FITTIS ROBERT SCOTT

THE MOSSTROOPER: A LEGEND OF THE SCOTTISH BORDER

Robert Fittis

The Mosstrooper: A Legend of the Scottish Border

Fittis R.

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Содержание

PREFATORY NOTE 5
ROBERT SCOTT FITTIS 6
Chapter I 10
Chapter II 15
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента. 19

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PREFATORY NOTE

After the death of my husband, Robert Scott Fittis, several of his friends suggested to me that some of his earlier writings should be re-published in book form as a Memorial of the Author, especially as it is now quite impossible to procure them otherwise. For these reasons I have chosen "The Mosstrooper," which, although now re-published here as he revised it in a subsequent edition, was originally written by my late husband when he was only between sixteen and seventeen years of age.

I take this public opportunity of thanking Mr. A. H. Millar for his great kindness in writing the very full and accurate biographical notice which is prefixed to this Memorial Volume.

Katharine Fittis.

89 High Street,
Perth, December, 1906.

ROBERT SCOTT FITTIS

(BIOGRAPHICAL)

Born 15th November, 1824

Died 11th October, 1903

ROBERT SCOTT FITTIS represents a type of the Scottish man of letters which is rapidly disappearing. While it could not justly be said that he was unique as a personality, or that he introduced a novel combination of intellectual qualities and thereby formed an epoch, the honour must be ascribed to him of having continued the best traditions of the Augustan Age of Scottish Literature, and of maintaining the dignity in literary affairs to which his native land had attained. He was a Scotsman "through and through," loving the land of his birth with intense devotion, reverencing the heroes whom she had brought forth to adorn the records alike of war and literature, and devoting the energies of a long life to setting before his countrymen the best models of patriotism for their imitation. His natural gifts were so strenuously cultivated that in his later days he was regarded as an inexhaustible encyclopædia of recondite information of the most varied kind. He was from his youth an omnivorous reader, and he possessed that best of all gifts "a reference memory," as Dean Stanley called it, and could bring forth from his treasures, new and old, a surprising variety of apt quotations and original inferences. In some respects his mind was akin to that of the late John Hill Burton, the historian. He had the same finical love of accuracy, the same fervid Scottish spirit, and a similarly broad outlook upon general literature which prevented him from becoming merely a local historian and nothing more. While his labours in connection with Perthshire history were unceasing, and have produced a rich storehouse of facts, he dealt with national history and literature in a manner which showed the breadth of his mind and the variegated nature of his studies. He was a historian, earnest to separate veritable truth from tradition; yet he was one eager to collect these very traditions as fragments of national character. A student of charters and a genealogist, over whom any time-stained charter or antique paper scrawled with crabbed penmanship exercised a fascination, he was still an ardent lover of poetry, especially such as described the flowery banks of Tay or Tummel, the gowany lea of Gowrie, or the Bens and Straths of Garth and Glen Lyon. Upon one of his title-pages he placed two quotations which aptly express his characteristics: —

> Let me the page of History turn o'er,
> The instructive page, and heedfully explore
> What faithful pens of former times have wrote.
> – Wondrous skilled in genealogies,
> And could in apt and voluble terms discourse
> Of births, of titles, and alliances;
> Of marriages, and inter-marriages;
> Relationship remote, or near of kin.

To describe adequately the life of such a man within limited space is impossible. All that can here be done is to outline his industrious career, as a tribute to one whose devotion to national literature, even in times of severe distress and difficulty, must ever command sincere respect.

The Fair City of Perth was the birth-place of Robert Scott Fittis, and there he spent all his days, from his birth on 15th November, 1824, till his death on 11th October, 1903, when he had almost completed his 79th year. He was educated at one of the Burgh Schools, and in May, 1837, he was apprenticed for three years (at that time the usual period) to Mr. John Flockhart, Solicitor in the City. So well did he acquit himself during his apprenticeship that he was retained in the office for two years as a clerk. From Mr. Flockhart's place he went to several lawyers' offices in Perth, until 1853, when he bade farewell to the Law as a profession, and took to literature. It was not altogether a rash step which made him take the crutch of literature and form it into a sustaining staff. Twelve years before this time – in 1841 – he had begun to write for the press, and for over sixty years it supported him.

The late Mr. John Fisher, Printer, Perth, had started in 1841 in that city a penny weekly periodical of twelve pages called "The Perth Saturday Journal." It was the first of its kind in the locality. Knowing the literary aspirations of Mr. Fittis, then a youth of 17 years, Mr. Fisher secured his aid as a contributor. The first editor was Mr. Rennie, afterwards one of the sub-editors of "Hogg's Instructor," and Mr. Fittis began in the second number, published in August, 1841, a series entitled "Legends of Perth." At that time the Rev. George Clark Hutton (afterwards Principal Hutton, of the United Presbyterian Church) was a Perth youth just beginning his theological studies, and he also became a contributor of poems and tales.

