasure, and the reproaches of Kelwood, whom he could hardly be kept from finishing with his own hand, his spirit was apt for wars and stratagems – all the more that he himself had as yet had little experience of blows or the smart of wounds. Kelwood we left with those of his dependents that had been in the tower with him. His wound proved not so serious as it might have been, and in a month he was safe with the Laird of Kerse – which thing occasioned a most bitter quarrel between Cassillis and the Craufords, as indeed hereafter ye shall hear.

It was already greying for the dawn when we reached the House on the Red Moss. Black Peter was at the door, and within the kitchen a large fire was blazing, which, because the night was chill and the sweat of fighting hardly yet well dried on us, we were right glad to see. We laid down the chest in a little trance at the back of the kitchen, setting it upon an oatmeal ark which stood there.

Black Peter went out to hold our horses while we talked together, and left his daughter, a well-favoured lass of about my own years or thereby, to wait upon us. So meeting the lass in the dusk of the trance, on pretext of seeing that the treasure was safe, I took occasion of a kiss of her – not that I liked it over much, or that her favours were precious, but because such like is held a soldier's privilege at an inn, and no more to be disregarded than the reckoning – indeed, somewhat less.

But the wench dang me soundly on the ear for it, so that my head echoed again. Yet I liked her better for that, because it made the adventure something worth attempting. 'Go,' she cried, 'grow your beard before ye set up to kiss women. I would as soon kiss the back of my hand as a man wanting the beard to his face.'

Thus she gave me also the woman's buffet of the tongue, and I could have answered her, and well, too, but that I saw behind me my Lord Cassillis himself, and right heartily he was laughing – which, I do admit, disconcerted me no little, and brought me to silence.

'Ah, lad,' he said, 'have ye not learned from your experience of this night that women are just like castles? Ye must reconnoitre them circumspectly before ye can hope to take them by direct assault.'

He went by, giving me a clap on the shoulder, as one that had sympathy both with the winning of castles and of women. And I think he liked me none the worse for it in the long run. But I hoped that he would not make a jest of it nor tell the Tutor of the matter. For my master, Sir Thomas of Culzean, being a grave man and reverend, was not apt to look upon the follies of youth with so kindly and comprehending an eye.

Within the kitchen of the Inn of the Red Moss there was routh of liquor, and all the Cassillis faction were gathered there, quaffing and pledging one another. They were flushed with their success, and several were even keen for assaulting some of the Bargany strongholds at once.

But the Tutor cautioned them.

'Mind what ye do. Young Bargany is as a lion compared to that braying ass we left groaning behind us at Kelwood; and John Muir of Auchendrayne has at once the wisest head and the evildest heart in all this broad Scotland. Be patient and abide. We have gotten the treasure. Let us be content and wait.'

'Ay, and by waiting give them the next score in the game!' said the young Earl, scornfully – for he, too, was hot with success.

So they stood about the kitchen with drinking-cups of horn in their hands, while the Earl unfolded a plan of the great house of Bargany, and began to explain how it might be taken.

'But,' he said, 'we must wait till, by some overt and considered act of war, Bargany gives me the chance to execute justice within my Balliary of Carrick, as is my legal right. Then swiftly we shall strike, before that Bargany can reach us with the sword, or John Muir of Auchendrayne foil us by getting at the King with his fox's cunning.'

Hardly were the words out of his mouth when a silence fell upon us. The Earl ceased speaking and inclined his head as though, like the rest of us, he were harkening eagerly for the repeating of a sound.

Then we who listened with him heard something that was like the clattering of horses' feet at a gallop, which came nearer and nearer. There arose a cry from the front of the house – that wild, shrill scream, the unmistakable parting cry of a man stricken to death with steel. Then broke forth about the Inn of the Red Moss, the rush of many horses snorting with fear and fleeing every way, the while we, that were in the house, stood as it had been carved in stone, so swift and unexpected was this thing.

The Earl remained by the table in the centre, with his hand yet on the plan of the house of his enemy. Sir Thomas was still bending down to look, when all suddenly the glass of the window crashed and a missile came flashing through, thrown by a strong man's hand. It fell with a ring of iron across the paper that was outspread on the table. It was a dagger heavily hiked with silver. But what thrilled us all with fear was, that the blade of it was red nearly to the hilt, and distilled fresh-dripping blood upon the chart.

Then was heard from without something that sounded like a man laughing – but as of a man that had been longtime in hell – and again there came the galloping of a single horse's feet. The first in all in the house to run to the door was no other than the young lass I had tried to kiss. She flung the door open and ran to a dark, huddled thing, which lay across the paving stones of the little causeway in front of the inn.

'My father – oh, they have slain my father!' she cried.

We that were within also rushed out by the front door, forgetting all else, and filled with dread of what we might see.

The dawn was coming red from the east, and there, in the first flush of it, lay Black Peter, plain to be seen, a dark tide sluggishly welling from his side, and his young daughter trying pitifully to staunch it with the bit laced napkin wherewith she had bound her hair to make her pleasant in the men's eyes.

When Peter of the Red Moss saw the Earl, he tried to raise himself upon his elbow from the ground. One feeble hand went waveringly to his head as if to remove his bonnet in the presence of his chief.

Cassillis sank on his knees beside him and took the hand. There was a fragment of a leather rein still clasped in it, cut across with a clean, slicing cut.

'Peter, Peter, poor man, who has done this to you?' he asked.

The man that was about to die turned his eyes this way and that.

'My lord, my lord,' he said, struggling with the choking blood that rose in his throat, 'it was – it was – the grey man – !'

And the Earl listened for more with his ear down to Peter's mouth, but the spirit of the man who had died for his master ebbed dumbly away without another word. So there was nothing left for us to do but to carry him in, and this we did in the young sunshine of a pleasant morning. And the maid washed and streaked him, moaning and crooning over him piteously, as a dove does that wanteth company.

I went, as it happened, into the trance to fetch her a basin of clear water. The top of the meal-ark stood empty!

'My lord – the chest!' I cried, and all save the maid alone rushed in. The treasure of Kelwood was gone! Without the door, on the trampled clay and mud, there were the steads of naked feet many

and small. But of the treasure-chest for which we had ventured so much that night, we saw neither hilt nor hair, clasp nor band.

Only in the kitchen of the house on the Red Moss there was a dead man, and a maid mourning over him; on the table a dagger, red to the guard, and from it fell slowly the drip of a man's life blood, blotting out with a bitter scorn the plans of our wisest and the enmity of our proudest.

CHAPTER VI

THE CROWN OF THE CAUSEWAY

I rode forth from Edinburgh town with infinite glee and assurance of spirit. No longer could I be slighted as a boy, for that day I, even I, Launcelot Kennedy, had been put to the horn – that is, I had been proclaimed rebel and outlaw at the Cross of Edinburgh with three blasts of the king's horn, 'Against John, Earl of Cassillis, Sir Thomas of Culzean, called the Tutor of Cassillis, and Launcelot Kennedy, his esquire!' So had run the proclamation. I wondered what that unkempt, ill-tongued lassie, Nell Kennedy, would say to this. But the honour itself even she could not gainsay.

It is true that there were others forfaulted as well as I – the Earl himself that was a sitter in the King's council board, Sir Thomas, my master, and, indeed, all that had any hand in the great contest in the High Street of Edinburgh. How close had every leal burgess kept within doors that day and how briskly screamed for the watch! How the town guards sequestered themselves safe behind bars, and were very quiet, for there was hardly a man to be seen from the castle to Holyrood-House that was not a Kennedy, and trying to kill some other Kennedy – as indeed is ever the way with our name and clan.

We of Cassillis had ridden hot foot to Edinburgh to denounce the Bargany faction to the king, in the matter of the treasure and the killing of Black Peter. Not that we knew for certain that it was Bargany who had any hand in the murder and reiving. But it was necessary to make a bold face for it, and, at all events, we knew that the thing had been done in Bargany's interests. So we went, all prepared to declare that the active criminal was Bargany's brother, Thomas of Drummurchie, a bold and desperate villain, who had been outlawed for years for many a crime besides murder in all its degrees. Also we hoped that if the king were in a good humour towards us of Cassillis, who were always the men of loyalty and peace, he might even attaint Bargany himself. So that our Earl, being the Bailzie or chief ruler of Carrick under the King, might get his will of his house foe, and thus put an end to the quarrel. For there was no other hope of peace, save that our enemies should be laid waste.

But we found King James in aught but a yielding mood. The ministers of Edinburgh, and in especial one, Mr Robert Bruce, a man of very great note, and once a prime favourite with the king, had been setting themselves against his will. So at first we got little satisfaction, and it did not help matters that, on the second day of our visit, the Bargany Kennedies and Mures rode into the town in force – all sturdy men from the landward parts of Carrick, while we were mostly slighter and limberer lads, from the side of it that looks towards the sea.

The next day, as I went down the Canongate with the gold lilies of Cassillis on my cocked bonnet, I declare that nearly every third man I met was a Bargany lout, swaggering with his silly favour of red and white in his cap. But, for all that, I ruffled it right bravely in despite of them all, letting no man cock his feather at me. For I had a way, which I found exceedingly irritating to them, of turning the skirt or my blue French cloak over my shoulder when I met one of the other faction, as if I feared defilement from the contact of their very garments. This I did with all of the underlings – aye, even with Mure of Cloncaird. Indeed, I had already had my long sword three times out of its sheath by the time I got to the guard-house at Holyrood.

It was just there that I met young Bargany himself, coming direct, from the King's presence. But I practised my pleasantries not with him. For a more kingly-looking man did I never see – far beyond our Earl (shame be to me for saying such a thing!), and, indeed, before any man that ever I saw. But Gilbert Kennedy of Bargany was the bravest man that was to be gotten in any land, as all men that saw him in his flower do to this day admit. And hearts were like water before him.

He was of his stature tall and well-made, with a complexion black but comely, noble on horseback, and a master both of arms and at all pastimes. And when I beheld him, it came upon me to salute him – which, though I had small intention thereof till I saw him, I did. It was with

some surprise, perceiving, no doubt, the Earl's colours, that he returned my greeting, and that very graciously. The moment after I looked about me, and right glad I was to observe that none of our folk had been in the place before the palace to observe my salutation.

After this we of Cassillis went in parties of three or four, and our swords were in our hands all the day, in spite of the watch – ay, in spite even of the King's Guard, which His Majesty had sent to keep the peace, when he himself had gone off to Linlithgow in the sulks, as at this time was oft his silly wont.

