

Stables Gordon

Annie o' the Banks o' Dee



Gordon Stables

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Содержание

Chapter One.	5
Chapter Two.	9
Chapter Three.	13
Chapter Four.	17
Chapter Five.	21
Chapter Six.	25
Chapter Seven.	28
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	30

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Chapter One.

At Bilberry Hall

“It may not be, it cannot be
That such a gem was meant for me;
But oh! if it had been my lot,
A palace, not a Highland cot,
That bonnie, simple gem had thrown
Bright lustre o'er a jewelled crown;
For oh! the sweetest lass to me
Is Annie – Annie o' the Banks o' Dee?”

Old Song.

Far up the romantic Dee, and almost hidden by the dark waving green of spruce trees and firs, stands the old mansion-house of Bilberry Hall.

Better, perhaps, had it still been called a castle, as undoubtedly it had been in the brave days of old. The many-gabled, turreted building had formerly belonged to a family of Gordons, who had been deprived of house and lands in the far north of Culloden, after the brutal soldiery of the Bloody Duke had laid waste the wild and extensive country of Badenoch, burning every cottage and house, murdering every man, and more than murdering every woman and child, and “giving their flesh to the eagles,” as the old song hath it.

But quiet indeed was Bilberry Hall now, quiet even to solemnity, especially after sunset, when the moon sailed up from the woods of the west, when only the low moan of the wind through the forest trees could be heard, mingling with the eternal murmur of the broad winding river, or now and then the plaintive cry of a night bird, or the mournful hooting of the great brown owl.

It was about this time that Laird McLeod would summon the servants one and all, from the supercilious butler down to Shufflin' Sandie himself.

Then would he place “the big ha' Bible” before him on a small table, arrange his spectacles more comfortably astride his nose, clear his throat, and read a long chapter.

One of the Psalms of David in metre would then be sung. There wasn't a deal of music in the Laird's voice, it must be confessed. It was a deep, hoarse bass, that reminded one of the groaning of an old grandfather's clock just before it begins to strike. But when the maids took up the tune and sweet Annie Lane chimed in, the psalm or hymn was well worth listening to.

Then with one accord all fell on their knees by chairs, the Laird getting down somewhat stiffly. With open eyes and uplifted face he prayed long and earnestly. The “Amen” concluded the worship, and all retired save Annie, the Laird's niece and almost constant companion.

After, McLeod would look towards her and smile.

“I think, my dear,” he would say, “it is time to bring in the tumblers.” There was always a cheerful bit of fire in the old-fashioned grate, and over it from a sway hung a bright little copper kettle, singing away just as the cat that sat on the hearth, blinking at the fire, was doing.

The duet was the pleasantest kind of music to the Laird McLeod in his easy-chair, the very image of white-haired contentment.

Annie Lane – sixteen years of age she was, and beautiful as a rosebud – would place the punch-bowl on the little table, with its toddy-ladle, and flank it with a glass shaped like a thistle. Into the bowl a modicum of the oldest whisky was poured, and sugar added; the good Squire, or Laird, with the jolly red face, smiled with glee as the water bubbled from the spout of the shining kettle.

“Now your slippers, dear,” Annie would say. Off came the “brogue shoes” and on went a pretty pair of soft and easy slippers; by their flowery ornamentation it was not difficult to tell who had made them.

A long pipe looked rather strange between such wee rosy lips; nevertheless, Annie lit that pipe, and took two or three good draws to make sure it was going, before handing it to her uncle. Then she bent over the back of the chair and kissed him on the bald pate, before going out with her maid for a walk on the lawn.

It might be in the sweet summer time, when those green grassy terraces were perfumed with roses of every hue, or scented with the sweet syringa; in spring, when every tree and bush were alive with bird song; in red-berried autumn, or in the clear frost of a winter's night, when the world was all robed in its white cocoon and every bush, brake, or tree had branches like the whitest of coral.

Jeannie Lee, the maid, was a great favourite with Annie, and Jeannie dearly loved her young mistress, and had done so for ten long years, ever since she had arrived at Bilberry Hall a toddling wee thing of six, and, alas! an orphan. Both father and mother had died in one week. They had loved each other in life, and in death were not divided. Jeannie was just four years older than her mistress, but she did not hesitate to confide to her all her secrets, for Jeannie was a bonnie lassie.

“She whiles had a sweetheart,
And whiles she had two.”

Well, but strange as it may appear, Annie, young as she was, had two lovers. There was a dashing young farmer – Craig Nicol by name – he was well-to-do, and had dark, nay, raven hair, handsome face and manly figure, which might well have captivated the heart of any girl. At balls and parties, arrayed in tartan, he was indeed a splendid fellow. He flirted with a good many girls, it is true, but at the bottom of his heart there was but one image – that of Annie Lane. Annie was so young, however, that she did not know her own mind. And I really think that Craig Nicol was somewhat impetuous in his wooing. Sometimes he almost frightened her. Poor Craig was unsophisticated, and didn't know that you must woo a woman as you angle for a salmon.

He was a very great favourite with the Laird at all events, and many were the quiet games of cards they played together on winter evenings, many the bowl of punch they quaffed, before the former mounted his good grey mare and went noisily cantering homewards.

No matter what the weather was, Craig would be in it, wind or rain, hail or snow. Like Burns's Tam o' Shanter was Craig.

“Weel mounted on his grey mare, Meg,
A better never lifted leg,
Tam skelpit on through dub and mire,
Despising wind and rain and fire,
Whiles holding fast his gude blue bonnet,
Whiles crooning o'er some auld Scots sonnet.”

Yes, indeed. Craig Nicol was a dashing young blade, and at times Annie thought she almost loved him.

But what of the girl's other lover? Well, he was one of a very different stamp. A laird he was too, and a somewhat wealthy one, but he was not a week under fifty.

He, too, was a constant visitor at Bilberry Hall, and paid great attention to Annie, though he treated her in a kind and fatherly sort of manner, and Annie really liked the man, though little did she think he was in love with her.

One lovely moonlight night in autumn, however, when Laird Fletcher – for that was his name – found himself seated beside Annie and her maid in an arbour that overlooked the dreamy, hazy forest, he suddenly said to Jeannie:

“Jeannie, I’d be the happiest man on earth if I only had this darling child to be my bride.”

Annie never spoke. She simply smiled, thinking he was in fun.