Rennie was succeeded by Mr. James Davidson, a local reporter, who soon resigned the office into the hands of Mr. Thomas Hay Marshall, also a reporter, who came to be known as the "historian of Perth." Before the end of the year, however, this periodical may be said to have entered upon another stage of its existence, with an alteration of the title to "The Perth and Dundee Saturday Journal," and in an eight-page issue.

The first number was dated 27th November, 1841, and in No. 28, July 16th, 1842, Mr. Fittis began a serial story entitled "The Mysterious Monk." This issue ran on to fifty-two numbers, the last one appearing 31st December, 1842. In this number it was announced that "the second volume of the 'JOURNAL' will appear on the day it is due – on the first Saturday of 1843, and will continue to be issued, as usual, weekly." It was not, however until Saturday, January 21st, 1843, that the first number of Vol. II. made its appearance. The volume consisted of fifty numbers of eight pages, as before, but the last, which was issued on Saturday, 30th December, 1843, consisted of two leaves (4 pp.) only, and intimated that the Journal was to be continued in 1844, and that the talented writer (Fittis) of "Anguswood" and many other tales which have appeared in the Journal, and met with so favourable reception, is, in an early number, to favour us with the first chapter of another tale entitled the "Mosstrooper." Accordingly, in 1844, the Journal again made its appearance, this time under the title of "The Perth and Dundee Journal," and in this year's issue, as promised, the tale called "The Mosstrooper," by Fittis, was first published. With this year the career of the Journal was terminated.

The literary ability of Mr. Fittis had been so conspicuously displayed in connection with the "Journal," that when Mr. Fisher contemplated a new venture it was to Fittis he first looked for aid. On 1st January, 1845, there was started a periodical entitled "The Tales of Scotland," similar in character to Wilson's "Tales of the Borders," but taking a wider scope. Fittis was editor and principal contributor, and he was assisted by Thomas Soutar, Solicitor, Crieff, George Hay of Rait, and James Stewart of Dunkeld. The experiment was entirely successful. So great was the demand for the "Tales" that the first twelve numbers were reprinted three times, and Fisher spared no effort to push the sale of the publication in London, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Dundee, and Aberdeen. The work was completed in four half-yearly volumes, the greater portion of the contents having been written by Mr. Fittis. Shortly after its completion Mr. Fittis became a contributor to "The Scottish Miscellany," which was begun in 1847. Four years afterwards (1851) he edited a short series under the title of "Miscellany of

Scottish Tradition," and in the following year (1852) he began the "Tales and Traditions of Scotland," in which he re-published "The Mosstrooper" in a revised and improved version. The tales in this periodical were all from his industrious pen.

In 1853 Fittis found himself sufficiently secure in literature to resign his connection with Law; and he then became connected with the "Perthshire Courier," which had been acquired by the Dewars from the old-established firm of the Morisons of Perth. His work at first was to assist Mr. Thomas Hay Marshall in writing summaries and paragraphs, and in supplying from notes the abstracts of speeches which were then rarely printed verbatim. He remained in this position till 1861, providing also original articles for the "Courier" and for other newspapers. One of the incidents of this period of his life may be narrated, as showing how steadfastly he remained true to the memory of his early friends. James Stewart, the Dunkeld shoemaker, who had contributed Scottish poetry to the "Saturday Journal," died in Perth Infirmary in 1843, and was buried in Greyfriars Burying-ground. His grave was not marked by any tomb-stone, and Fittis determined that this neglect should be remedied. In 1857 he brought out a volume of Stewart's works bearing the title "Sketches of Scottish Character, and other Poems," which he published by subscription, and with the proceeds he was able to place a memorial stone over the grave of his former comrade. The "People's Journal," which was begun in Dundee in 1858, provided an avenue for occasional contributions by Fittis, and in 1864 his serial story, "The Secret Witness," appeared in its columns. His connection with the "People's Journal" continued intermittently for many years, his latest contribution being a series published in 1891, under the title of "Haunted Houses in Perth." In 1865 he wrote the novel "Gilderoy," which was issued as a serial in the "Scottish Journal," and was published in the following year as a volume in Routledge's Railway Library. Mr. Fittis was married in 1866, and, after a union lasting for 37 years, his wife survived him. At that time the "Penny Post," published in Glasgow, was the most popular of weekly papers in that district, and was early in the field as one of the first journals to issue serial stories. The late Mr. David Pae, of Dundee (afterwards editor of "The People's Friend") ran several of his most successful stories in the "Penny Post" in the "fifties." Mr. Fittis in 1866 supplied his novel "The King of the Cairds"; in 1867 "A Master's Crime"; and in 1872 "A Lass with a Tocher," and "In the Pages of the Past" to this periodical. The "Edinburgh North Briton" was another of the weekly papers to which he contributed, his stories there published being "Aggie Lyon," in 1866, and "The Sexton's Mystery" in 1871. To the "North Berwick Advertiser" he contributed in 1870 "The Captain of the Bass," besides reprinting some of the "Tales of Scotland." By his writings in these papers the name of Robert Scott Fittis became widely known throughout Scotland.