For me, I went chiefly with Sir Thomas, my master, as was my duty; but being allowed to choose my companion, I chose Muckle Hugh from Kirriemore, which marches with mine own home of Kirrieoch on Minnochside. Hugh was the strongest man in all Carrick, and had joined the command chiefly for the love of me – because he had once herded sheep for us, and my mother had been kind to him and given him new milk instead of skim for his porridge.

And I warrant you when the two of us took the crown of the causeway, we stepped aside for no man, not even for Bargany and his brother Drummurchie had we seen them (which by good luck we never did). But others we saw in plenty. It was 'Bargany thieves!' 'Cassillis cairds!' as we cried one to the other across the street. And the next moment there we were, ruffling and strutting like gamecocks, foot-to-foot in the midst of the causeway, neither willing to give way. Then 'Give them iron!' would be the cry; and in a clapping of hands there would be as pretty a fight as one might wish to see – till, behold, in a gliff, there on the cobble stones was a man stretched, and all workmanly completed from beginning to end, while the clock of St Giles' was jangling the hour of noon.

For the matter of the killing of Black Peter, and the way that lassie his daughter held his head as she washed him, abode with us, and made our hearts hot against the Barganies. That is, the hearts of the younger of us. For I wot well that the elders thought more of the lost box of treasure, than of many men's lives far more famous and necessary than that of poor Black Peter, who died in his duty at the house door of the Red Moss – and that is not at all an ill death to die.

But there came a day when the ill blood drew to a head. It was bound to come, because for weeks the two factions of us Kennedies had been itching to fly at each other's throats. The Barganies mostly lodged together in the lower parts of the town beneath the Nether Bow, in order to keep us away from the King when he was at Holyrood House, and also to be near the haunts of those loose characters of the baser sort with whom, as was natural, they chiefly consorted.

We, on our part, dwelled in the upper portion of the town, in the well-aired Lawnmarket and in the fashionable closes about the Bow-head. For none of us, so far as I knew, desired to mix or to mell with loose company – save, an' it might be, the Earl himself. That being 'the custom and privilege of the nobility,' as Morton said to his leman, when he wished to change her for another.

Now, we had among us of our company one Patrick Wishart, an indweller in Irvine and a good fighter. He was an Edinburgh man born, and knew all the town – every lane and street, every bend and bow, every close and pend and turning in it. He also knew that which was even more valuable, where the King's Guard were, and how to shut them up till we had done our needs upon our foes. He was well advised besides where each of the leaders among the Barganies dwelt.

On the day appointed the Earl gave us all a meeting-place by the back of Saint Giles' High Kirk, beneath the wall of the Tolbooth. And there we mustered at ten of the clock one gay morning. It was a windy day, and, spite of the sun, the airs blew shrewdly from the eastern sea, as is their use and wont all the year in the High Street of Edinburgh.

Now our young Earl had ever plenty of siller though afterward he parted with it but seldom. Yet for the furtherance of his cause he had spent it lavishly during these days in Edinburgh, so that all the common orders in our upper part of the town held him to be the greatest man and the best that ever lived. And as for the vices he showed, they were easy, popular ones, such as common folk readily excuse and even approve in the great – as women, wine, and such-like.

So as we swung down the street all the windows of the armourers' shops in the booths about the Kirk of Saint Giles' were opened, and as many as desired it were supplied with spears and pikes and long-handled Highland axes, each with a grappling hook at the back, such-like as had brought many a good knight down at the Red Harlaw.

And these were afterwards a great advantage to us, for though we were much fewer in numbers, yet we had longer weapons of assault and also the upper side of the street to fight from.

Then we sallied forth crying, 'A Kennedy!' And the streets were lined to see us go by, many a douce burgher's wife, knowing our good intentions and our not companying with the riotous troublers of the town, but rather, when we could compass it, with honest, sonsy women, giving us her blessing from an upper window.

Patrick Wishart advised that we should stop up all the alleys and closes as far down as the Blackfriar's Wynd with barracadoes of carts, barrels, and puncheons, to prevent the enemy sallying forth upon us from behind. It was a good thought, and but for a foe without, whom we knew not how to reckon with, it had been completely successful. Down by the Nether Bow, where the street narrows, was the place where we first saw the misleared Bargany faction drawn across the street to resist us and condemn the King's authority.

When we observed them we gave a mighty shout and heaved our weapons into the air, that they might see the excellence of our arming. They sent a shout back again, and I saw in front of their array Bargany himself with a casque on his head, the sun glinting the while on a steel cuirass which covered him back and front. Then I gave the word to blow up the matches; for by this time I was well kenned for a good soldier and proper marksman, and had by my lord himself been put over the hackbuttmen, which was a great honour for one so young. Thus we advanced to the onset. But first my Lord of Cassillis, going to the front, cried to Kennedy of Bargany to know why he withstood him in the highway of the King's principal town.

'Because ye have lied concerning me to the King. Because ye have slain my men, hated my race, and sought to bring me to my death!' answered back young Bargany in a clear, high voice.

'Ye lie, man! Have at you with the sword!' cried our Earl, who was never a great man with his tongue, though sometimes masterful enough with his hands.

So with that I gave the order, and our hackbuttmen shot off their pieces, so that more than one of the wearers of the red and white fell headlong.

'A Kennedy! A Kennedy!' cried the Earl. 'To it, my lads!'

And in a moment we were on them. By instinct we had dropped our matchlocks and taken to the steel, so that the first thing that I knew, I was at Thomas of Drummurchie's throat with my borrowed pike. He roared an oath, and leaping to the side, he struck the shaft with his two-handed sword, which shored the point off near to my upper grip. And there is little doubt but that I had been spent ere I could have drawn my sword, had not Muckle Hugh of Kirriemore brought his broadsword down upon the steel cap of the Wolf of Drummurchie, so that with the mighty blow he was beaten to the ground, and, being senseless, men trampled upon him as the battle swayed to and fro. Yet I have never forgotten that, but for Hugh, I was that day almost sped, which should have been a lesson to me not to trust to a weapon of which I had no skill, even though it might be an ell longer in the haft than my sword. Also I was thankful to God.

'A Kennedy! a Kennedy!' cried we. 'We are driving them. They give back!'

For we felt the downward push upon the hillslope, and that gave us courage.

And the crying of 'Bargany' was almost silenced, for now the wearers of the butcher's colours had enough to do to keep steeks with us, with their faces braced to the brae, and so needed all their breath.

By this time I had my arm cleared and my sword out, and, certes, but the fray was brisk. Now, when it is hand to hand I fear no man. Once I had a chance of paying my score in the matter of Drummurchie, for as I passed over him he cut upwards at me with a knife. But I spared only long

enough from the man I was engaging at the time (who indeed was no swordsman or I dared not have done it) to slash the Wolf across the wrist, which, I am given to believe, has troubled his sword-hand all his life – and for no more than this he has borne me a grudge unto this day, so malicious and revengeful are some men.

Thus we drove the Bargany faction into the Canongate in spite of the swordsmanship of their chief, who fought ever in the forefront. It was, indeed, all over with them, when suddenly, from behind us, there came rushing a rabblement of men with weapons in their hands, all crying 'Bargany!' Able-bodied scoundrels with long hair and pallid faces they were, and they laid about them with desperate vigour. Now, it is no wonder that this was a terrible surprise to us, and, hearing their cry, the broken Bargany folk down the streets and closes took heart of grace to have at us again. We were not discouraged, but part of us faced about, so as to fight with our backs set one, to the other. Nevertheless, I saw at once that unless some help came we were overpowered.

'Into the lanes!' I cried, though, indeed, I had no right to give an order, but, in the pinch of necessity, it is he who sees that should lead.

So into one of the narrow lanes which led to the ford and down by the stepping-stones across the Nor' Loch we ran, but not in the way of a rout. Rather we retreated orderly and slow – withdrawing, grieved at heart to think that we had to leave so many of our sick and wounded behind us. Yet, because of the love they bore us as peaceable men, we knew that the town's dames would succour them – also lest we should be bloodily revenged on their husbands when we came back, if they did not.

At the edge of the Nor' Loch, six or seven of us made a rally, and having wounded and captured one of the long-haired desperadoes whose assault had turned the tables against Cassillis, we brought him with us, thinking that my Lord might wish to question him with the pilniewinks.

Now not many of the Bargany faction pursued; some because they knew not whither we were gone, some because both their chief and the Wolf of Drummurchie were hurt, and others again because the rabble which had fallen on our rear, not knowing one party from another, had turned their weapons upon their friends.

Nevertheless, it was a patent fact that we good men of Cassillis had been baffled and put to shame by the thieves of Bargany in the open High Street of Edinburgh. It has not happened to many to be victorious and pursuing, and again broken and defeated, all within the space of half-an-hour.

When we were safe from pursuit on the other side of the Nor' Loch, we questioned the varlet whom I and others had captured, as to what was his quarrel against us.

'Nothing,' he said. 'I and the others were lying in the Tolbooth, when suddenly the gates were opened, and there stood one at the door, clad in grey, who gave a sword or a pike to each man, as well as a piece of gold, telling us that there were other ten of the same awaiting each good striker who should fall on and fight those whom he would show us.'

'What like was this man?' said Sir Thomas, my master.

'An ordinary man enough,' said the fellow; 'grey of head and also clad in grey, but with armour that rattled beneath his clothes.'

Then we looked at one another, and remembered the dying words of Black Peter – 'It was – it was – the Grey Man – !'

Once more such a man had crossed the luck of Cassillis. By what golden key he had bribed the warders and opened His Majesty's Tolbooth, we knew not; but assuredly he had clean beaten us from the field.

Nevertheless, I was much cheered to hear on the next day that the name of Launcelot Kennedy, called 'of Kirrieoch, or Launcelot of the Spurs,' was among those that were 'put to the horn,' or in plain words declared rebel and outlaw at the Cross of Edinburgh.

For I knew that Nell Kennedy would never flout me more. Even fair Marjorie would, perhaps, not disdain speech with me now, and might perchance let me walk by her side in the garden some summer evening.

CHAPTER VII

MY LADY'S FAVOURS

It was as I had foretold. Those that had flouted me for a beardless boy, now scorned me no more. I mean chiefly Nell Kennedy. Indeed, for some days it was as much as I would do even to speak to her. She would make shift oftentimes to pass me in the pleasaunces of the house of Culzean, when I walked abroad in the sunshine with my hand on my sword – as was my duty – to receive her father's guests. For there was a great repair of people to our castle ever since the outlawing, the cause of which was considered most fortunate and honourable to all concerned.

Nell Kennedy, as I say, would often pass me in the orchard or in the Italian garden, which her father had made with great expense. And as she went by, she would kick with her foot a stone in front of me. But of this I took no heed whatever, no more than if I had not seen it. Because, for my own part, I was resolved never to think of maids and such light matters again, but rather to concern myself solely with glory, as became one who at eighteen had been outlawed for rebellion and other deeds of military prowess.