But after a pause the Laird took Annie’s hand:

“Ah! dear lassie, I’ll give you plenty of time to think of it. I’d care for you as the apple of my eye; I’d love you with a love that younger men cannot even dream of, and not a lady in all the land should be dressed so braw as my own wee dove.”

Annie drew her hand from his; then – I can’t tell why – perhaps she did not know herself, she put her little white hands to her face and burst into tears.

With loving words and kind, he tried to soothe her, but like a startled deer she sprang away from him, dashed across the lawn, and sought shelter in her own boudoir.

The Laird, honest fellow, was sad, and sorry, too, that he had proposed to Annie; but then he really was to be excused. What is it a man will not do whom love urges on?

Laird Fletcher was easy-minded, however, and hopeful on the whole.

“Ah! well,” he said to himself; “she’ll come round in time, and if that black-haired young farmer were only *out of the way*, I’d win the battle before six months were over. Gives himself a mighty deal too much side, he does. Young men are mostly fools – I’ll go into the house and smoke a pipe with my aged friend, McLeod.”

Shufflin’ Sandie seemed to spring from the earth right in front of him.

A queer little creature was Sandie, soul and body, probably thirty years old, but looking older; twinkling ferrety eyes and red hair, a tuft of which always stuck up through a hole on the top of the broad Prince Charlie bonnet he wore; a very large nose always filled with snuff; and his smile was like the grin of a vixen.

Sandie was the man-of-all-work at Bilberry. He cleaned knives and boots in-doors, ran errands, and did all kinds of odd jobs out of doors. But above all Sandie was a fisherman. Old as he was, Squire McLeod, or Laird, as he was most often called, went to the river, and Sandie was always with him. The old man soon tired; then Sandie took the rod, and no man on all Deeside could make a prettier cast than he. The salmon used to come at his call.

“Hullo!” said Laird Fletcher, “where did *you* come from?”

“Just ran round, sir, to see if you wanted your horse.”

“No, no, Sandie, not for another hour or two.”

The truth is that Sandie had been behind the arbour, listening to every word that was said.

Sandie slept in a loft above the stable. It was there he went now, and threw himself on his bed to think.

“Folks shouldn’t speak aloud to themselves,” he thought, “as Laird Fletcher does. Wants Farmer Nicol got out of the way, does he? The old rascal! I’ve a good mind to tell the police. But I think I’d better tell Craig Nicol first that there is danger ahead, and that he mustn’t wear his blinkers. Poor man! Indeed will I! Then I might see what the Laird had to say as well. That’s it, Sandie, that’s it. I’ll have twa strings to my bow.”

And Sandie took an enormous pinch of snuff and lay back again to muse.

I never myself had much faith to put in an ignorant, deformed, half-dwarfed creature, and Shufflin’ Sandie was all that, both physically and morally.

I don’t think that Sandie was a thief, but I do believe he would have done almost anything to turn an honest penny. Indeed, as regards working hard there was nothing wrong with Sandie. Craig

Nicol, the farmer, had given him many a half-crown, and now he saw his way, or thought he did, to earn another.

Well, Sandie, at ten o'clock, brought round Laird Fletcher's horse, and before mounting, the Laird, who, with all his wealth, was a wee bit of a niggard, gave him twopence.

"The stingy, close-fisted, old tottering brute. Tuppence, eh!"

Shufflin' Sandy shook his fist after the Laird.

"*You* marry our bonnie Annie?" he said, half-aloud. "Man, I'd sooner see the dearie floating down the Dee like a dead hare than to see her wedded to an old fossil like you."

Sandie went off now to his bed in the loft, and soon all was peace around Bilberry Hall, save when the bloodhounds in their kennels lifted up their bell-like voices, giving warning to any tramp, or poacher that might come near the Hall.

Annie knelt reverently down and said her prayers before getting into bed.

The tears were in her eyes when she got up.

"Oh," she said to her maid, "I hope I haven't hurt poor Mr Fletcher's feelings! He really is a kind soul, and he was very sincere."

"Well, never mind, darling," said Jeannie; "but, lor, if he had only asked *my* price I would have jumped at the offer."

Chapter Two.

“There is Danger in the Sky.”

“What!” said Annie Lane, “would you really marry an old man?”

“Ay, that would I,” said the maid. “He’s got the money. Besides, he is not so very old. But let me sing a bit of a song to you – very quietly, you know.”

Jeannie Lee had a sweet voice, and when she sang low, and to Annie alone, it was softer and sweeter still, like a fiddle with a mute on the bridge. This is the little song she sang:

“What can a young lassie, what shall a young lassie,
What can a young lassie do with an old man?
Bad luck on the penny that tempted my minnie
To sell her poor Jenny for silver and land.

“He’s always complaining from morning till eenin’,
He coughs and he hobbles the weary day long;
He’s stupid, and dozin’, his blood it is frozen —
Oh! dreary’s the night wi’ a crazy old man!

“He hums and he hankers, he frets and he cankers —
I never can please him, do all that I can;
He’s peevish and jealous of all the young fellows —
Oh! grief on the day I met wi’ an old man!

“My old Aunty Kitty upon me takes pity:
I’ll do my endeavour to follow her plan;
I’ll cross him and rack him until I heart-break him,
And then his old brass will buy a new pan!”

“But, oh, how cruel!” said Annie. “Oh, I wish you would marry that Laird Fletcher – then he would bother me no more. Will you, Jeannie, dear?”

Jeannie Lee laughed.

“It will be you he will marry in the long run,” she said; “now, I don’t set up for a prophet, but remember my words: Laird Fletcher will be your husband, and he will be just like a father to you, and your life will glide on like one long and happy dream.”

It will be observed that Jeannie could talk good English when she cared to. When speaking seriously – the Scots always do – the Doric is for the most part of the fireside dialect.

“And now, darling,” continued Annie’s maid, “go to sleep like a baby; you’re not much more, you know. There, I’ll sing you a lullaby, an old, old one:

“Hush, my dear, lie still and slumber,
Holy angels guard thy bed;
Countless blessings without number
Gently falling on thy head.”

The blue eyes tried to keep open, but the eyelids would droop, and soon Annie o’ the Banks o’ Dee was wafted away to the drowsy land.

Shufflin' Sandie was early astir next morning. First he fed and attended to his horses, for he loved them as if they had been brothers; then he went to the kennels to feed the hounds, and in their joy to see him they almost devoured him alive.

This done, Sandie had a big drink of water from the pump, for Sandie had had a glass too much the night before.

He was none the worse, however; so he hied him to the kitchen.