A change came over the literary work of Mr. Fittis in the early "seventies." While he did not entirely give up writing fiction, he devoted most of his time and energy to veritable history. In 1872 the Rev. Thomas Morris, a promising young Glasgow student, who became assistant in one of the Edinburgh churches, had started a weekly column in the "Perthshire Constitutional," under the title of the "Antiquarian Repository." He died suddenly in 1873, and Mr. Fittis was then engaged to carry on this column, which had become a feature of the paper. The work was entirely congenial to him. There was ample scope for the use of his vast stores of miscellaneous knowledge of Scottish history, tradition, and literature, and he fully utilised his opportunity. From 1873 till 1881 he continued to produce two weekly columns, republishing the matter in book form at the end of every year. He thus brought together the most complete and varied series of volumes relating to the history, antiquities, and literature of Perthshire ever attempted. The following table gives the titles and dates of these seven remarkable volumes: —

"Illustrations of the History and Antiquities of Perthshire" (455 pages),	1874
"Perthshire Antiquarian Miscellany" (634 pages),	1875
"Historical and Traditionary Gleanings concerning Perthshire" (521 pages),	1876
"Chronicles of Perthshire" (540 pages),	1877
"Sketches of the Olden Times in Perthshire" (560 pages),	1878
"Perthshire Memorabilia" (567 pages),	1879
"Recreations of an Antiquary in Perthshire History and Genealogy" (556 pages),	1881

A mere glance at the list will give an idea of the industry of the writer, while the fact that the books have been accepted as the work of a painstaking and accurate historian proves their value. All these books are at present (1906) out of print, and command good prices when they come into the market.

After he had ceased his regular contributions to the "Perthshire Constitutional," much of the time of Mr. Fittis was taken up in genealogical research, a task for which his long experience peculiarly fitted him. Yet he did not neglect historical writing, though severe illness frequently interrupted his labours. The five last volumes which he published were not issued serially, but made their first appearance in book form. Their titles and dates are as follows: —

"Ecclesiastical Annals of Perth" (322 pages),	1885
"Heroines of Scotland" (327 pages),	1889
"Sports and Pastimes of Scotland" (212 pages),	1891
"Curious Episodes in Scottish History" (326 pages),	1895
"Romantic Narratives from Scottish History and Tradition" (363 pages),	1903

The activity of Mr. Fittis continued almost up to the close of his life, and his two last books were produced after he had passed the allotted span of three-score years and ten. His death took place on 11th October, 1903, after he had been engaged in literature for sixty-two years.

The work of Robert Scott Fittis was not allowed to pass unnoticed and unrewarded by those best qualified to appreciate it. In 1893 his case was brought to the knowledge of Mr. W. E. Gladstone, and he then received £100 from the Queen's Bounty Fund. Three years later (1896) Mr. A. J. Balfour gave £100 from the same fund. In 1899, Mr. Thomas, Sheriff-Clerk of Perthshire, raised a sum of money among the friends and admirers of Mr. Fittis, which Mr. Balfour doubled. With this sum an annuity of £20 was purchased, which Mr. Fittis received till his death. During his literary life Mr. Fittis had brought together an extensive and valuable library, chiefly of books relating to Scottish history and literature, and containing nearly 7000 volumes. After his decease these books were purchased by Dr. Andrew Carnegie, and presented to the Sandeman Library, Perth. Shortly after the death of Mr. Fittis a movement was set on foot for the securing and erecting of a suitable monument over his grave in Wellshill Cemetery, and sufficient money was raised not only to accomplish this purpose, but also to provide an enlarged photographic portrait of Mr. Fittis, which was presented to the Sandeman Library, as a memorial of one of Perth's most notable sons. Even from this brief outline of his career it will be seen that Robert Scott Fittis, by his self-sacrificing and protracted labours, in the Roman phrase, "merits remembrance for his services to the commonweal."

A. H. MILLAR.

Chapter I

O mirk, mirk is this midnight hour,
And loud the tempest's roar;
A waefu' wanderer seeks thy tower,
Lord Gregory, ope thy door.

– Burns.

IT was an early Spring eve in a year long before King James III. of Scotland perished in his flight from the lost field of Sauchieburn, and was succeeded on the throne by his son, Prince James, who headed the rebellion which resulted in the hapless monarch's assassination at Beaton's Mill.