Once it happened that we were all in the garden – Marjorie, the loons James and Alexander Kennedy, and little David, Sir Thomas's youngest son. Also Nell Kennedy was there. Sir Thomas himself was walking to and fro at the garden's end, all by his lone, with his hands clasped behind his back, as was his custom.

Then Nell, who, being angry, desired above all else to put a slight upon me, called me to come to her, speaking roughly as though I had been a servitor, and bade me take a misbehaving puppy dog of hers within doors.

But I was equal with her, and beckoned to me Sandy, her brother, who played about on the grass plots.

'Who may this little girl be that hath the messan dog with her?' I asked of him.

'Thou art a great blind colt-head not to know my sister Nell!' he answered, and ran again to his play with his brothers.

'Ah,' said I, looking over the heads of those that stood near by, 'now I do remember to have seen the little maid playing with her dolls before I went to the wars!'

And with that I marched off, and walked to and fro on the terrace near to my master. Presently he came and walked with me, as I had hoped he would, in sight of Nell and of them all, speaking low and kindly the while. And I listened as though it were an affair of State and policy he had been confiding to my private ear, though indeed it was only concerning our greatly increased expenses with the vast number of guests who came to see him, and his fear that the buttery might be running low.

When Nell Kennedy had betaken herself away in an access of anger and despite, I made my bow to Sir Thomas, her father, and went to the Italian pleasaunce once again. Presently the young Lady Marjorie came walking by, fairer of face than the flower of the hawthorn hedge on a moonlight night, but with hair tossed about her temples blacker than the sky on a night of stars. Her eyes were bright and large when she turned them on me.

'Launcelot, come and walk with me awhile,' she said kindly, 'unless you have something better to do – with your arms and war gear as it may be,' she added. And her way of speaking thus of my calling as a soldier pleased me. Also in spite of my renunciation of all pleasure in women's society, my heart gave a great stound at her marked favour. Perhaps, also, at the way she had in walking, which was with her head high and her bosom set well forward in its openwork bodice of fair linen, and all her sweet body swaying lightly to the side as a willow wand that bends in the wind.

Her voice, the voice of Marjorie Kennedy, sounded like the running of deep water in a linn under the dusk of trees, with undercurrents of sobs and pitifulness in it, for all that it was so proud.

For even thus, in her youth, walking as the fairest maid the sun shone on, Marjorie seemed ever to be 'fey,' trysted to some lot beyond that of maids who are to be good men's wives and mothers.

But enough of speaking about her and about. Better that I should tell what she said to me as we walked up and down, while the young buds were cracking open that gracious May gloaming.

'It was a good fight, I hear, and well fought,' she said.

'Which fight may it please you to speak of, my Lady Marjorie?' said I, making as though I had been in many.

'The battle in the High Street of Edinburgh,' she made answer, and methought smiled as she said it. But there was no bairnly scorn or raw coltish ignorance in Marjorie's smile, as there mostly was in the face of her sister – who was nothing but a child at any rate, and still wore her hair without a snood, flying daft-like about her shoulders.

Then I told Marjorie Kennedy of all the fight, and she listened with face turned away from me to the sea, looking to the hills of Arran that were so blue in the distance, so that for a space I thought she hearkened not to what I said.

But in a little she interrupted me. 'And you speak thus with admiration of Gilbert Kennedy of Bargany, he that is an enemy to our house and name! How say ye then that such an one is noble and worthy?'

For I had been telling her of meeting him coming from the king's palace.

'Ay, noble and generous is Gilbert Kennedy of Bargany, as well as the handsomest man that walks, with a spring to his feet as one that goes upon the deep twigs of the pine trees in the woods. He can twirl a lance in one hand on horseback – for I myself have seen him – never was there such a man!'

For I had given him all my heart and admiration, being then young – or at least not very old in years – and I wished with all my strength that such an one had been chief of our side and Earl of Cassillis, instead of he that was. Though my lord is a good man also, and I deny it not.

Then it was that my Lady Marjorie showed me the greatest favour that ever she showed to any man, and caused my heart to beat high with love and hope. For she took my hand in hers, holding it to her side as she walked – ay, and stroked and touched it gently with her other hand as we went along, being hidden by the screen of the leaves in the pleasaunce hedges. Now this was so sweet to me and precious, that I slept with my right hand in a glove of silk for many days – ay, and even forbore to wash it. For I bethought me that though, as a man of war, I had forsworn the society of silly girls, yet every true knight had a lady for his heart's mistress, whose colours he might wear in his helmet, and whose lightest word he might treasure in his heart.

Thus we two walked and talked, while the sun was going down and the colours of a dove's breast crept over the water from the west.

'And this Gilbert of Bargany – tell me of him – for, being the great enemy of our house, I desire to hear more of him,' she said.

So I told her, being nothing loth to speak of so brave an enemy.

'Was he at all hurt in the combat, think you?' she asked again, carelessly, as one that thinks of other things.

'Wounded? No,' I replied, with a laugh; 'on the contrary, he pursued us down to the ford of the Nor' Loch, and defied us all to come back and have it out. But I think that not he but another, had a hand in the craven's trick of letting loose on us the offscourings of the prisons – Highland catherans and Border hedgethieves.'

'And who might that other be?' she asked.

'That,' I replied, with dignity, 'I am not at liberty to tell. It is yet a secret under trust.'

'Tell it me,' she said, bending her eyes on me, that were beautiful as I know not what.

And this, indeed, I should very gladly have done at that moment, but truly I knew nothing of the matter. So I made haste to answer that I would readily die for her, but that it was a soldier's duty that he should keep the secrets with which his honour had been entrusted.

'Then tell me what you can,' she said, so quietly that I was ashamed of my subterfuge. Though that is the way that all wise men must talk to women, so as to keep the peace, telling them (mostly) the truth, but seldom the whole truth.

'It was,' said I, 'the Grey Man!'

'Ah,' she replied, quickly drawing away her hand, and laying it upon her heart, 'the Grey Man!'

'What ken ye of the Grey Man?' I asked her, in surprise.

'Nothing,' she said, giving me back her hand; 'I know not why, but for the moment something came upon me, and I felt as it had been a little faint. It is nothing. It has already passed.'

Then I wished to bring her a cup of wine from the house. But she laughed more merrily than ever I had heard her, and tossed back the lace kerchief which confined her hair, so that it lay about her white neck with the ends dropping over her bosom.

'Let us two walk here yet a space, Launcelot,' she said, 'for it is lonely within the great house.'

A saying which made my heart swell with gladness and pride, for she had never thus distinguished any man before, so that I forgot all about my vows and about forswearing to company with women. But this was indeed very different.

'My Lady Marjorie,' I said (I much desired to say 'My sweet lady' as they do in the stage plays, but dared not), 'My Lady Marjorie,' I said, 'I, even I, will be your true knight, and fight for you against all, if so be that coming home I may see the pleasure in your eyes.'

'Ah, will you truly?' she asked, and sighed. Then she was silent for a moment but drew not away her hand, which I took of be a good omen.

'No, you must not – you must not. It would not be fair!' she said.

'I love you with all my heart!' I whispered, trying to reach her hand; but somehow, though it was very near, I could not again take it in mine.

She seemed not to hear me speak.

'Well,' she said at last, as if to herself, 'perhaps it will be good for the lad.'

I could not conceive what she meant.

'Launcelot,' she continued, and her voice had music in it such as I never heard in any kirk or quire, at matins or at laud, – 'Launcelot, do not think of me, I pray you – at least, not if you can help it –'

'Help it I cannot,' answered I; 'it is far beyond that!'

And so I thought at the time.

'But, Launcelot, my sweet squire,' she said again, 'hast thou already forgotten thy vow? It is better for thee to be a squire of arms than a squire of dames! At least,' she added, smiling, 'till you win your spurs.'

'I will win them for your sake, an you will let me, Marjorie!' I cried.

'Win them, then, Launcelot,' she made me answer, suddenly breaking from her reserve, 'win them for my sake – and see, meantime you shall wear my colours.'

And she undid a brooch of gold whereon were the lilies of France, that were the badge of her house, and setting it on the velvet collar of my coat she gave a little dainty pat to the place where she put it.

'It sets you well,' she said, pushing my hair to one side to look at me; 'two such I have. Wear you one and I shall wear the other – for Marjorie Kennedy and the honour of Culzean.'

It sounded like a sacred oath rather than the posy of a love-gift: '*For Marjorie Kennedy and the honour of Culzean!*'

Then most humbly would I have lifted her fingers to my lips and kissed them, not daring more; but she put her hand on my head, for she was tall (though not as tall as I), and bent sweetly to me.

The blood of all my heart fled insurgent to my ears, deafening me, as I also stooped toward her.

'No, not there,' she whispered, and kissed me gently on the brow.

'My laddie,' she said, 'be brave, true, noble, and one day you shall know root and branch what the love of woman is.'

And waving me not to follow her, she went in with her head turned away from my sight.

So there for a great space I stood in the dusk of the harbour, mazed and bewildered by the strange, undreamed-of bliss – ennobled by the touch of her lips, ay, more than if the King himself had laid his sword on my shoulder in the way of accolade.

Then at last I moved and went in also, dragging tardy-foot away from the sweet and memorable place.

At the garden gate I met Nell Kennedy, and made to pass without seeing her. But she stood in the middle of the way.

'I know,' she said, pointing scornfully with her finger, 'Maidie has been talking to you behind the hedge. She has given you the French brooch she would not give me yesterday, though she has another.'

Then I walked silently past her, with as great dignity as I could command, for that is ever the best way with forward children.

But she turned and cried after me, 'I know who will get that other.'

A saying which did not trouble me, though I could not quite forget it, for I knew well enough that it was only Nell's spite, because her sister had not given her the golden badge which she coveted.

High in my room in the White Tower I sat and looked out to the sea. There I sat all night, sleepless, till the sun rose over the woods and the chilly tops of the waves glittered. I bethought me on all that had happened, and I remembered with shame many things in which I had done not wisely especially in the matter of the Grieve's lass, and my convoying of her home through the wood. For now, with Marjorie Kennedy's badge against my lips, all things had become new; bitterly was I ashamed of my folly, and right briskly did I repent of it.