There were lots of merry Scotch lassies here, and they delighted to torment and tease Sandie.

"Sandie," said one, "I've a good mind to tie the dish-cloth round your head."

"Tie it round your own," said Sandie. "Anything becomes a good-looking face, my bonnie Betsy."

"Sandie," said another buxom girl, "you were drunk last night. I'm sure of it."

"No, not so very full, Fanny. I hadn't enough to get happy and jolly on."

"But wouldn't you like a hair of the doggie that bit you this morning?"

"Indeed would I, Fanny. I never say no to a drop of good Scotch."

"Well, ye'll have to go to the village. Ye'll get none here. Just make your brose, and be content."

Sandie did as he was bidden. Into a huge wooden bowl, called a "caup," he put three large handfuls of fine oatmeal and a modicum of salt. The kettle was boiling wildly on the fire, so the water was poured on and stirred, and the "brose" was made.

A huge piece of butter was placed in the centre, and the bowl was flanked by a quart of new milk.

And this was Shufflin' Sandie's breakfast, and when he had finished all save the bit he always left for Collie and the cat, he gave a sigh of contentment, and lit his pipe.

And now the lasses began their banter again.

"That's the stuff to make a man of you," said Fanny.

"Make a man of an ill-shapen dwarf like him," said Maggie Reid. "Well! well! well!"

"Hush, Mag," cried Fanny, "hush! God could have made you just as misshapen as poor Sandie."

But Sandie took no heed. He was thinking. Soon he arose, and before Fanny could help herself, he had kissed her. Fanny threw the dish-cloth after him, but the laugh was all against her.

The Laird would be downstairs now, so Sandie went quietly to the breakfast-room door and tapped.

"Come in, Sandie," cried the Laird. "I know it is you."

The Laird had a good Scotch breakfast before him. Porridge, fresh herrings and mashed potatoes, with ducks' eggs to follow and marmalade to finish off with.

"Will you have a thistle, Sandie?"

"Indeed I will, sir, and glad to."

"Well, there's the bottle, and yonder's the glass. Help yourself, lad."

Sandie did that, right liberally, too.

"Horses and hounds all well, Sandie?"

"All beautiful, Laird. And I was just going to ask if I could have the bay mare, Jean, to ride o'er to Birnie-Boozle (Craig Nicol's farm possessed that euphonic name). I've news for the fairmer."

"All right, Sandie. Take care you don't let her down, though."

"I'll see to her, Laird."

And away went Sandie exultant, and in ten minutes more was clattering along the Deeside road.

It was early autumn, and the tints were just beginning to show red and yellow on the elms and sycamores, but Sandie looked at nothing save his horse's neck.

"Was the farmer at home?"

"Yes; and would Sandie step into the parlour for a minute. Mary would soon find him."

"Why, Sandie, man, what brings you here at so early an hour?"

Sandie took a lordly pinch of snuff, and handed the box to Craig Nicol.

"I've something to tell ye, sir. But, hush! take a peep outside, for fear anybody should be listening."

"Now," he continued, in a half-whisper, "ye'll never breathe a word of what I'm going to tell you?"

"Why, Sandie, I never saw you look so serious before. Sit down, and I'll draw my chair close to yours."

The arrangement completed, Sandie's face grew still longer, and he told him all he heard while listening behind the arbour.

"I own to being a bit inquisitive like," he added; "but man, farmer, it is a good thing for you on this occasion that I was. I've put you on your guard."

Craig laughed till the glasses on the sideboard jingled and rang.

"Is that all my thanks?" said Sandie, in a disheartened tone.

"No, no, my good fellow. But the idea of that old cockalorum – though he is my rival – doing a sturdy fellow like me to death is too amusing."

"Well," said Sandie, "he's just pretty tough, though he is a trifle old. He can hold a pistol or a jock-the-leg knife easily enough; the dark nights will soon be here. He'd be a happy man if you were dead, so I advise you to beware."

"Well, well, God bless you, Sandie; when I'm saying my prayers to-night I'll think upon you. Now have a dram, for I must be off to ride round the farm."

Just before his exit, the farmer, who, by the way, was a favourite all over the countryside, slipped a new five-shilling piece into Sandie's hand, and off the little man marched with a beaming face.

"I'll have a rare spree at Nancy Wilson's inn on Saturday," he said. "I'll treat the lads and lassies too."

But Shufflin' Sandie's forenoon's work was not over yet.

He set spurs to his mare, and soon was galloping along the road in the direction of Laird Fletcher's mansion.

The Laird hadn't come down yet. He was feeling the effects of last evening's potations, for just as —

"The Highland hills are high, high, high,
The Highland whisky's strong."

Sandie was invited to take a chair in the hall, and in about half an hour Laird Fletcher came shuffling along in dressing-gown and slippers.

"Want to speak to me, my man?"

"Seems very like it, sir," replied Sandie.

"Well, come into the library."

The Laird led the way, and Sandie followed.

"I've been thinkin' all night, Laird, about the threat I heard ye make use of – to kill the farmer of Birnie-Boozle."

Gentlemen of fifty who patronise the wine of Scotland are apt to be quick-tempered.

Fletcher started to his feet, purple-faced and shaking with rage.

"If you dare utter such an expression to me again," he cried, banging his fist on the table, "I won't miss you a kick till you're on the Deeside road."

"Well, well, Laird," said Sandie, rising to go, "I can take my leave without kicking, and so save your old shanks; but look here. I'm going to ride straight to Aberdeen and see the Fiscal."

Sandie was at the door, when Laird Fletcher cooled down and called him back.

"Come, come, my good fellow, don't be silly; sit down again. You must never say a word to anyone about this. You promise?"

“I promise, if ye square me.”

“Well, will a pound do it?”

“Look here, Laird, I’m saving up money to buy a house of my own, and keep dogs; a pound won’t do it, but six might.”

“Six pounds!”

“Deuce a dollar less, Laird.” The Laird sighed, but he counted out the cash. It was like parting with his heart’s blood. But to have such an accusation even pointed at him would have damned his reputation, and spoilt all his chances with Annie o’ the Banks o’ Dee. Shufflin’ Sandie smiled as he stowed the golden bits away in an old sock. He then scratched his head and pointed to the decanter.

The Laird nodded, and Sandie drank his health in one jorum, and his success with Miss Lane in another. Sly Sandie!

But his eyes were sparkling now, and he rode away singing “Auld Lang Syne.”