On that Spring eve the setting sun, breaking through heavy cloud-masses, poured his red radiance athwart the snow-flecked summits of the hilly chain known as the Cheviots, the scene of Chevy Chase and of many another Border fight, and the boundary for a considerable distance between Scotland and the sister kingdom. The day had been dull and bleak, scarce enlivened by a transient glint of sunshine; nevertheless, the aspect of Nature somewhat indicated that the reign of "surly Winter" was over. As far as the eye could reach, the snow and ice had almost wholly melted from the face of the low country on either side of the hills; and the drooping snowdrop, emblem of purity, and harbinger of genial skies, decked the Frost-king's grave.

The red sun went down, leaving a trail of fire at the "gates of the west"; and a dreary quietude brooded on the hills – scant sign or sound of life being apparent save what the homeward-bound rooks made as they sailed, weary of wing, this way and that. But as the gloaming fell, a solitary pedestrian emerged from one of the passes on the Scottish side of the marches – a tall and stoutly-built but youthful man. A short cloak of untanned deerskin hung from his shoulders, being secured at the throat by a knot of thongs, and it partly hid a doublet, called, in Border phrase, a *jack*, of boiled leather, fitting close to the body, and strengthened on the breast (if not also all over the shoulders and sleeves) by small circular plates of hammered iron sewed on in overlapping fashion like the scales of a fish. A broad buff belt around his waist, held by a polished brass buckle, sustained an iron-hiked sword and a long knife or dagger, termed a *whinger*, hafted with buck-horn, curiously carved. His right hand – the other being studiously concealed under his mantle, and apparently carrying something rather bulky – was encased in a leathern gauntlet, the back of which was defended by little plates of mail like those on the jack. On his head he wore an iron bascinet cap, rusty and much dinted, and from under its rim straggled locks of dark brown hair inclining to curl. He had a thin, sallow, unprepossessing physiognomy, which expressed a combination of cunning and effrontery: two keen, grey eyes sparkled under heavy brows; and a slender moustache, lighter in colour than his locks, sparsely covered his upper lip; but the livid scar of a cicatrized wound, evidently from a sword-cut, adown his left cheek, gave, on close observation, a peculiar grimness to his otherwise sinister mien. Altogether, he might be considered as a typical Borderer of the time, rough-living, law-defying, rarely ever out of "sturt and strife."

On quitting the defile, he struck across a stretch of open moorland, over which the rising night-wind fitfully sighed among the furze. Now and then he paused and gazed eagerly behind, seeming to listen, as if dreading pursuit; but pursuers there seemed none, save the cloud-billows that rolled in endless succession over the dim hills and darkened above his head. The waste soon became both rugged and marshy, and a shallow rivulet, fed from the moss-hags, ran in a serpentine and perplexing course, necessitating its being repeatedly waded, but the water never came much above the traveller's ankles, and he wore a pair of strong buskins reaching to the calf of his leg. When he had finally left the sinuosities of the sluggish stream in his rear, he made a dead halt, as if come to the end

of his journey, and scowled all around him in the gloom. Throwing back the left side of his cloak, he disclosed a young child, well wrapped up, and fast asleep, whom he was carrying, and whom he immediately laid down on the heath at his feet. The infant awoke, and began to whimper and wail. The man stood bending his moody gaze upon it till his eyeballs glowed with dusky fire.

"This nicht," he said, in a low tone, savouring of fierce exultation, "this nicht will the proud Southron grieve, and the bonnie lady greet in her bower, for the loss o' the young heir that was the hope o' their hearts. The retainers may scour hill and dale, and the pathless wilds echo the bay o' their sleuth-hound. Let them speed far and wide wi' horse and ban-dog. In my hand rests the young heir's fate. By the Black Rood o' Melrose! this is the revenge o' gentle Edie Johnston!"

He stamped on the ground, and could have crushed the infant under his heel; but he started back a pace, as if, indeed, the fiend of revenge had prompted such a thought in his troubled brain, and he revolted at it – but he revolted only for a moment, as the savage suggestion seemed to be followed by another equally remorseless. What did he now meditate? Was he one

> Whom the vile blows and buffets of the world
> Had so incens'd, that he was reckless what
> He did, to spite the world?

Nervously his fingers clutched the hilt of his whinger, and he unsheathed it and waved it in the air, and then, stepping forward and stooping over the child, pointed the steel as if to deal a mortal stab. The weapon trembled in his grasp. Again the powers of compunction and shame overcame the murderous impulse. He raised himself erect, with an impatient ejaculation, and his armed hand fell slowly, and as if reluctantly, by his side.

"Frae sunset to sunset has this hand been feckless as a withered rush," he said. "In darkness as in licht I ha'e been weak as water. I micht ha'e flung the brat, like a stane, frae the brow o' a fathomless precipice, never mair to be seen but by the ravens: or he micht ha'e been thrown into a rushing stream that would ha'e swirled him awa' to the sea; and nae mortal could ha'e fyled me wi' the deed; and yet he is spared, as if his life were charmed by a spell o' power. Maun I, a gentle Johnstone, forget my wrangs? My faither fell in an inroad o' the Southrons: my mither was twice harried out o' her cot-house in the cleugh: and I – " He paused, and stroking his scarred cheek, glanced alternately around him and at the sobbing boy on the cold turf: then sheathed his whinger, lifted the babe, and strode hurriedly on his way.