CHAPTER VIII

THE LAIRD OF AUCHENDRAYNE

It is not to be supposed that the taking of the treasure of Kelwood was permitted to pass without the Earl, a man keener for red siller than any other man in Scotland, casting about him for the reivers of the gear he had so confidently counted his own. His old grandmother of a Countess, whom, though a young man, he had shamefully married for her tocher and plenishing, flustered about the house of Cassillis like a hen dancing on a hot girdle when she heard of the loss. It was but the other day that she had had to draw her stocking-foot and pay down eight thousand merks, that her man might be permitted to resign the office of High Treasurer, lest all her gear would be wasted in making loans to the King, who had great need of such. And so the further loss of this treasure sat wondrously heavy on my Lady Cassillis, as indeed it did on her husband.

The Earl himself rode over to Culzean to hold council concerning it with his uncle, the Tutor. He cherished a wonderful affection for Sir Thomas, considering, that is, what a selfish man he was, and how bound up in his own interests.

So after they had talked together a while, pacing up and down in the garden (while I walked apart and pressed the hard brooch-pin of Marjorie Kennedy's trysting favour to my breast for comfort), they called me to them.

So with all respect and speed I went, and stood with my bonnet off to hear their commands. I thought that it was some light matter of having the horses brought. But when I came the Earl was looking keenly at me, and even Sir Thomas paused a little while before he spoke.

'Launcelot, you are a brave lad,' he said, 'and I know that you desire to distinguish yourself even more than you have done, though you have shown your mettle already. Now my lord and I have a matter which it needs a man to perform – one of address and daring. I hear from all about me that you are a ready man with your wits and your tongue. Will you bear my lord's cartel of defiance to his enemy, David Crauford of Kerse?'

'Ay, my lords, that will I, and readily!' I replied, knowing that my good fortune stood on tiptoe.

'I am not eager,' the Earl said, breaking in upon my reply, 'for reasons which I have given to the Tutor, to send one of my own folk. I would rather accredit one more kin to Culzean here, one who is a gentleman of good blood and a brave Kennedy, such as I observed you to be on the day of the tulzie in Edinburgh.'

'I will serve Cassillis till I die,' I replied, making him a little bow – because I wished him to see that, though I was of the moorland house, I had yet manners as good as he had brought back with him from France. Besides, I saw Marjorie looking down upon us from the terrace, which made me glance at my shadow as it lay clearly outlined upon the gravel.

And I was glad to observe that the point of my cloak fell with some grace over the scabbard of my sword. Now this was not vanity, God knows, but only a just desire to appear point device in the presence of the heads of my clan and of the lady of my heart – which is a thing very different. For of all things I am not vain, nor given, after the manner of some, to talking greatly about my own exploits.

'So,' said the Earl, 'you will go to David Crauford of Kerse at his own house as my messenger. You will not give him a written but a spoken message. And in token that you come from us who have power to speak, you must exhibit to him our signet rings, which we now entrust to you to guard with your life.'

So, giving me the rings, which I put under my glove upon the first finger of the left hand, he communicated to me the cartel for the Laird of Kerse, which he made me repeat carefully thrice over in their hearing. Then he dismissed me to go my way.

And as I went, I saw the lads roistering in the garden with the young Sheriff of Wigton, who had married their eldest sister when she was but a lassie. And I smiled as I thought within me, 'Had I been so born to lofty estate, I might even have been playing at golf and pat-ball, instead of riding on the errands of Cassillis and Culzean, with an Earl's message in my mouth and an Earl's signet on my finger.'

And I do not think that the pride was an unworthy one, for since I had none to push my fortune for me, it was the more necessary that I should be able to do it for myself.

I went to get my war-horse, for after the affair of Edinburgh, Sir Thomas had given me 'Dom Nicholas,' a black of mettle and power, well able to carry me even had I been clad in full armour, instead of merely riding light as I now meant to go, with only my sword and pistols.

At the seaward corner of the White Tower, going by the way of the stables, I met my Lady Marjorie, and my heart gave a bound at the seeing of her. She came gravely forward to give me her hand. Yet not to kiss, as I knew by the downward weighting of it, and by her taking it quickly again to herself.

'Whither go you, grave man of affairs?' she said, smiling with pleasantry.

'I go with an Earl's cartel and defiance,' I replied, telling her, perhaps, more than I ought. But then she was my lady.

Marjorie became very pale and set her hand on the stone parapet of the sea wall where she stood.

'To Bargany?' she asked, breathlessly, for it was natural she should think that the quarrel with the family had broken out again.

'Not to Bargany,' I said, smiling to reassure her. 'I cannot now tell you where, but it is out of Carrick that I ride – Carrick for a man – Kyle for a cow. I ride to the land of sweet milk cheese!'

'God speed you, then,' she said. 'Take care of yourself – beware of the dairymaids. I have heard they are dangerous.'

'For your sweet sake,' cried I, waving my bonnet to her as I ran down the path.

But before I went fairly out of sight I turned and looked back, for, indeed, I could not help it. And Marjorie was still standing under the archway where I had left her, but with so sad and lost a countenance that I had run back to ask her what was her grief. Then she seemed to awake, kissed the tips of her fingers to me, and turning her about, walked slowly within.

When I was fully arrayed, I rode past the front of the house on pretext of knowing if my lords had any further commands for me, but really that the maids might see me upon Dom Nicholas in his fair caparison of beaten silver. She whom I wished most to see I saw not indeed; but there at the great gate, with a foolish spraying branch of hawthorn in her hair, was Nell Kennedy, of whom during these last days I had scarcely so much as thought.

And with her, to my burning shame and amaze, was Kate Allison, the Grieve's daughter. The two girls stood with their arms about one another's waists, as maids that are yet half bairns are wont to do. But neither of them looked at me. Only when I made Dom Nicholas caracole by, they turned disdainfully aside as though they were avoiding the path of some poisonous toad or asp. And so, wholly without word, they passed down one of the leafy avenues that beset the place of Culzean, which thing in a moment rendered all my full, sweet cup empty and bitter.

At this I was much dashed and crestfallen, so that I had no spirit in me. For I was sure, by the attitude of the maids, and their demeanour to me, that they had gotten to the stage of the confiding of secrets. And if that were so, I had a good guess that it would be as well for me to avoid the Grieve's house by the shore for some time to come. Which thing, indeed, last evening's tryst with Marjorie had made me resolve on before. But it was not the matter of Kate Allison's anger that troubled me; it was rather that the clattering minx, Nell Kennedy, would certainly tell her sister of my past boyish affairs with the pretty young lass, and specially of our home-coming from the March fair so late at night.

But the stir of going through the town of Maybole – the lasses running to the doors to admire, the 'prentice lads envying and hating me, so worked on me that, for a space, I forgot the ill-fared memory of the two maids linking down through the greenwood together. Yet the thing came again into my mind and stuck there, before I had overtaken half the way to Dalrymple, by which I was behoved to go.

As I rode along I practised pulling at the wicks of my upper lip, where I was persuaded that my moustache was certainly beginning to grow apace. For so I had seen the soldiers of the King's Guard do in Edinburgh, and mightily admired them at it.

The way went pleasantly by, there being many folk of all degrees and qualities on the road. And as many as saw me come, stepped aside and stood respectfully at gaze, if they were on foot; or courteously saluted me as an equal if they were on horseback. Both which things pleased me well.

So I went on smiling to myself for the pleasantness of my thoughts, in spite of the incident of the lasses. Suddenly, however, I came upon a horseman like myself, that rode down a loaning from the muirside. I saw no weapon that he had about him, yet he was no mere landward minister or merchant, by the sober richness of his habit. He was dressed in fine cloth of Flemish blue, with a plain edging of silk, but without lace or any broidery. His face, when I saw it, was pleasant, and there was on it a smile that spoke of good cheer. He seemed to be tall of his person, and, from the manner in which he reined his horse easily with his left hand, I knew him to be strong. A well-appearing, sober, conditionable man of fifty I should have taken him to be, fit to be head of a house or to sit at a king's council table.

But his occupation was the strange part of his sudden appearing. He was employed in reading a little book which he held in his right hand, riding easily all the while with his horse at a brisk walk – a thing which I never saw anyone do before. Then was I sure that he was a man of religion, by his busying himself thus with his devotions. At which I was the better pleased, since religion is a thing I was ever taught to reverence above all else, for that is the habit of the moorland folk who get but little of it. On the other hand, they tell me that in Edinburgh, where there are as many as seven ministers, the folk pay little heed to their privileges; and are, as indeed I have seen, given over to following all manner of wickedness and that with greediness.

As my fellow-traveller came down the loaning he looked up, and seeing me, he wheeled his horse alongside of mine, and very courteously gave me 'Good-day.'

Then, as well he might, he admired Dom Nicholas, letting his eyes stray smilingly over my equipage. Yet even at that moment I marked that it was a set smile, and methought that there was a busy brain behind it.

'You ride like a soldier that hath seen the wars, young sir,' he said.

'Ah,' I replied, lifting my bonnet of steel as to an elder, 'but little enough of these, my Lord, for I am but a youth.'

'You will mend of that last, I warrant,' said my companion, 'and in the end more swiftly than you will care about.'

'You were busy with your book of devotion,' said I, with respect, for I care not to force my conversation on any man; 'let me not interrupt.'

'Nay,' he said, 'I fear I am no great churchman, though for my servants' sake I have reading and worship daily in my own house, and generally I may claim to be very well affected toward the Almighty.'

'Are there no churches in your part of the country,' I asked him, 'for I perceive by your habit you are not a hereaway man?'

'There are indeed kirks there, but I cannot bide to be hampered and taken in a snare within walls, in the present unsettled state of the country. A peaceable man does well to worship in the open. What sense is there in being shut weaponless in a kirk, and shot at through the windows, as happened not long ago?'

I asked how that could be.

'Have you not heard how in the north country the Craufords beset the Kennedies in Dalrymple Kirk, taking them at an advantage without their weapons of war – so that a Kennedy now goes no oftener to kirk than the twenty-ninth of February comes into the calender.'

'How strange it befalls in a small world,' said I, laughing, 'for I am a Kennedy, and I ride to visit the Craufords of Kerse.' Then he looked at me more closely than ever.

'My name,' he said courteously, 'is John Mure of Auchendrayne.'

So I told him my name and style, and also the knight's name to whom I was squire, for after his giving me his own I could not do less.

'You have been in Edinburgh lately?' he said. 'And I doubt not, by your looks, bore yourself well in the sad broil in the High Street. Indeed, I think that I heard as much. Though being a man of good age, and one that is of quiet ways, I neither make nor mell with such tulzies, which are for young, lusty folk at any rate.'

After a little riding in silence and thought, he asked me if I had ever spoken to Gilbert Kennedy of Bargany, and it was with a loath heart that I answered 'No.'

Then he spoke long of him and his noble prowess, comparing him to the Earl of Cassillis, to his great advantage – which I grant it was easy enough to do. But since I could not wear a man's signet ring on my finger and deny him even by my silence, I spoke up for my colours. And that is good enough religion, as I read it.