He was thinking at the same time about the house and kennels he should build when he managed to raise two hundred pounds.

“I’ll save every sixpence,” he said to himself. “When I’ve settled down I’ll marry Fanny.”

That same forenoon Craig called at Bilberry Hall. He was dressed for the hill in a dark tweed kilt, with a piece of leather on his left shoulder.

He had early luncheon with McLeod, Annie presiding. In her pretty white bodice she never looked more lovely. So thought Craig.

“Annie, come to the hill with me. *Do*.”

“Annie, go,” added her uncle.

“Well, I’ll go, and bring you some birds, uncle dear, and Sandie shall ghillie me.”

“I have a ghillie,” said Craig.

“Never mind. Two are better than one.”

They had really a capital day of it, for the sun shone brightly and the birds laid close.

Gordon setters are somewhat slow, and need a drink rather often, but they are wondrous sure, and Bolt, the retriever, was fleet of foot to run down a wounded bird. So just as the sun was sinking behind the forests of the west, and tingeing the pine trees with crimson, they wended their way homeward, happy – happy with the health that only the Highland hills can give.

Shufflin’ Sandie had had several drops from Craig’s flask, but he had also had good oatcakes and cheese, so he was as steady as a judge of session.

When near to Bilberry Hall, Nicol and Annie emptied their guns in the air, and thus apprised of their approach, white-haired old McLeod came out to bid them welcome.

A good dinner!

A musical evening!

Prayers! The tumblers! Then, bidding Annie a fond adieu, away rode the jolly young farmer.

Shufflin’ Sandie’s last words to him were these:

“Mind what I told you. There’s danger in the sky. Good-night, and God be with you, Farmer Craig.”

Chapter Three.

Sandie Tells the Old, Old Story

"I wonder," said Craig Nicol to himself that night, before going to bed, and just as he rose from his knees, "if there can be anything in Shufflin' Sandie's warning. I certainly don't like old Father Fletcher, close-fisted as he is, and stingy as any miser ever I met. I don't like him prowling round my darling Annie either. And *he* hates *me*, though he lifts his hat and grimaces like a tom-cat watching a bird whenever we meet. I'll land him one, one of these days, if he can't behave himself."

But for quite a long time there was no chance of "landing the Laird one," for Fletcher called on Annie at times when he knew Craig was engaged.

And so the days and weeks went by. Laird Fletcher's wooing was carried on now on perfectly different lines. He brought Annie many a little knick-knack from Aberdeen. It might be a bracelet, a necklace of gold, or the last new novel; but never a ring. No; that would have been too suggestive.

Annie accepted these presents with some reluctance, but Fletcher looked at her so sadly, so wistfully, that rather than hurt his feelings she did receive them.

One day Annie, the old Laird and the younger started for Aberdeen, all on good horses – they despised the train – and when coming round the corner on his mare, whom should they meet face to face but Craig Nicol? And this is what happened.

The old man raised his hat.

The younger Laird smiled ironically but triumphantly.

Annie nodded, blushed, and smiled.

But the young farmer's face was blanched with rage. He was no longer handsome. There was blood in his eye. He was a devil for the present. He plunged the spurs into his horse's sides and went galloping furiously along the road.

"Would to God," he said, "I did not love her! Shall I resign her? No, no! I cannot. Yet —"

"'Tis woman that seduces all mankind;
By her we first were taught the wheedling arts."

Worse was to follow.

Right good fellow though he was, jealousy could make a very devil of Craig.

"For jealousy is the injured woman's hell."

And man's also. One day, close by the Dee, while Craig was putting his rod together previous to making a cast, Laird Fletcher came out from a thicket, also rod in hand.

"Ah, we cannot fish together, Nicol," said the Laird haughtily. "We are rivals."

Then all the jealousy in Nicol's bosom was turned for a moment into fury.

"You —*you*! You old stiff-kneed curmudgeon! You a rival of a young fellow like me! Bah! Go home and go to bed!"

Fletcher was bold.

"Here!" he cried, dashing his rod on the grass; "I don't stand language like that from anyone!"

Off went his coat, and he struck Craig a well-aimed blow under the chin that quite staggered him.

Ah! but even skill at fifty is badly matched by the strength and agility of a man in his twenties. In five minutes' time Fletcher was on the grass, his face cut and his nose dripping with blood.

Craig stood over him triumphantly, but the devil still lurked in his eyes.

"I'm done with you for the time," said Fletcher, "but mark me, I'll do for you yet!"

"Is that threatening my life, you old reprobate? You did so before, too. Come," he continued fiercely, "I will help you to wash some of that blood off your ugly face."

He seized him as he spoke, and threw him far into the river.

The stream was not deep, so the Laird got out, and went slowly away to a neighbouring cottage to dry his clothes and send for his carriage.

"Hang it!" said Craig aloud; "I can't fish to-day."

He put up his rod, and was just leaving, when Shufflin' Sandie came upon the scene. He had heard and seen all.

"Didn't I tell ye, sir? He'll kill ye yet if ye don't take care. Be warned!"

"Well," said Craig, laughing, "he is a scientific boxer, and he hurt me a bit, but I think I've given him a drubbing he won't soon forget."

"No," said Sandie significantly; "he – won't – forget. Take my word for that."

"Well, Sandie, come up to the old inn, and we'll have a glass together."

For a whole fortnight Laird Fletcher was confined to his rooms before he felt fit to be seen.

"A touch of neuralgia," he made his housekeeper tell all callers.

But he couldn't and dared not refuse to see Shufflin' Sandie when he sent up his card – an old envelope that had passed through the post-office.

"Well," said the Laird, "to what am I indebted for the honour of *this* visit?"

"Come off that high horse, sir," said Sandie, "and speak plain English. I'll tell you," he added, "I'll tell you in a dozen words. I'm going to build a small house and kennels, and I'm going to marry Fanny – the bonniest lassie in all the world, sir. Ah! won't I be happy, just!"

He smiled, and took a pinch, then offered the box to the Laird.

The Laird dashed it aside.

"What in thunder?" he roared, "has your house or marriage to do with me?"

"Ye'll soon see that, my Laird. I want forty pounds, or by all the hares on Bilberry Hill I'll go hot-foot to the Fiscal, for I heard your threat to Craig Nicol by the riverside."

Half-an-hour afterwards Shufflin' Sandie left the Laird to mourn, but Sandie had got forty pounds nearer to the object of his ambition, and was happy accordingly.

As he rode away, the horse's hoofs making music that delighted his ear, Sandie laughed aloud to himself.