Soon he came to a spring-well, a round, brimful *well-e'e*, fringed with furze. There he stopped, mused some space, and muttering a curse, suspended the child over the water, as if intending to let it drop and drown. But as he gazed fixedly on the limpid element, which shimmered under the dim sky, a lustrous planet shone out through the clouds and glittered in the natural mirror, the golden similitude sparkling up like the eye of an accusing spirit. It was what guilt could not withstand. The mystic gleam of the shadowy star smote the gentle Johnston to the soul. Drawing a harsh breath, he succumbed once more to a power that shamed his fierce nature. Huddling the infant under his rude mantle, he hurried from a spot where temptation had pressed him so strongly.

Straight northwards he held his route, with the shades of night deepening on what seemed a desert, where no living things seemed near save the heath-birds that started at his approach, and sped away with shrill screams. Some heavy drops of rain, "like the first of a thunder-shower," pattered on his head-piece and deerskin garment, and louder grew the sough of the gale, which prognostications of an inclement night caused him to quicken his pace. The child had now wept itself to sleep, and its bearer showed every care to screen it from the rough weather. Happily, the threatened storm blew by. But although the night settled down, the Borderer still travelled comparatively fast, with long, unwearied stride, as being well inured to exertion and well acquainted with the country which he

was traversing. Indeed, we may not err in supposing that in the latter respect he could rival "stout Deloraine," of whom the Last Minstrel tells us that —

Through Solway sands, through Tarras moss,
Blindfold he knew the paths to cross;

*****

In Eske, or Liddel, fords were none,
But he would ride them, one by one;
Alike to him was time or tide,
December's snow, or July's pride;
Alike to him was tide or time,
Moonless midnight, or matin prime.

Sometimes the traveller changed his course to a certain extent, inclining now to the right, now to the left, probably to avoid the neighbourhood of hamlets: his darkling journey was one of hours; but eventually the blustering blast swept away the clouds, and a frosty starlight shone down, enabling him to perceive that he was nearing the spurs of a range of low hills. On he went towards a wide ravine, and entering it, was soon plodding sturdily along a well-beaten but winding path, whilst the gale whistled shrilly through the underwood that clad both sides of the glen. As he progressed, his eye caught the feeble glimmer of a light in the distance, which he knew was not the twinkle of a star, and which was inconstantly seen and lost according to the turnings of the road.

"The auld keep o' Hawksglen at last!" he muttered. "An' gude fortune speed me, the seeds o' a double revenge will be sawn."

The glen debouched on what dimly appeared to be a spacious amphitheatre among the low hills, and in the foreground loomed the dark and turreted mass of a Border keep or castle, in a high casement of which burned the light that had been attracting the wayfarer's attention. He trudged forward to the strength, and speedily reached the outer wall surrounding it, which was machicolated or embrasured along the top for the discharge of all sorts of missiles on the heads of assailants attempting escalade: and now the angry, deep-mouthed bark of a dog within the wall broke the silence. The Borderer halted in front of an arched and strong portal, which was closed by a gate which he felt was faced with iron. He gave a peculiar whistle and then a halloo, which the dog answered vigorously, rousing others of its kind in their kennel in the rear of the place. But next the gruff voice of an elderly man responded to the Borderer's call from over the gateway – "Who goes there?"

The keen starlight could enable only the mere outline of the stranger's figure to be discerned. "A friend to Hawksglen," he answered.

"From whence, and on what errand?"

"From Rowanstane, and on matter o' life and death. I bring a letter to the worthy Elliot. Open the *vizzy*, and I will wait his pleasure."

"So, so: and bring you also the Rowanstane password?" demanded the scrupulous warder.

"*Hand and glove.*"

Prompt was the result of this response – almost like the effect of the "Open, Sesame" of the Forty Thieves. The warder, confident that the knowledge of the password was confined to friends (and it was changed at intervals), descended from his coign of vantage; and after some preliminary clank of chains, an aperture, measuring scarcely a foot square, opened in the side of the portal, without

the iron-sheeted gate, and about breast-high from the ground, whilst the dog was heard sniffing and growling along the bottom of the gate.

"Hand in your letter," said the warder.

The gentle Johnston deftly thrust the sleeping infant through the opening, and feeling that it was grasped by the other, turned without a word, took to his heels, and was lost in the gloom.