'I am Cassillis man,' said I, with my hand on my sword, 'and I care not who knows it.'

'Hush you, young sir,' replied the Laird of Auchendrayne, soothingly, 'mind that you are now in an enemy's country. I warrant that Currie of Kelwood has travelled this road not so long before you.'

'I am not one who cares whether folk know my opinions,' I cried. 'See, I wear them on my collar. And I have on my finger a double safe-conduct.'

Whereupon I let him see the rings, drawing off my gauntlet that I might show him the signets.

Then he redoubled his respect and rode nearer to me, which made me glad that I had showed him the seals with their crests.

'You are young to ride so far alone on such great folk's business,' he said softly. 'Even I, that am old and sober, am not so trusted.'

'Laird Auchendrayne,' I replied to him, 'you do jest with me because of my youth. For you yourself are of the great ones, their kinsman and equal at muster and council-board, and but lately, in the Earl's absence, Bailzie of Carrick!'

Then he went on to speak of the Earl, mocking at him as one greedy-tooth for land and siller like his father, and warning me that when he had done with me he would cast me off without fee or reward, like an old glove.

'Nay, worse,' said he, 'for he will save the worn glove to sell over again to Granny Nish of the Luckenbooths.'

'Light-hand or luck-penny,' said I, 'Launcelot Kennedy is not the man to change his colours for goods or gear.'

'And who bids you?' said he. 'Tush, man! you are at the horn and outlaw. Any man may take your life and be the freer for it. The sneckdraw Cassillis and the old wife Culzean are not fit mettle for a gallant like you to ride beside. Hear ye, man; I will tell you a secret which none knoweth yet, but which, if you are wise and bold, will make your fortune with the King. Bargany is to marry one of the Queen's bower-maidens – one too that carries the King's name —*and he is to have the Earldom of Carrick!*'

Here he hushed his voice and leaned towards me, setting his hand on the arch of Dom Nicholas's neck.

'And that,' he whispered, 'will mean knighthood and an estate – besides a fair maid with a tocher, to every good man that can draw a sword and lead a company. What think ye of that? Be not hasty, man. I tell you Bargany will crumple up Cassillis as I crumple this bit of paper.'

And he threw a crushed sheet of writing into Doon Water as we rode beside it.

Then I faced about upon him, and set myself very straight in the saddle.

'Sir,' I said, 'you are an older man, a richer man, a better learned man than I. But let me tell you, sir, that I am an honestest man than you; and maybe I shall win though none the worse of that at the long and last. But if what I have said offend you, I am willing to give satisfaction on horse or foot, now or again, either to you or to any younger man of your name. I bid you good-day, sir, for I count you not good company for leal gentlemen.'

And with that I turned my back on him, and rode on my way.

'Go your own gate,' he said, rather regretfully than angrily. 'You have thrown away a kindly offer for an old song and a sounding phrase. You are a mettle lad, but with much wind in your belly.'

So I rode on, thinking that I had done with him – which was very far indeed from being the case.

CHAPTER IX

CARTEL OF CONTUMELY

Now, the place where I took my leave of that pleasant, reputable treason-breeder, John Mure of Auchendrayne, was within a quarter of a mile of Dalrymple Bridge, where it strides across Doon Water. I am persuaded that when I left him a little behind, I saw him heave up his hand, for I got just a waft of it with the tail of my eye. Yet though I could not swear it conscience-clear in any court in the land (unless absolute need were), I am still persuaded in my mind, as much as I was then, that the douce and gracious man intended that I should fall into an ambush, if I proved overly hard-bitten for his projects and temptings.

So as I came near to the bridge-end, I looked very warily about, and methought that I spied the black muzzle of a hackbutt, where there was no need of such like. Now hackbutts do not, even in Carrick, grow on hedges, though in these days a man might somewhat easily make the mistake of thinking so. I judged, therefore, that there would be an ugly face behind the gun, and a finger on the slow match that intended me no good.

As I paused, turning about on my saddle, I saw a fellow rise out of the copse-wood before me, and run like a rabbit to the bridge-end. That was enough for me. Fighting is well enough, and I can be doing with it, for it is the path of glory and of fortune. But black treachery I cannot stomach.

So being mightily angry, but resolved like steel to show John Mure and his butchers that I despised them, I turned Dom Nicholas's head and set him straight at the deeps of Doon Water, where ford there was none. In a moment we were splashing in the pool, and in another Dom Nicholas had thrown back his head and taken to the swimming like a duck. It was but a little way across, but far enough for me, for I saw the fellows running along the bank from the end of the bridge, blowing on their matches and bidding me stop. Now that was not a likely thing for me to do, being, praise the Lord! in my sober senses.

But when I got to the other shore, and set my horse to climb the steep (which was by a mill on the waterside), I was somewhat dashed to find one sitting quiet on his horse, within ten paces of me, with his fingers on his sword and his pistol bended in his hand.

I apprehended in a moment that this must be James Mure the younger of Auchendrayne, and I thought that I was as good as dead. Yet I held up my hand and cried, 'Herald!' and 'Safe-Conduct!' Though I knew that with such men as the Mures I might just as well and usefully have cried 'Bubbly Jock!' or 'Pigeon Pie!'

The young man in war-gear who sat his horse above me, did not move nor lift his weapon to fire.

'Tell me,' he said calmly, 'who may you be that cries "Safe-Conduct!" and "Herald!" on the lands of Kerse?'

I answered him that I was Launcelot Kennedy – and to effectuate something with him I added 'of Kirrieoch.' For I thought it was unlikely that he would know the hill country well enough to remember that my father was still alive. Which I take to have been an innocent enough deception, in that it hurt no one.

And in this I was right, for he answered at once, —

'I am David Crauford the younger of Kerse, but what said you of safe-conducts?'

So I showed him the rings, and told him that my business lay by word of mouth with his father. Thereafter I laid before him the matter of the scoundrels running at me nigh to Dalrymple bridge. Indeed, we could even then see them retiring in a group.

'Let us ride to the bridge head now, and see if they will molest us?'

And this we did, but none stirred nor showed themselves.

'So,' he said, 'let us ride on to Kerse.'

As we went our way we had much excellent discourse of the news of the countryside, and also of Edinburgh and its customs. I found David Crauford a fine and brave fellow, and regretted heartily that he was not on our side of the blanket – a thing which, indeed, I was too apt to do. I considered it an unfair thing that all the shavelings should be ours, and all the paladins theirs. Yet I was comforted by the thought that it was easier to be distinguished among the men of Cassillis than with Bargany – for in the kingdom of the blind the one-eyed man is king, as the saw hath it.

Thus we came at last to the place of Kerse. It was a handsome tower, with additions that made it almost a castle, standing upon a rising ground by a loch, and overlooked at a safe distance by some high rocks and scaurs, which David Crauford told me were called the Craigs of Kyle.

It was the slowest time of the afternoon when we arrived at the ancient strength, and David, saying that his father might not be wakeful, slipped on ahead, in order to assure me a proper reception – so, at least, he said.

And at the doorway I was met by many men-at-arms, with pikes in their hands and feathers in their bonnets. And there came forth to meet me eight of the twelve brothers of Kerse, all bareheaded and with swords at their sides. In the background I could see the cause of my adventuring Currie, the Laird of Kelwood – bowing and smirking like a French dancing-master. But I never so much as looked his way.

'From whom come you, and in peace or war?' said David Crauford, just as though I had not told him – which was quite right and proper, for these commissions of diplomacy should be carried out with decorum and observance.

'I come,' said I, 'from the Earl and also from the Tutor of Cassillis, and am commissioned to speak with the Laird of Kerse in their name and on their behalf.'

With that I was conducted through a lesser into a greater hall, at the upper end of which was a raised platform, two feet or so above the floor. The hall and dais were alike strewn with yellow bent grass, such as grows upon the sides of the hills and on the seashore. On the dais stood a great oaken chair with a hood about it, and in it there sat the noblest old man that ever I saw. He seemed by his beard and hair to be ninety years of age at the least, yet his natural colour was in his cheek, and he was gleg both to hear and to speak.

So they introduced me, and I went up to the old man of Kerse to show my credentials, bending my knee, but not near to the ground, in token of courtesy.

'Come hither, David, and tell me what are the posies on the rings.'

So David came near, and, looking at my hand, he read that motto of the Earl of Cassillis – '*Avisé a fin!*' it read.

'Ay, ay, that will do. Let the lad speak his message,' said the old man.

Then in the midst of three-score Craufords I set myself, with my shoulders squared and my hand on my hip, to speak the message of my lord. I do not deny that I liked the job well enough, for it was the sort which enables a man to make a figure – thus to stand alone among a host of enemies, and speak a challenge of defiance.

'Master David Crauford, Laird of Kerse and Skeldon,' said I, giving out his titles like a herald, 'I bear you greeting and worship from John, Earl of Cassillis, and Sir Thomas Kennedy of Culzean, Tutor of that ilk.'

The old man bowed in token of respect for the formal courtesy. 'My principals bid me say that they request and demand as their right, that you shall deliver up to them the Laird of Kelwood, their liege vassal, presently rebel and fugitive; and also that you render back the box of treasure and the stones of price which they have good reason to believe their vassal aforesaid hath concealed with you. These things being done, they assure you of their friendship and support in all your undertakings.'

So I gave it out clearly, formally, dispassionately, and without heat, as one that is accustomed to high commissions.

As I spoke I saw the old man grip his staff as though it had been a sword, and ere I had done, he had half risen from his seat as though he would have struck me to the ground.

'And you dare, you beardless birkie, to bring such a message to Crauford of Kerse, in his own hall and among his own folk?'

But I stood still with my hand on my side as before, looking at him with a level brow, knowing that without a weapon in my hand, and with a double safe-conduct on my finger, I had by far the best of it, ay, though there had been a thousand Craufords in the hall.

'Father, father,' said David from behind, as one accustomed to soothe the old man's anger.

'I ken – I ken bravely. The laddie has to bring his message, but Scraping Johnny of Cassillis shall rue this day. Tell him,' he cried, his voice rising to a wild scream, 'that I have seen no doot of the dirty money which he howks out of every dub with his swine's snout. The Laird of Kelwood indeed, I have with me, and here he shall bide while it likes him – not for his own sake, for he is small credit either to Kennedy or Crauford (to his face I say it), but because Kerse is an eagle sitting on high, and it has not yet come to it that he must, forsooth, throw down so much as a well-pyked bone at the bidding of Cassillis.'

I bowed to the ground as having gotten my answer. But I had another part of the piece still to play, and the doing of it liked me even better, for I saw that this time I should anger not only the old man but the young.