"Now," he thought, "if I could only just get about fifty pounds more, I'd begin building. Maybe the old Laird'll help me a wee bit; but I must have it, and I must have Fanny. My goodness! how I do love the lassie! Her every look or glance sends a pang to my heart. I cannot bear it; I *shall* marry Fanny, or into the deepest, darkest kelpie's pool in the Dee I'll fling myself.

"O love, love! Love is like a dizziness,
That winna let a poor body go about his bus-i-ness."

Shufflin' Sandie was going to prove no laggard in love. But his was a thoroughly Dutch peasant's courtship.

He paid frequent visits by train to the Granite City, to make purchases for the good old Laird McLeod. And he never returned without a little present for Fanny. It might be a bonnie ribbon for her hair, a bottle of perfume, or even a bag of choice sweets. But he watched the chance when Fanny was alone in the kitchen to slip them into her hand half-shyly.

Once he said after giving her a pretty bangle:

"I'm not so very, *very* ugly, am I, Fanny?"

"Deed no, Sandie!"

"And I'm not so crooked and small as they would try to make me believe. Eh, dear?"

“Deed no, Sandie, and I ay take your part against them all. And that you know, Sandie.”
How sweet were those words to Sandie’s soul only those who love, but are in doubt, may tell.

“Tis sweet to love, but sweeter far
To be beloved again;
But, ah! how bitter is the pain
To love, yet love in vain!”

“Ye haven’t a terrible lot of sweethearts, have you, Fanny?”
“Well, Sandie, I always like to tell the truth; there’s plenty would make love to me, but I can’t bear them. There’s ploughman Sock, and Geordie McKay. Ach! and plenty more.”
She rubbed away viciously at the plate she was cleaning.
“And I suppose,” said Sandie, “the devil a one of them has one sixpence to rub against another?”
“Mebbe not,” said Fanny. “But, Fanny – ”
“Well, Sandie?”
“I – I really don’t know what I was going to say, but I’ll sing it.”
Sandie had a splendid voice and a well-modulated one.

“My love is like a red, red rose,
That’s newly sprung in June;
My love is like a melody,
That’s sweetly played in tune.

“As fair art thou, my bonnie lass,
So deep in love am I;
And I will love you still, my dear,
Till a’ the seas go dry.

“Till a’ the seas go dry, my lass,
And the rocks melt with the sun;
Yes, I will love you still, my dear,
Till sands of life are run.”

The tears were coursing down the bonnie lassie’s cheeks, so plaintive and sweet was the melody.
“What! ye’re surely not crying, are ye?” said Sandie, approaching and stretching one arm gently round her waist.

“Oh, no, Sandie; not me!”

But Sandie took the advantage, and kissed her on the tear-bedewed cheeks.

She didn’t resist.

“I say, Fanny – ”

“Yes, Sandie.”

“It’ll be a bonnie night to-night, the moon as bright as day. Will you steal out at eight o’clock and take a wee bit walk with me? Just meet me on the hill near Tammie Gibb’s ruined cottage. I’ve something to tell you.”

“I’ll – I’ll try,” said Fanny, blushing a little, as all innocent Scotch girls do.

Sandie went off now to his work as happy as the angels.

And Fanny did steal out that night. Only for one short hour and a half. Oh, how short the time did seem to Sandie!

It is not difficult to guess what Sandie had to tell her.

The old, old story, which, told in a thousand different ways, is ever the same, ever, ever new.
And he told her of his prospects, of the house – a but and a ben, or two rooms – he was soon to build, and his intended kennels, though he would still work for the Laird.

“Will ye be my wife? Oh, will you, Fanny?”

“Yes.”

It was but a whispered word, but it thrilled Sandie's heart with joy.

“My ain dear dove!” he cried, folding her in his arms.

They were sitting on a mossy bank close by the forest's edge.

Their lips met in one long, sweet kiss.

Yes, peasant love I grant you, but I think it was leal and true.

“They might be poor – Sandie and she;
Light is the burden love lays on;
Content and love bring peace and joy.
What more have queens upon a throne?”

Homeward through the moonlight, hand-in-hand, went the rustic lovers, and parted at the gate as lovers do.

Sandie was kind of dazed with happiness. He lay awake nearly all the livelong night, till the cocks began to crow, wondering how on earth he was to raise the other fifty pounds and more that should complete his happiness. Then he dozed off into dreamland.

He was astir, all the same, at six in the morning. And back came the joy to his heart like a great warm sea wave.

He attended to his horses and to the kennel, singing all the time; then went quietly in to make his brose.

Some quiet, sly glances and smiles passed between the betrothed – Scotch fashion again – but that was all. Sandie ate his brose in silence, then took his departure.

One morning a letter arrived from Edinburgh from a friend of Craig Nicol.

Craig was sitting at the table having breakfast when the servant brought it in and laid it before him. His face clouded as he read it.

The friend's name was Reginald Grahame, and he was a medical student in his fourth year. He had been very kind to Craig in Edinburgh, taking him about and showing him all the sights in this, the most romantic city on earth —

“Edina, Scotia's darling seat.”

Nevertheless, Craig's appetite failed, and he said “Bother!” only more so, as he pitched the letter down on the table.

Chapter Four.

“This Quarrel, I Fear, must end in Blood.”

Reginald Grahame was just as handsome a young fellow as ever entered the quad of Edinburgh University. Not the same stamp or style as Craig; equally as good-looking, but far more refined.

“My dear boy,” ran the letter, – “next week look out for me at Birnie-Boozle. I’m dead tired of study. I’m run down somewhat, and will be precious glad to get a breath of your Highland air and a bit of fishing. I’m only twenty-one yet, you know, and too young for my M.D. So I’m going soon to try to make a bit of money by taking out a patient and her daughter to San Francisco, then overland to New York, and back home. Why, you won’t know your old friend when he comes back,” etc, etc.

“Hang my luck!” said Craig, half-aloud. “This is worse than a dozen Laird Fletchers. Annie has never said yet that she loved me, and I feel a presentiment that I shall be cut out now in earnest. Och hey! But I’ll do my best to prevent their meeting. It may be mean, but I can’t help it. Indeed, I’ve half a mind to pick a quarrel with him and let him go home.”

Next week Reginald did arrive, looking somewhat pale, for his face was “Sicklied o’er with the pale cast of thought,” but very good-looking for all that. Probably his paleness added to the charm of his looks and manner, and there was the gentleman in every movement, grace in every turn.