Judge of the amazement which seized upon the guardian of the portal when he found that instead of a letter he had received a bundle containing a young child, who being roughly awakened began to cry. For a moment was the warder struck speechless, but then, recovering his voice, he shouted through the aperture – "Hillo! man – what is this? Where's the letter? A bairn! what does this mean? Curse the knave! and he had the password too. A vile trickster! Down, Ranger! down, lad!" – for the dog was climbing upon him, and smelling at the child in his arms. "By our lady! a rare gift at midnight! What will Sir James say to it? or his mother, either? I was a dolt to open the vizzy-hole; but the false-tongued knave swore it was a matter of life and death. The foul-fiend rive him! What ho! within there! Robin, Robin – up, man!"

A young serving-man rushed out to the gateway, with a spear in one hand, and a round buckler on his arm, and ejaculated – "What's the steer, Allan? I was dovering ower the ha' fire, after dipping ower deep in the ale-jack, and I thocht I heard the dogs bark."

"Bring a torch," cried Allan, "mayhap the wean is but a fairy changeling, and I must see to that ere it comes under our roof."

"The wean? whatna wean?" inquired Robin, rubbing his sleepy eyes with the knuckles of the hand that held the spear.

"You hear the wean yaumering: and fairy weans are ever girning – devil take them!"

"Allan, Allan, dinna speak o' *them* in sic a way, and at sic an hour. Ha'e you forgotten the auld rhyme?

"Gin you ca' me Imp or Elf,
I rede you look weel to yourself.
Gin you ca' me Fairy,
I'll work you muckle tarrie.

"I beseech you, Allan, bethink yoursel' that this is just the time when the *gude neighbours* are busiest for gude and ill."

"Pshaw!" exclaimed the warder. "I think a bad neighbour has been here. Fetch a torch, in Mahound's name!"

Robin hurried back to the hall, and, transferring his spear to his left hand that the right might be free, kindled a flambeau at the fire, and returned with it to the courtyard. The infant, on seeing the light, ceased crying, and stretched out his little hands towards the bickering flame.

"By the mass! a bonnie babe, and no fairy changeling, I'll be sworn," said Allan, and he shut the espial opening. "Let us now within doors."

They accordingly withdrew into the hall, where Allan sat down on a buffet stool at the side of the hearth, with the young stranger on his knee, while the watch-dog stretched itself at his feet, and the clamour of its companions in the kennel died away. Robin fixed his torch into an iron sconce projecting half a foot from the wall, stirred the faggots on the andirons to a blaze, and was then told the story of the adventure.

Seemingly nobody else in the place had been aroused, all remaining quiet; but Allan now directed his subordinate to call up one of the female domestics, to whose care the foundling should be committed till morning. The woman, when she came, being dubious as to whether the boy was not a fairy changeling after all, suggested the test usually applied to such supernatural impostors, namely, by "putting it on the fire to see if it wadna flee up the lum wi' an eldritch lauch!" But Allan was opposed

to the experiment. The child's clothes were of fine materials, and around its neck was a slender gold chain of curious links suspending an antique golden reliquary; but there was no inscription on the trinket, or mark about the dress, to afford a clue to the little wearer's parentage.

The foundling being provided for, old Allan pulled his deerskin mantle closer around him, and went out to satisfy himself that the fastening of the aperture in the portal was secure.

"By our lady," he muttered, "I'll not open that vizzy again until daylight, although a score of stories of life and death should be told me. A small family might be foisted upon me ere morning."

Chapter II

He's married a may, and he's fessen her hame;
But she was a grim and a laidly dame.
When into the castle court drave she,
The seven bairns stood wi' the tear in their e'e.
Nor ale nor mead to the bairnies she gave,
"But hunger and hate frae me ye's have."

– Danish Ballad.

TWENTY years elapsed after the midnight when the infant boy was left at Hawksglen Castle by the gentle Johnston, whom we dub with that epithet in accordance with the Border usage of characterizing the principal families, or clans, as the *haughty* Homes, the *bauld* Rutherfords, the *sturdy* Armstrongs, the *gentle* Johnstons, *et sic de cæteris*. But "gentle," as applied to the Johnstons, was an ironical misnomer, they being a peculiarly rude and turbulent race, living in "sturt and strife." A story is told that a Baron, who was at deadly feud with them, having captured several, ordered their heads to be cut off and flung into a sack, which he gave to one of his retainers to carry home; and the man, when he got the grisly burden upon his back, gave it a good shake, saying jocosely, "Gree amang yoursells, Johnstons!" Our Johnston seemed a full-fledged scion of this law-defying race.

Let us now fill up the gap of those twenty years with a brief recital of events which concern our tale.