'Then,' said I, 'in the name of John, Earl of Cassillis, whom ye call swine's snout, I am charged to tell you that if ye will not deliver the man and the thing that are his just right, then will my master come and gar ye be fain to deliver them – '

Then there went a murmur of scorn and anger all about the hall, and the white locks of the old man fairly bristled on his head. But I spoke on, level as a clerk that reads his lessons.

'Hearken ye to the word of Cassillis – the last word – gin ye refuse he will come on Lammas day proximate, and in token of ignominy and despite, he will tether a brood sow upon the lands of Kerse, and not a Crauford shall steer her for the length of a summer's day.'

What a shout of anger went up from about the hall! The blades of the young men fairly blazed from their sheaths. The old man rose in his chair and lifted his staff by the middle. Two tall servitors that stood at the back of the hall, lighting the dusk with torches, sprang forward ready to catch him should his strength fail. There were at least thirty swords pointed at my breast, and one great lout threatened me with a Lochaber axe.

But with my heart swelling I stood still and calm amid the graceless tumult, like one of the carven stones which look out from the niches of Crossraguel. Motionless I stood as I had done from the first, for I was a herald with an Earl's message.

'An insult! an insult! an insult in the hall of Kerse. Kill the black Kennedy!' they cried, gnashing on me with their teeth like wild beasts.

I declare I never was happier in my life, knowing that I had made that day a figure which would not be forgotten, and that my bearing among them would be spoken of over all Carrick and Kyle. How I wished that Marjorie Kennedy could have seen me. And I smiled as I thought how little it mattered after this, whether or no Nell Kennedy turned tale-pyet.

'I will take the smile off his black Kennedy's face with a paik of this Lochaber axe!' cried my great lout. But indeed I smiled not at him nor any of his sept, but at the thought of Nell Kennedy.

Then when they had roared themselves out in anger, they became, as I take it, some deal ashamed of the hideous uproar, and of a sudden were silent – as with a stave thrust in the joint and a twist of the wrist one may shut off a noisy mill-lade.

So I got in my last word.

'Thereafter, John, Earl of Cassillis, bids me say that he will leave not one standing stone in the house of Kerse upon another, for the despite and contempt done to him as its overlord.'

Then the loud anger gave place to silent, deadly hate, and it was some time before any could speak. David the younger would have spoken, but his father waved him down, fighting for utterance.

'Hear ye, sir, and bear this message and defiance to your master. He has put a shame on us in this our own house. Tell him that he may bring his swine to Kerse every Lamma day, and fetch with him every swineherd Kennedy from every midden-head betwixt Cassillis and the Inch. There are plenty stout Craufords here in Kyle that can flit them. Ay, though this hand, that was once as the axe-hand of the Bruce, be shrunken now, and though I lean on these bearers of torches because of mine age, tell him that there are twelve stout sons behind me who can render taunt for taunt, blow for blow, to King or Kennedy. And tell him that Crauford of Kerse knows no overlord in earth or heaven – least of all John Kennedy, fifth Earl of Cassillis!'

Then I bowed as one might before some of the glorious pagan gods of whom Dominie Mure has tales to tell. For, indeed, that was an answer worth taking back, and, being a man, I know a man when it is given me to see him. So, with my face to him still, and my bonnet in my hand, I made my way off the dais. There I turned me about, and, as an Earl's spokesman should, set my steel bonnet on my head to go out alone through the crowded hall.

But the old man stayed me.

'Launcelot Kennedy of Kirrieoch,' he said, courteously, 'to you and not to your master, I say this. Ye have well delivered an ill message. May ye never get your fill of fighting, and at the last may you die in harness. I would to God ye were my thirteenth son!'

So I bowed again, and for respect I walked backwards to the door of the great hall with my head again bare. Then I helmed myself and passed without to Dom Nicholas.

There was now a full muster of Craufords in the courtyard – a hundred of them, I should say, at least. But no murmur arose among them as, helped by a groom, I mounted and moved slowly through the throng, having saluted David the younger and his brothers with my hand.

Then, as I rode through the gateway, the feet of Dom Nicholas clattering on the stones, I was aware of a troop of twelve that followed me, all well-accounted men riding in order. And I knew the author of that guard. It was David, who had resolved to see me safe across Dalrymple bridge, and so gave me the attendance of a prince.

Then knew I how excellent a thing it is to have to do in peace or war with gentlemen. For to do them justice, the Craufords of Kerse were neither landloupers nor ambuscaders.

CHAPTER X

SIR THOMAS OF THE TOP-KNOT

My guard of honour did not leave me till I was within sight of the towers of Cassillis, when David Crauford and his men parted from me with silent salute. Nor had the dyke-back hiding gentry so much as ventured to show their faces. So I rode down to Cassillis yett, a well-kenned place and famous in story. Down a smooth, green mead I rode to it. At the gate the porter, a surly rogue, bade me stand.

'Stand thou, hang thee, pock-faced varlet!' I cried; 'haste thee and up with the gates, or thine ass's ears shall answer for it, nailed incontinent to a post!'

Whereupon, seeing him wondering and still wavering, I drew off my glove and flashed the Earl's broad signet ring at him. I declare he laid hold of the pulley like one demented.

'I trust, noble sir, that ye will not mention the matter of my hasty greeting to my lord,' he said to me as I passed, for the rascal was shaking in every limb.

'Let it learn you to be better scraped as to the tongue for the time to come,' I answered sharply, for I was none sorry once for all to read the villain a lesson. There is nothing better than a man who worthily and for his office's sake magnifies his office, but there is nothing more scunnering than that a menial knave, in pride of place, should beard his betters.

In the hall of Cassillis, while I waited for my lord, I met the old man of strange aspect, who had been with us upon the Red Moss. He was dressed in a long, lank robe like a soutane, and he carried a book with him, very filthy and tattered. In this he read, or pretended to read, by whiles, muttering and mumbling the words over to himself.

Seeing me stand alone, he came over and began to speak to me about matters that I knew not of – something that concerned the Black Vault of Dunure, so I understood him to say.

But his appearance as he talked caused me to laugh, though, being an old man, I did not let him see it. His head appeared as bald all about as is a hen's egg. But on the very crown there was an oval place of a hand's breadth or thereby, from which dropped a crest of yellow-white hair, very laughable and ludicrous. For as the old man talked the silly cockscomb on his crown waggled, and being toothless his jaw waggled also. So that the nut-cracker jaw underneath and the wagging plume aloft might well have made a cat laugh.

'I am Sir Thomas Tode,' he mumbled, when I began to get a little familiar with his shambling speech – 'ay me, Sir Thomas Tode' (he pronounced the word as though it had been the name of the foul beast that squats on its belly), 'the famous Sir Thomas Tode am I. Ay, dear mother Mary – I mean Christian friends, but a feck of life it has been my lot to see.'

I thought within me what a strange old scare-the-crows this was, to have the name and style of knighthood. So I asked him what were his ancestral possessions.

'I am only poor Sir Thomas Tode, chaplain to two mighty Earls,' he said, shaking his head and wagging his top-knot, till he looked more like the father of all the apes that ever were, than a sober cleric.

'Even so,' he went on, 'I was bred to Holy Church – I mean brought up in ignorance, to serve the Whore that sitteth on the Seven Hills. I was chaplain to the old Lord Gilbert, the father of the Earl John that is. Ah, many a time did I shrive him soundly, and none needed it more. Faith, but he was a ripe, crusted old sinner –'

And Sir Thomas Tode chuckled a senile laugh at his memories of the bygone wickednesses of the great.

'Faith, I doubt shrewdly that he fries for it now. For in these days there are no prayers to hoist men out of purgatory by the telling down of the good broad bonnet pieces – more's the pity for poor honest churchmen! Ah me, the times that were! The times that were!'

The old man paused a moment to think the matter over, and then very visibly his mind went wandering after some greater and yet choicer wickedness which he might retail to me.

'Have you ever heard,' he said at last, 'of the roasting of the Abbot of Crossraguel? Man, I was there – yes, I was there – Tom Tode was there, and turned him on the iron brander till I burned my fingers!'

And the ancient rascal beat merrily on the floor with his stick and charred together his toothless gums.

'Now sit ye down, and I shall tell you all that took place in the Black Vault of Dunure – '

Just then I saw a sonsy, red-faced woman, ample of bosom and with many plies of wylicoats pleated and gathered about her, rise from the black stair head – even as Dominie Mure fables that Venus (a heathen goddess, but one of whose ongoing I own it diverts me greatly to hear) did from the sea. With three strides she came across the hall and caught Sir Thomas Tode by the shock of yellow-white hair on his crown.

'Be you at it again?' she cried. 'I will give you your fill of the Black Vault of Dunure, doddering old bletherer that ye are. Who is to turn my spit, I would have you tell me, gin you waste your time yammering to wanchancy lazybones of the Black Vault of Dunure? "Black Vault of Dunure" indeed! You have told your lies till I declare you grow to believe them yourself!'

So without a word of protest from the knightly lips of Sir Thomas Tode, he was led below, his head nodding and bowing as his captor shook the yellow top-knot.

After the pair were gone, I laughed both loud and long, so that they had to fetch me nigh on a gallon of strong ale to recover me of my access of mirth, and prepare me for the presence of the Earl.

And right certainly did I vow within my heart, that it would not be long before I renewed acquaintance with Sir Thomas and his tyrant, for it seemed a strange and merry thing to sec an Earl's chaplain so used. It was, indeed, many a day since I had seen such sport.

At last I was led in to the Earl. He sat in a rich dressing-robe, flowered with gold, and a leather-bound book with knobs and studs of brass lay open beside him. It was the account book of his estates and overlordships.

'What was that loud mirth I heard a moment since?' he asked, for the Earl John did not seem to be in the best of tempers. Indeed he was said never to be canny to come near, when he was in the same house as his wife, a thing passing strange and but not wholly without precedent.

I answered that I laughed at a good story of Sir Thomas Tode, his private chaplain.

'My what!' he cried. 'Oh, ye mean old Tode of the Top-knot! Was his story about the Black Vault of Dunure?'

And without stopping for an answer he went on with one of his proverbs, just as though he had not sent me on an errand, and that in peril of my life. I never met a young man so broadened on wiseacre saws and proverbs in my life. It was clean ridiculous, though well enough in a gap-toothed grandfather, no doubt.

'The loud laughter of the idle gathereth no gear,' said Earl John.

'No,' replied I, 'but since it cheers the heart, it costs less than your good strong ale.'

'Ay, but,' he said, breaking in and looking pleased, 'but you have had some deal of that too. I can smell it.'