They shook hands fervently at the station, and soon in Craig’s dogcart were rattling along towards Birnie-Boozle.

Reginald’s reception was everything that could be desired, and the hospitality truly Highland. Says Burns the immortal:

“In Heaven itself I’ll seek nae mair
Than just a Highland welcome!”

For over a week – for well-nigh a fortnight, indeed – they fished by the river, and caught many a trout, as well as lordly salmon, without seeing anyone belonging to Bilberry Hall, except Shufflin’ Sandie, for whom the grand old river had irresistible attractions.

Sandie smelt a rat, though, and imagined he knew well enough why Craig Nicol did not bring his friend to the Hall. Before falling asleep one night, Craig had an inspiration, and he slept more soundly after it.

He would take his friend on a grand Highland tour, which should occupy all his vacation.

Yes. But man can only propose. God has the disposal of our actions. And something happened next that Craig could not have calculated on.

They had been to the hill, which was still red and crimson with the bonnie blooming heather, and were coming down through the forest, not far from Bilberry Hall, when suddenly they heard a shot fired, then the sounds of a fearful struggle.

Both young men grasped their sturdy cudgels and rushed on. They found two of McLeod’s gamekeepers engaged in a terrible encounter with four sturdy poachers. But when Craig and his friend came down they were man to man, and the poachers fled.

Not, however, before poor Reginald was stabbed in the right chest with a *skean dhu*, the little dagger that kilted Highlanders wear in their right stocking.

The young doctor had fallen. The keepers thought he was dead, the blood was so abundant.

But he had merely fainted. They bound his wound with scarves, made a litter of spruce branches, and bore him away to the nearest house, and that was the Hall. Craig entered first, lest Annie should be frightened, and while Shufflin’ Sandie rode post-haste for the doctor poor Reginald was put to bed downstairs in a beautiful room that overlooked both forest and river.

So serious did the doctor consider the case that he stayed with him all night.

A rough-looking stick was this country surgeon, in rough tweed jacket and knickerbockers, but tender-hearted to a degree.

Craig had gone home about ten, somewhat sad-hearted and hopeless. Not, it must be confessed, for his friend's accident, but Reginald would now be always with Annie, for she had volunteered to nurse him.

But Craig rode over every day to see the wounded man for all that.

"He has a tough and wondrous constitution," said Dr McRae. "He'll pull through under my care and Annie's gentle nursing."

Craig Nicol winced, but said nothing. Reginald had brought a dog with him, a splendid black Newfoundland, and that dog was near him almost constantly.

Sometimes he would put his paws on the coverlet, and lean his cheek against his master in a most affectionate way. Indeed, this action sometimes brought the tears to Annie's eyes.

No more gentle or kind nurse could Reginald have had than Annie.

To the guileless simplicity of a child was added all the wisdom of a woman. And she obeyed to the very letter all the instructions the doctor gave her. She was indefatigable. Though Fanny relieved her for hours during the day, Annie did most of the night work.

At first the poor fellow was delirious, raving much about his mother and sisters. With cooling lotions she allayed the fever in his head. Ay, she did more: she prayed for him. Ah! Scots folk are strange in English eyes, but perhaps some of them are saints in God's.

Reginald, however, seemed to recover semiconsciousness all at once. The room in which he lay was most artistically adorned, the pictures beautifully draped, coloured candles, mirrors, and brackets everywhere. He looked around him half-dazed; then his eyes were fixed on Annie.

"Where am I?" he asked. "Is this Heaven? Are you an – an – angel?"

He half-lifted himself in the bed, but she gently laid him back on the snow-white pillows again.

"You must be good, dear," she said, as if he had been a baby. "Be good and try to sleep."

And the eyes were closed once more, and the slumber now was sweet and refreshing. When he awoke again, after some hours, his memory had returned, and he knew all. His voice was very feeble, but he asked for his friend, Craig Nicol. But business had taken Craig away south to London, and it would be a fortnight before he could return.

Ah! what a happy time convalescence is, and happier still was it for Reginald with a beautiful nurse like Annie – Annie o' the Banks o' Dee.

In a week's time he was able to sit in an easy-chair in the drawing-room. Annie sang soft, low songs to him, and played just as softly. She read to him, too, both verse and prose. Soon he was able to go for little drives, and now got rapidly well.

Is it any wonder that, thrown together in so romantic a way, these two young people fell in love, or that when he plighted his troth Annie shyly breathed the wee word Yes?

Craig Nicol came back at last, and he saw Reginald alone.

Reginald – impulsive he ever was – held out his hand and asked for congratulations on his engagement to Annie.

Craig almost struck that hand away. His face grew dark and lowering.

"Curse you!" he cried. "You were my friend once, or pretended to be. Now I hate you; you have robbed me of my own wee lamb, my sweetheart, and now have the impudence – the confounded impertinence – to ask me to congratulate you! You are as false as the devil in hell!"

"Craig Nicol," said Reginald, and his cheeks flushed red, "I am too weak to fight you now, but when I am well you shall rue these words! *Au revoir*. We meet again."

This stormy encounter took place while the young doctor sat on a rocking-chair on the gravelled terrace. Shufflin Sandie was close at hand.

"Gentlemen," said Sandie, "for the Lord's sake, don't quarrel!"

But Craig said haughtily, "Go and mind your own business, you blessed Paul Pry."

Then he turned on his heel and walked briskly away, and soon after his horse's hoofs might have been heard clattering on the road as he dashed briskly on towards his farm of Birnie-Boozle.

Annie Lane came round from the flower-garden at the west wing of Bilberry Hall. She carried in her hand a bouquet of autumnal roses and choice dahlias – yellow, crimson, and white; piped or quilled cactus and single. She was singing low to herself the refrain of that bonnie old song:

"When Jackie's far awa' at sea,
When Jackie's far awa' at sea,
What's a' the pleasure life can gie,
When Jackie's far awa'?"

Perhaps she never looked more innocently happy or more beautiful than she did at that moment.

"Like dew on the gowans lying
Was the fa' o' her fairy feet;
And like winds in summer sighing,
Her voice was low and sweet."

But when she noticed the pallor on her lovers cheek she ceased singing, and advanced more quickly towards him.

"Oh, my darling," she cried, "how pale you are! You are ill! You must come in. Mind, I am still your nursie."

"No, no; I am better here. I have the fresh air. But I am only a little upset, you know."

"And what upset you, dear Reginald?"