Sir James Elliot of Hawksglen was the lineal descendant of a famous Border house; and a worthier representative of a baronial stock it would have been rather difficult to single out among his compeers. High renown had been earned by his ancestors in the feuds and wars of the marches. His father received his death-wound in resisting a Southron inroad some few years anterior to the period when our legend opens. Sir James, an only son and only child, was thus left master of wide domains when he had just passed his majority. His mother was an amiable lady; but after the loss of her husband she never regained that happy buoyancy of mind which had distinguished her during her wedded life. To all her dependants she was a kind and indulgent mistress, ever ready to forgive shortcomings, and to relieve the wants of humble vassals when overtaken by pinching poverty. Seeing that her son inherited the martial spirit of his sire, it became her aim to induce him to bury animosities and feuds, and to cultivate, as much as he could, and as far as the circumstances of the times allowed, the arts of peace. She meant well. But Sir James would say to himself, as he paced through his hall, and gazed on several grim portraits of the Elliots of Hawksglen with which it was decorated: —

"My mother's mild precepts would avail in some other age and land; but they are vain in this Border country, where every man rights himself by his own hand, and wins honour and esteem by martial valour. When every man draws his blade in his own quarrel, dare I keep mine unsheathed without incurring disdain and disgrace? Nay – in these times I must uphold the dignity of our house with the steel in my grasp and the corselet on my breast."

Sir James was ardent and fiery by nature, yet evincing generous and chivalrous impulses. In stature he rather exceeded the middle height, and had a manly and well-formed figure. His face was oval and swarthy-complexioned, its expression being mild and thoughtful in repose, but under excitement becoming instinct with strong animation. As yet in early manhood, he was unmarried, and so far as appeared had never been wounded by a shaft from Cupid's bow.

The midnight adventure at the gate exceedingly amazed the knight and his mother, and probably induced a certain suspicion in the latter's mind; but they resolved to shelter and provide for the child until its parents should be discovered. Every means were used to penetrate the mystery; but, owing to

troubles which broke out along the Border, all inquiries proved fruitless, and even rumour was dumb. The child's habiliments and the ornament about its neck betokened that its lineage was above the common. Thus weeks and months sped away, and the foundling was treated with as much care and kindness as could have been bestowed upon a son of the family; which, indeed, the retainers could not help suspecting that he was, and therefore, they gradually refrained from rehearsing to others the story of his exposure at the gate.

The boy was healthy, with pleasing features, a soft skin, and a clear complexion. He soon became familiar with his new guardians; and the lady forgot her sorrows in ministering to his wants, and fondling him upon her knee. A priest from a neighbouring chapel admitted the foundling within the pale of the visible Church by the Sacrament of Baptism, and christened him by the name of Eustace, in memory of the lady's only brother who had died in infancy.

When Eustace had seen about a couple of years under the hospitable roof of Hawksglen, the lady was seized with a malignant distemper, which was destined to close her days. Despite the skill of physicians, the rapid progress of the disease could not be arrested: the lamp of hope burned dim: and now —

> The mildest herald by our fate allotted
> Beckoned, and with inverted torch did stand
> To lead her with a gentle hand
> Into the land of the great Departed,
> Into the Silent Land.

As the lady was sinking, fully resigned to depart, she desired that the orphan boy should be brought into her presence, which was immediately done. Long ere this time she had become entirely persuaded in her own mind that he was really and truly of stranger blood. Raising herself with a last effort, she took him in her arms, and kissed his lips fervently; then turned to Sir James and said: —

"Son, I have one request to make ere I yield my fleeting breath. I have endeavoured to fill the place of the unknown mother of this fair child. In my last hour I leave him to your protection. I beseech you to befriend him until, by the workings of Providence, he be restored to the arms of his parents, or of his kinsfolk, which I am persuaded will some day take place. But until that day never let him feel that, under your roof, he is a stranger. In time you will lead a bride to the altar, and bring her to Hawksglen: children of your own will grow up around your knees: but, O, my son, never neglect this boy, never count him as an alien, while he abides under your roof. As I have cherished him till now, do thou cherish him still. This is my dying request, which I trust will be fulfilled."

The knight gave his solemn promise, laying his hand on the crucifix which the attendant priest was holding up before the dying lady. The child instinctively clasped her neck, and whimpered some broken words. The parting moment drew nigh. The last offices of the Church were performed; and soon the lady, in the serenity of hallowed hope, passed through the dark tide of Jordan to the better land.

The knight of Hawksglen was overborne by his bereavement. Shutting himself within his castle, for a space, he seemed to have forsaken the changeful world beyond its walls. Time sped its course; and at length the torch of Love slowly scattered the clouds of unavailing sorrow. Not long after Sir James left his seclusion he was smitten by the charms of Anne Rutherford, the only daughter of a Border baron. Younger than himself, she possessed the witcheries of an exquisite form and a lovely face. It was whispered, *sub rosa*, that with her personal graces was united a disposition proud, self-willed, and shrewish. But what daughter of Eve, however fair, could claim perfection? Elliot, becoming her lover, was naturally incredulous of the faults or failings with which rumour charged her. To his glamoured eyes she appeared as a blooming rose without a thorn. She favoured his impassioned addresses: she

accepted his hand: and, about eighteen months after his mother's demise, Sir James brought a fair young bride to grace his hall.