Then he looked briskly up, as if delighted with himself for his penetration, and catching me with my hand held guiltily before my mouth, he smiled.

'Well,' he said, 'can you not come to the point – why stand so long agape? What of your mission?'

So, being nothing loath, I told him the whole matter, much as I have related it in this place. And though at the beginning he sat calmly enough to listen, long before I had finished he was striding

up and down the room gripping at his thigh, where for common he wore his sword – for, after all, Earl John was a true Cassillis, and neither craven nor hen-hearted.

'And they roared upon you, standing still. Nay, you did well! I wish it had been I! Man, I will give you the horse you rode upon, and all the caparison. I declare I will!'

For which I thanked him in words; but in my heart I said, 'It is an easy present to give that which is your uncle's, and hath indeed been mine for weeks.'

Then he seemed to remember, for he said, 'But give me back my signet. Ye have done well, and on Lammas day ye shall do better. Will ye take a ring or a sword for a keepsake?'

A moment only I divided my mind. A ring, if good, would indeed buy many swords. But Cassillis was not the man to give a ring of price. Contrariwise a sword was a thing that all men had good skill of, and for very shame's sake a good sword would he give.

'I crave a sword,' said I, briefly.

'Ye have chosen like a soldier. I shall not grudge you the wale of swords,' the Earl made reply, smiling upon me, well pleased.

So with that he went out into the armoury, and came back with the noblest sword I had ever seen. Blade, hilt, and scabbard were all inlaid with scrolled Damascus work of gold, thin limned and delicate – I never saw the like. And my blood leaped within me – I declare to my shame, nigh as hotly as it did when Marjorie Kennedy kissed me on the brow in the arbour of the pleasaunce at the house of Culzean.

'Buckle it on, and take it with you,' said the Earl, 'lest looking long upon it my heart should smite me, and I want it back again.'

So I thanked him and presently was gone without great ceremony, lest, indeed, it should be so.

'Stay the night at Cassillis,' he cried after me. 'I have a letter to send to my eame the Tutor in the morning.'

CHAPTER XI

SWORD AND SPIT

The house of Cassillis is not a great place for size, to be so famous. But the Earl has many castles, to which he goes oftentimes – specially to the grand house of the new style which he is building at the Inch, and from which he means to assert his overlordship of the Lairds of Galloway, which, as I see it, is likely to breed him trouble – more than if he had stayed here at home and flaired his old gammer mistress into good humour.

So, leaving his presence, I went to see that Dom Nicholas had the best of food and bedding, passing through the grooms and men-at-arms in the bravery of my Damascus sword, walking carelessly as though I wore suchlike every day – a thing I liked well to do. I also made them change the straw for better, though, indeed, there was little to find fault with. But it is always best when one goes first into the stables of the great to speak loud, to cry, 'Here, sirrah, what means this?' And then order fresh bedding to be brought, and that instantly. Thus I made myself respected, and so walked out, while the grooms bowed, pulling the while at my moustache and pressing upon the hilt of my sword, so that the point stood out at the proper angle behind with my cloak a-droop over it, as I have said.

Then, on my way back to the house, I must needs pass – or so I made it appear – through the kitchens, where I found my tyrant Venus-of-the-fiery-face in the act of cooking the supper.

Seeing me lean against the baking board, dressed so *cap-à-pie*, she came and brushed me a place to sit upon. Then she asked, 'Would I be pleased to drink a cup of sack – rare and old?'

So, seeing her set on it, I denied her not; but sat down, unbuckling my weapon for ease's sake, and throwing it down with clank of blade and jingle of buckle on the clear-scoured boards of the great deal table in the midst. The Lord forgive me for caring so mightily about these things and so little for going to church! Some good day, doubtless, I shall change about. And in the meanwhile, what would you?

Were you that chance to read never eighteen and thought you not well of yourself, having a new sword? If not, the Lord pity you. It is little ye ken.

But all the while I longed to hear more of Sir Thomas Tode, and if it might be, to see him. So I asked of the lady of the pans where her husband was.

She set her thumb over her shoulder, pointing to a narrow door as of an aumrie or wall press.

'He is in there,' she said shortly.

'And what else is there in there?' said I, laughing, for what was I the wiser?

'Half a bullock is in there,' she said, laughing also. 'That is the meat-cupboard. It is fine and caller, and he is not troubled with flies upon his miserable bald head.'

'The meat-safe,' cried I, much astonished; 'and what does a reverend chaplain and a knight in the meat-safe?'

'The old dotard will not quit his maundering about the Black Vaut of Dunure to every one that comes near. He got hold of a silly chapman in the yard that came with fish from Ayr, and I declare he must sit down and prate by the hour of the Black Vaut of Dunure. So I shut him up in the meat-safe. Faith, I will give him Black Vaut of Dunure ere I have done with him. The Black Vaut of Cassillis and the company of the dinner roast will set him better.'

'And what says my lord to your using his chaplain so?'

The lady gazed at me a moment in a kind of wilderment. Then she broke into the vulgar speech of the country, which, because I learned to write English as those at the Queen's Court do, I have used but seldom in this chronicle – though, of course, not for lack of knowledge.

'Sain me,' she said, 'this may be a queer, uncanny world, but it is surely no come to that o't yet, that a wife mauna check and chastise her ain man. Guid Lord, no – life wadna be worth leevin' – see till this – ' she said.

And taking a key from her pocket she rapidly unlocked the door of the meat-closet.

Sir Thomas was discovered sitting most forlornly within, upon the corner of a great chest, with many pieces of meat depending from hooks about his head. His wife, reaching in from the step, took him by the top-knot of hair as by a handle, and pulled him out upon the floor of the kitchen with one movement of her arm.

'It's a guid's mercy,' she cried, 'that yince ye war a papish monk wi' a shaven crown, for the place that ye keepit bare sae lang has ripened late, after a' the lave o' the crap has been blawn awa' wi' the wind.'

I had been endeavouring to explain to myself the strangeness of the wisp upon Sir Thomas's head, but the words of his wife made clear the matter. It was but the retarded growth of his long fallow tonsure.

'An' it's a de'il o' a queer thing,' said Mistress Tode, 'that turning your coat ootside in should turn your hair inside oot! Heard ye ever the mak' o' that?'

'It was all owing to – ' began Sir Thomas Tode, looking at his wife with a cringing shamefacedness that was most entertaining.

'Oh, I ken,' interrupted his wife, 'it was owing to the Black Vaut o' Dunure, nae doot! I declare I canna haud ye aff it. I jaloose that it maun hae been owing to the Black Vaut o' Dunure that Mary Greg, a decent cook woman and a deacon in her trade, took up wi' the likes o' you – that mak's yoursel' nae better than a mountibank wi' your yammer-yammering like a corn-crake aboot black vaults and roasted abbots. Fegs, I declare I could roast ye yoursel'. Ye are that muckle thocht and care to me, but ye wadna pay for the trouble. Even the Earl himsel' couldna mak' a profit oot o' you – an' a' folk kens that he wad drive a flea to London market for the sake o' the horns and hide!'

'Wheesht, wheesht, honest woman!' said Sir Thomas Tode, 'wha kens wha may be listenin' – maybe the Countess her very sel'.'

'Faith, an' I carena,' cried the brave cook, tossing her head, 'she is a backstairs body at ony gate, but she canna fear me – na, brawly no'. I ken ower muckle. I ken things the Earl doesna ken. Certes an' serve him richt – a young man like him – but three-an'-twenty, to mairry his grandmither. Though guid kens Mary Greg is no the woman to speak, that mairried nocht better than an auld skeleton hung on strings – for nae sounder reason than that it is the custom for the cook in a decent big hoose to tak' up wi' the chaplain.'

The kitchen began to fill, and I bethought me that I should be going; for it was not seemly that a gentleman and a squire should colloque overly long with all the orra serving-men and women in a great house. But before I could lift my sword and depart, there came in a dark, burly man with a sharp-cleft eagle's face on him, his eyes very close together, and a contemptuous sneer that was liker a snarl, on his face.

'Good e'en to ye, John Dick,' said the cook. 'Mind ye keep the peace, ye wull-cat, for there are to be no collieshangies in my kitchen!'

A voice called something querulously down the stairs.

'Coming the noo, my leddy,' cried Mrs Tode, the cook of Cassillis, 'I am juist pittin' on the pot – '

And she vanished up the stair.

As soon as she was gone, Sir Thomas appeared to wake up from a dream. He looked eagerly around him.

'She will no be back for a while,' he said. 'I might have a chance. I maun tell you of the roasting of the abbot. Man, I saw it – I was there. I held him on the ribs o' the grate. I set him on the brander, and poured the oil on him that he might be roasted in sop. Oh, man, ye think I am a fool. Ever since

that day, never hae I been alone without seeing the face o' him, crying out for them to ding whingers into him, or blaw him up wi' powder to ease him – the auld Earl girnin' at him like a wild cat, and hunkering low to watch, with his hands on his knees. Oh, young men, never you put your hand to the torture of man, for it bides with you in the brain – just as, asleep or awake, night or day, I see the Black Vaut o' Dunure!"

'Good life,' cried his wife, entering briskly at the moment, 'is it possible that the auld fule is at it again? The very de'il's in the craitur. He thinks that he was at the roastin' o' a man, whan a' the roastin' he has done in his life has been turnin' the spit in this decent hoose o' Cassillis. Come awa', ye doitered auld loon, what did I tell ye the last time? – Into the keepin' chamber wi' you!"

And she caught him by the top lock to lead him away once more. But I pled for him, saying that I had never heard of his fantasy, and had indeed encouraged him to begin.

The tall man who had been called John Dick, the fellow of the hateful countenance, in whose eyes there was the insolence of challenge, at this point stalked up to the table on which my sword still lay. He took it in his hand with a contemptuous air, examined the Damascus work of fine gold, and was about to draw the blade from its sheath.

'That sword is mine,' said I, scarcely looking at the fellow, 'and does not leave its scabbard save when I draw it.'

'And then,' quoth he, with a bitter sneer, 'I opine it will not do much damage. 'Tis but a bairn's plaik at any rate! And in fit hands!"

'It may be that you would like to try, sirrah,' said I, slipping my hip off the table and buckling on my sword with one movement.

'Very willingly,' said he of the sneer. 'Come out to the green.'

But before I could move to end the matter, there arose from the corner, where he had been lying on an oaken settle, a tall, slender lad of foreign aspect and distinction. He had on him a green suit like the Royal hunting liveries. A long, plain sword in a black leather scabbard swung by his side.