She had seated herself by his side. She had taken his hand, and had placed two white wee fingers on his pulse.

"I'll tell you, Annie mine – "

"Yes, I'm yours, and yours only, and ever shall be."

"Craig Nicol has been here, and we have quarrelled. He has cursed and abused me. He says I have stolen your heart from him, and now he must for ever hate me."

"But, oh, Reginald, he never had my heart!"

"I never knew he had sought it, dearest."

"Yet he did. I should have told you before, but he persecuted me with his protestations of love. Often and often have I remained in my room all the evening long when I knew he was below."

"Well, he cursed me from the bottom of his heart and departed. Not before I told him that our quarrel could not end thus, that I was too proud to stand abuse, that when well I should fight him."

"Oh, no – no – no! For my sake you must not fight."

"Annie, my ain little dove, do you remember these two wee lines:

"I could not love thee half so much,
Loved I not honour more."

"There is no hatred so deep and bitter as that between two men who have once been friends. No; both Craig and I will be better pleased after we fight; but this quarrel I fear must end in blood."

Poor Annie shuddered. Just at that moment Shufflin' Sandie appeared on the scene. He was never far away.

"Can I get ye a plaid, Mr Grahame, to throw o'er your legs? It's gettin' cold now, I fear."

“No, no, my good fellow; we don’t want attendance at present. Thank you all the same, however.”

Oscar, Reginald’s great Newfoundland, came bounding round now to his master’s side. He had been hunting rats and rabbits. The embrace he gave his master was rough, but none the less sincere. Then he lay down by his feet, on guard, as it were; for a dog is ever suspicious.

Annie was very silent and very sad. Reginald drew her towards him, and she rested her head on his shoulder. But tears bedimmed her blue eyes, and a word of sympathy would have caused her to burst into a fit of weeping that would probably have been hysterical in its nature. So Reginald tried to appear unconcerned.

They sat in silence thus for some time. The silence of lovers is certainly golden.

Presently, bright, neatly-dressed Fanny came tripping round, holding in advance of her a silver salver.

“A letter, sir,” she said, smiling.

Reginald took it slowly from the salver, and his hand shook visibly.

“Annie,” he said, somewhat sadly, “I believe this contains my sailing orders.”

Chapter Five.

A Discovery That Appalled and Shocked Everyone

Reginald had guessed aright. The good barque *Wolverine* would sail from Glasgow that day month, wind and weather permitting, for the South Atlantic, and round the Horn to the South Pacific Islands and San Francisco.

This was from the captain; but a note was enclosed from Mrs Hall, Reginald's pet aunt, hoping he was quite restored to health and strength, and would join them some hours before sailing. She felt certain, she said, that the long voyage would quite restore her, and her daughter Ilda and wee niece Matty were wild with delight at the prospect of being —

“All alone on the wide, wide sea.”

“Oh, my darling!” cried Annie, “I believe my heart will break to lose you.”

“But it will not be for long, my love – a year at most; and, oh, our reunion will be sweet! You know, Annie, I am *very* poor, with scarce money enough to procure me an outfit. It is better our engagement should not be known just yet to the old Laird, your uncle. He would think it most presumptuous in me to aspire to the hand of his heiress. But I shall be well and strong long before a month; and think, dearest, I am to have five hundred pounds for acting as private doctor and nurse to Mrs Hall! When I return I shall complete my studies, set up in practice, and then, oh, then, Annie, you and I shall be married!

“Two souls with but a single thought,
Two hearts that beat as one.”

But the tears were now silently chasing each other down her cheeks.

“Cheer up, my own,” said Reginald, drawing her closer to him.

Presently she did, and then the woman, not the child, came uppermost.

“Reginald,” she said, “tell me, is Miss Hall very beautiful?”

“I hardly know how to answer you, Annie. I sometimes think she is. Fragile, rather, with masses of glittering brown hair, and hazel eyes that are sometimes very large, as she looks at you while you talk. But,” he added, “there can be no true love unless there is a little jealousy. Ah, Annie,” he continued, smiling, “I see it in your eye, just a tiny wee bit of it. But it mustn't increase. I have plighted my troth to you, and will ever love you as I do now, as long as the sun rises over yonder woods and forests.”

“I know, I know you will,” said Annie, and once more the head was laid softly on his shoulder.

“There is one young lady, however, of whom you have some cause to be jealous.”

“And she?”

“I confess, Annie, that I loved her a good deal. Ah, don't look sad; it is only Matty, and she is just come five.”

Poor Annie laughed in a relieved sort of way. The lovers said little more for a time, but presently went for a walk in the flower-gardens, and among the black and crimson buds of autumn. Reginald could walk but slowly yet, and was glad enough of the slight support of Annie's arm.

“Ah, Annie,” he said, “it won't be long before you shall be leaning on my arm instead of me on yours.”

“I pray for that,” said the child-woman.

The gardens were still gay with autumnal flowers, and I always think that lovers are a happy adjunct to a flower-garden. But it seemed to be the autumn buds that were the chief attraction for Reginald at present. They were everywhere trailing in vines over the hedgerows, supported on their own sturdy stems or climbing high over the gables and wings of the grand old hall.

The deadly nightshade, that in summer was covered with bunches of sweetest blue, now grew high over the many hedges, hung with fruitlike scarlet bunches of the tiniest grapes. The *Bryonia Alba*, sometimes called the devil's parsnip, that in June snows the country hedges over with its wealth of white wee flowers, was now splashed over with crimson budlets. The holly berries were already turning. The black-berried ivy crept high up the shafts of the lordly Lombardy poplars. Another tiny berry, though still green, grew in great profusion – it would soon be black – the fruit of the privet. The pyrocanthus that climbs yonder wall is one lovely mass of vermilion berries in clusters. These rival in colour and appearance the wealth of red fruit on the rowan trees or mountain ashes.

“How beautiful, Annie,” said Reginald, gazing up at the nodding berries. “Do you mind the old song, dear? —

“Oh, rowan tree, oh, rowan tree,
Thou'lt ay be dear to me;
Begirt thou art with many thoughts
Of home and infancy.

“Thy leaves were ay the first in spring
Thy flowers the summer's pride;
There wasn't such a bonnie tree
In a' the countryside,
Oh, rowan tree!”

“It is very beautiful,” said Annie, “and the music is just as beautiful, though plaintive, and even sad. I shall play it to you to-night.”