For a season wedded life went pleasantly at Hawksglen – the cup of the happy pair, who seemed absorbed in a dream of love, betraying no bitter drop. But the time came when the dream was broken. The mask which the lady had worn was withdrawn, and her husband was undeceived. She now evinced an unequal temper, a degree of whim and caprice, and an obstinate desire to subject everything to her will, which eventually dissipated much of Elliot's matrimonial happiness. In vain did he strive to wean her back to her former self: and he mingled with the troubles of the Border to counteract the feeling of disappointment.

An evil hour for the foundling boy was that in which Dame Anne came to Hawksglen. She was duly informed of the mysterious manner in which the child had been left, and of the injunctions laid upon her husband by his dying mother, which he felt it his bounden duty to respect. The lady affected to acquiesce in his sentiments; but at heart she thought otherwise. Secretly jealous that the boy might prejudice her own children in their father's estimation, and perhaps ultimately receive some portion of the Hawksglen lands (suspicions which cannot be considered as wholly unnatural), she soon endeavoured, by various little arts, to diminish her husband's regard for the foundling. Her enmity strengthened when, in about a year after marriage, she gave birth to twin daughters. After that event, little Eustace became more and more the object of the mother's dislike, and Elliot, anxious to soothe her feelings, relaxed in his attentions to the boy.

Eustace grew up a handsome youth, of a high spirit but an urbane and generous nature, which endeared him to all the dependants of Hawksglen. Lady Elliot, seeing in him more and more the likely cause of future trouble and danger, never ceased plying her insidious arts against him. Every trivial mistake or fault of his she reported to her husband in such exaggerated shape as was possible: and it seemed her aim to lower Eustace from the position of an accepted member of the family to that of a mere dependant, who had no claim to higher consideration. As she had no more children, and the want of a son embittering her jealousy of the foundling, she frequently told her husband that unless he secretly wished to adopt Eustace altogether, to the injury of his daughters' interests, it was doing wrong to maintain him in a station to which he had not the shadow of right.

The lady's twin daughters, Eleanor and Catherine, were beautiful girls, lauded by all who saw them. Eleanor, however, surpassed her sister in charms of form and feature, and had a gentle, guileless, trustful heart; while Catherine, fickle, passionate, and overbearing, seemed to be endowed with all the worst qualities of her mother. It was not remarkable that a mutual sympathy and attachment arose betwixt Eleanor and Eustace, or that antipathy towards him gradually gained possession of Catherine's mind, and was not concealed. Up to a certain period, Eustace was led to consider himself an orphan relative of the family: the sisters were allowed to entertain the same idea; but it was never mentioned what was the relationship, or whence he came. The retainers were constrained to avoid alluding in any way to the fact of his having been left at the gate: and, indeed, they generally formed the belief that he was Elliot's own son, and would some day be openly acknowledged. But Eustace, as he grew, had anxious musings concerning his parentage and the strange reticence manifested by one and all around him on the subject. He could not help fancying gloomily that some dark secret was associated with his birth, and would in the end be disclosed to his dismay.

Eustace, brought up amid the warlike turmoils of the Border, was trained, like other youths, to the use of arms, and occasionally bore his part in the field as Elliot's squire. In one desperate fray his daring saved the knight from slaughter, a gallant achievement which gained him the latter's highest regard. This was as gall and wormwood to Dame Anne. In a fit of ungovernable spleen, she told her daughters that the young hero was nothing better than a nameless foundling who had been thrown upon the charity of Hawksglen. She entrusted them with this startling knowledge as with a profound secret, which they were not to disclose to any without her express permission, for fear of drawing down upon her and them their father's displeasure. Probably the lady hoped that the revelation to

her daughters would destroy the attachment betwixt Eleanor and Eustace, which, if allowed to exist, might result in love. Inconsiderate woman! she had no idea that she was taking the very step to thwart her own purpose. Catherine acted upon her mother's counsels, in holding Eustace in undisguised indifference. But with Eleanor it was otherwise. To tell her that Eustace was the son of misfortune, cast upon strangers in his helpless infancy, was but to give new life to the affection for him which had grown in her mind.

Until about the age of one-and-twenty Eustace continued ignorant of the all-important secret, although distressing suspicions had long haunted his thoughts. But as intimacy betwixt him and Eleanor seemed, in the watchful lady's eyes, to increase, she dared again to break her husband's injunction. One day, when Sir James was absent from Hawksglen attending a Warden's Court, Eustace chanced to give the lady some offence, and appeared to treat her rebuke lightly, in revenge for which she told him the secret, adding that his unknown parentage was doubtless base, and that his position in the Castle should be that of the humblest menial. He had long anticipated something like this: yet the final disclosure came upon him like a thunderbolt, and he felt himself humiliated in the dust. He saw that the current of his life must now inevitably turn into another channel, and that his days at Hawksglen were thenceforth numbered. The world was wide, and he would seek his fortune.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.