'Launcelot Kennedy of Kirrieoch,' he said, bowing to me, 'I am Robert Harburgh, and though for the time being I serve here as little better than a cullion, I am yet of some blood and kindred. Therefore I shall do you no shame. And you, sir,' said he, turning to John Dick, who stood lowering, 'being your equal here, I can serve your turn to cross swords with – and spare this gentleman the discomfort of defiling his sword of honour with such black ignoble blood as yours.'

And with that he whipped out a long, straight sword which glittered in the firelight. John Dick turned up his lip wickedly, so that we saw his teeth, and the black, curly fringe of hair about his face stood out, till his visage was like that of an angry ramping bull of Galloway.

There were only men in the kitchen when the fracas arose, for Mistress Tode had gone to do some errand for the Countess.

'You are surely a stark man,' said John Dick, 'to mell or meddle with me. Ken ye that I have wounded more men with my whinger than I have fingers on my right hand?"

'And how many may that be?' said the young man who had espoused my cause.

'Why, four,' said John Dick, surprised at the question.

'Then in a little while you shall have one less – and that is but three. Guard yourself!"

And there in the red dusk of the kitchen they cleared themselves for fighting, and their blades met with so stern a clash that sparks were driven from the steel. But Harburgh, my young and melancholy Dane, forced the fighting from the first, driving Dick before him round the narrow and enclosed place, countering and attacking with such dexterity and fury as I had never seen, though for years I myself had been a sound swordsman. But such fighting as this I saw not – no, not in the schools which the King has set up in Edinburgh to be used instead of golf and siclike foolish games, which the men of the east country love to play in their idle folly and wantonness.

They had not gone far when my champion, using a snicking undercut I had never seen, severed the little finger of his opponent, at the second joint just where it overlaid the hilt, so that the tip of it

fell on the floor. Whereat Sir Thomas Tode lifted it and wrapped it with care in two sheets of clean scrivening paper which he took from his pocket.

But John Dick, who after all was a man, though a crab-grained and ill-conditioned one, only called a halt for a moment and wrapped his wounded finger in a napkin, drawing the cincture close with cord. And he was in the act of continuing the fight, and pressing his adversary for revenge, being resolved to kill him for the affront, when, with a loud outcry, Mistress Tode rushed down the stairs. She seized a huge spit, and with the sharpened end so briskly attacked both the combatants, battering them soundly about their heads, that they were compelled to desist.

And it was most comical to see these fierce and confident fighters drop their swords' points and shield their heads with their hands to ward off the blows of the stick.

'Varlets!' she screamed. 'Briskly I will learn you to fight and tulzie in my kitchen. Out with you,' she cried, giving John Dick the sharpened end of her weapon in his wame, 'out with you, for it was your de'il's temper that began the fray.'

And so, having opened the door, she fairly thrust him out into the night. But she had not time to close it again before one whom none of us had seen came within the circle of red light. He was a man of a dignified countenance, dressed in black, and he held a plain staff, also of black, in his hand. On his head there was a broad hat with a cord about it. Upon his coat he wore no ornament save a broad, black silk collar which lay upon his shoulders, and over that again there fell another collar of fair soft linen, very white and well dressed.

'What means this tumult in the house of Cassillis?' he asked, speaking as one that has authority, and has been accustomed to wield it unquestioned for many years.

Now there was not a man there but longed to ask, 'And who may you be that speers?' But none answered rudely, for the awe that was upon them.

Then at last Robert Harburgh said to him, but courteously, 'Sir, you ask of the tumult. It was a matter that concerns those only that fought upon their own proper quarrel. It concerns neither you nor yet my Lord Cassillis, in whose house ye presently are.'

'Lead me to my lord!' he said, as one who had only to speak that the doors might be opened.

But Robert Harburgh withstood him and would not suffer him to pass.

'Let me see the Earl of Cassillis instantly!' said he.

'The Earl is at supper,' said Robert Harburgh, 'and cannot be disturbed.'

'I will eat with him,' said the stranger, calmly.

Then when some scullion laughed, for of custom those who ate with the Earl of Cassillis entered not by the kitchen door, the unknown made a gesture of extraordinary contempt and yet withal of a marvellous dignity.

'Go, instantly,' he commanded, pointing to the stair door with his finger, 'and tell your master that Robert Bruce, Minister of Edinburgh Town, would see him in the name of the Lord and of His Highness the King of Scots.'

And Robert Harburgh, who had just outflouted John Dick, the ruffler of camps, bowed before him. And as for me I took my bonnet off my own head and saluted, for there was no one of us who had not heard of the famous and well-reputed minister, to whom the King had committed the rule and governance of all the realm during the half-year he was in Denmark busy marrying of his queen.

So with Robert Harburgh leading and myself following, the minister passed up the stair with due attendance, and into the supper chamber where the Earl and Countess took their meal at even, mostly without speech each with the other. And when through the open door I saw the Earl welcome his guest as he would have done the King himself, and especially when I heard their serious and weighty conversation, the thought came to me that it was well that there were men in Scotland able to make religion so to be honoured. Then again I laughed, thinking of the mighty difference that there was between Maister Robert Bruce, Minister of Edinburgh and sometime ruler of Scotland,

and poor Sir Thomas Tode, domestic chaplain to the Earl of Cassillis and the well-pecked husband of Mary Greg, his cook.

CHAPTER XII

THE FLITTING OF THE SOW

It was Lammas day, and the strange wager of battle was about to be fought. Maister Robert Bruce, who had composed so many quarrels (and made so many more in the doing of it), had altogether and utterly failed to make up this one. So he had passed south to his friend and favourer the Laird of Bargany, who for all his soldiery was ever great for the honour of the Kirk. I hope that the Minister of Edinburgh made more of him than he made of Earl John, of whom he gat nothing but fair speeches and most indifferent drink, which were indeed in my time the staples of Cassillis hospitality.

Now, it so happened that Sir Thomas Kennedy, my master, could not move from his chair, much less sit a horse, because of that old income in the knee, which ever in the hot season of the year caused him so much pain and trouble. Thus it fell to me to lead our small levy from the lands of Culzean, for we were near to the country of the Barganies, and it would not do, in the absence of an armistice, to denude our head castle of all the fighting men that were thereabout.

The morn of Lammas was one that promised to open out into a day of fervent heat, for the mists rose lazily, but did not dissolve as the sun climbed the skies. Yet it was a morning that pleased me beyond telling, as I buckled on my new sword of price, and rode out to fight. I am not averse from fighting, but I own it is the riding out in array that I chiefly love.

What a heartsome sight it was when we turned our faces towards Cassillis Yett, and saw the companies of Kennedies come riding and running over every green knoll – long, upright men of the South who had started the night before from far Minnochside and Auchneil, shoulder-bent shoremen who came over the edge of Brown Carrick, pikemen, spearmen, and hackbuttmen, together with a multitude of limber, pranksome lads with only a leathern jacket and a whinger.

When we came to Cassillis Yett, there by the road-end was Sir Thomas Tode, who was charged to tell us that my lord had gone on before us with many soldiers and horsemen. They had taken also with them a trail-cart, being a box with shafts like a carriage, but without wheels, mounted on a great brush of branches and twigs, which stuck out behind and scored the ground with a thousand ruts and scratches. This was for the conveyance of the sow, which from sundawn to sunset was to be tethered, in despite and contempt, upon the lands of the Craufords of Kerse. For that was the wager of battle between the Kennedies and the Craufords.

The place where we found the Earl and his tethered sow was well chosen. It was a three-cornered piece of land, of which two sides were defended by the Doon Water sharply bending back upon itself, while across the broad base of the triangle there ran a moss. The beating of the drums and the playing of pipes were on all the hills; and so gay and cheerful was the scene that it might have been a fair or a weapon-shawing, for the sound of merrymaking and deray that there was all about.

The Doon, that should run so red or sunset, now sparkled pure and clear in the light of morning, and the speckled piets and pigeons scudded here and there among the coppices. We had not been long established on this tongue of land with our tethered sow when there arose a crying among the outposts, and word was brought that from all the Craigs of Kyle, and out of all the country of the east, the Craufords and their allies were gathering to the trysted fray.

Presently we saw them top the brae in ordered companies. It was bonny to see them come stringing down the sides of the hills, now going singly like cattle along a path in the steep places, and now forming into squadrons and companies on the plain ground. The sunshine sifted through the thin clouds as through a sieve, and made a strange pale glittering on their war gear, so that all the country round was lit up with little sparkling flashes of fire, like the wave tops when the sun rises out of the eastern sea.

They had their drums also, though it was the latest of many affronts that the Kennedys had put holes in all the Crauford drums which were in the town of Ayr upon the last market day. And this quarrel also had to be settled. Presently we could see all twelve of the stalwart sons leading on their vassals from the brown hills. They were a sunburnt company, because it was about the Lammastide, when the muirmen are wont to be out all day at the watersides at the winning of the meadow hay – the crop which is hard to grow, ill to mow, but worst of all to gather into barn, as the saying goes in the parts of the outland hills.

It was nine of the morning when the Craufords moved to the attack. All this while the loathly sow, that was at once provocation and offence, lay upon a little mound in the midst of our camp, grunting and grumphing most filthily. The Earl had set a little snipe of a raggetty loon to stir her up with a pointed stick, so that she should not go to sleep, but should grunt and disport herself as she ought. Being thus encouraged, the boy did his work to admiration, and the old grouting wretch kept up such a snorking and yellyhooing that she could be heard almost from Dalrymple Kirk to the Mains of Kerse.

Then there was a pause for parley. Of this I will not write at length, because it was for the most part but rudeness and dirtiness that were bandied about and between – each party miscalling the other for greater thieves and worse murderers than their neighbours. Even in this I do not think we had the worst of it, for John Dick (whose finger-stump was well healed) spat out oaths as if for a wager. And Muckle Hugh miscalled the Craufords in a voice like thunder, as though they had been dogs that would not run aright upon the hillsides of Kirriemore, in that dear land which looks towards Galloway.

Now, I cannot say that I was keen of this particular quarrel. For though there was some pleasure in making a figure in the great hall at Kerse, I foresaw but a brawling of clowns and the splattering of confused fighting without honour or chivalry, in this affair of swine and blundering *melées*. Yet, because I was there in the place of my knight, I could do no more than just bear the brunt and abide.

Presently the Craufords came on with their horsemen first and the pikemen behind. But the mounted men came not far, for the bog laired their horses, and they sank deeper and deeper at every step. Then the footmen came between them and charged up to our foremost lines, so that we were hand-to-hand and hard at it in a trice. It was not, however, the work of many minutes to gar them turn about and run, for our front was solid and broad, while the hackbutt shooters had fine rests for their guns, so that on a still day they could bring a man down at thirty yards or more. A good many Craufords were already splattering like wounded waterfowl in the moss which protected our front.

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