But here is an arbour composed entirely of a gigantic briar, laden with rosy fruit. Yet the king-tree of the garden is the barberry, and I never yet knew a botanist who could describe the lavish loveliness of those garlands of rosy coral. With buds of a somewhat deeper shade the dark yews were sprinkled, and in this fairy-like garden or arboretum grew trees and shrubs of every kind.

Over all the sun shone with a brilliancy of a delightful September day. The robins followed the couple everywhere, sometimes even hopping on to Reginald's shoulder or Annie's hat, for these birds seem to know by instinct where kindness of heart doth dwell.

“Annie,” said Reginald, after a pause, “I am very, very happy.”

“And I, dear,” was the reply, “am very hopeful.”

How quickly that month sped away. Reginald was as strong as ever again, and able to play cards of an evening with Laird McLeod or Laird Fletcher, for the latter, knowing that the farmer of Birnie-Boozle came here no longer, renewed his visits.

I shall not say much about the parting. They parted in tears and in sorrow, that is all; with many a fond vow, with many a fond embrace.

It has often grieved me to think how very little Englishmen know about our most beautiful Scottish songs. Though but a little simple thing, “The Pairtin” (parting) is assuredly one of the most plaintively melodious I know of in any language. It is very *à propos* to the parting of Reginald and Annie o' the Banks o' Dee.

“Mary, dearest maid, I leave thee,
Home and friends, and country dear,

Oh, ne'er let our pairtin' grieve thee,
Happier days may soon be here.

“See, yon bark so proudly bounding,
Soon shall bear me o'er the sea;
Hark! the trumpet loudly sounding,
Calls me far from love and thee.

“Summer flowers shall cease to blossom,
Streams run backward from the sea;
Cold in death must be this bosom
Ere it cease to throb for thee.

“Fare thee well – may every blessing
Shed by Heaven around thee fa’;
One last time thy lov'd form pressing —
Think on me when far awa'.”

“If you would keep song in your hearts,” says a writer of genius, “learn to sing. There is more merit in melody than most people are aware of. Even the cobbler who smoothes his wax-ends with a song will do as much work in a day as one given to ill-nature would do in a week. Songs are like sunshine, they run to cheerfulness, and fill the bosom with such buoyancy, that for the time being you feel filled with June air or like a meadow of clover in blossom.”

How lonely the gardens and the Hall itself seemed to Annie now that her lover had gone, and how sad at heart was she!

Well, and how reluctant am I myself to leave all these pleasant scenes, and bring before the mind's eye an event so terrible and a deed so dark that I almost shudder as I describe it; but as the evolution of this over-true tale depends upon it, I am obliged to.

First, I must tell you that just two days before joining his ship, Reginald had to go to Aberdeen to see friends and bid them adieu.

But it happened that Craig Nicol had made a visit on foot to Aberdeen about the same time. Thirty, or even forty, miles was not too much for a sturdy young fellow like him. He had told his housekeeper a week before that he was to draw money from the bank – a considerable sum, too.

This was foolish of him, for the garrulous old woman not only boasted to the neighbouring servants of the wealth of her master, but even told them the day he would leave for the town.

Poor Craig set off as merrily as any half-broken hearted lover could be expected to do. But, alas! after leaving Aberdeen on his homeward journey, he had never been seen alive again by anyone who knew him.

As he often, however, made a longer stay in town than he had first intended, the housekeeper and servants of Birnie-Boozle were not for a time alarmed; but soon the assistance of the police was called in, with the hopes of solving the mystery. All they did find out, however, was that he had left the Granite City well and whole, and that he had called at an inn called the Five Mile House on the afternoon to partake of some refreshment. After that all was a dread and awful blank. There was not a pond, however, or copse along from this inn that was not searched. Then the river was dragged by men used to work of this sort.

But all in vain. The mystery remained still unrevealed. Only the police, as usual, vaunted about having a clue, and being pressed to explain, a sergeant said:

“Why, only this: you see he drew a lot of cash from the bank in notes and gold, and as we hear that he is in grief, there is little doubt in our minds that he has gone, for a quiet holiday to the Continent, or even to the States.”

Certain in their own minds that this was the case, the worthy police force troubled themselves but little more about the matter. They thought they had searched everywhere; but one place they had forgotten and missed. From the high road, not many miles from Birnie-Boozle, a road led. It was really little more than a bridle-path, but it shortened the journey by at least a mile, and when returning from town Craig Nicol always took advantage of this.

Strange, indeed, it was, that no one, not even the housekeeper, had thought of giving information about this to the police. But the housekeeper was to be excused. She was plunged deeply in grief. She and she only would take no heed of the supposed clue to the mystery that the sergeant made sure he had found.

“Oh, oh,” she would cry, “my master is dead! I know, I know he is. In a dream he appeared to me. How wan and weird he looked, and his garments were drenched in blood and gore. Oh, master, dear, kind, good master, I shall never, never see you more!” And the old lady wrung her hands and wept and sobbed as if her very heart would break.

Reginald's ship had been about two days at sea. The wind was fair and strong, so that she had made a good offing, and was now steering south by west, bearing up for the distant shores of South America.

And it was now that a discovery was made that appalled and shocked everyone in all the countryside.

Chapter Six.

A Verdict of Murder

About half-way up the short cut, or bridle-path, was a dark, dingy spruce-fir copse. It was separated from the roads by a high whitethorn hedge, trailed over with brambles, the black, shining, rasp-like fruit of which were now ripe and juicy. They were a great attraction to the wandering schoolboy. Two lads, aged about eight or ten – great favourites with Craig's housekeeper – were given a basket each in the forenoon and sent off to pick the berries and to return to tea about four o'clock.

There was a gate that entered from the path, but it was seldom, if ever, opened, save probably by the wood-cutters.

Well, those two poor little fellows returned hours and hours before tea-time. They were pale and scared-looking. In their terror they had even dropped their baskets.

"Oh, the man! the man!" they cried, as soon as they entered. "The poor, dead man!"

Although some presentiment told the aged housekeeper that this must indeed be the dead body of her unhappy master, she summoned courage to run herself to the police-station. An officer was soon on the fatal spot, guided by the braver of the two little lads. With his big knife the policeman hacked away some of the lower branches of the spruce-fir, and thus let in the light.

It was indeed Craig, and there was little doubt that he had been foully murdered. But while one officer took charge of the corpse, he did not touch it, but dispatched another to telegraph to Aberdeen at once for a detective. He arrived by the very next train, accompanied by men with a letter. The news had spread like wildfire, and quite a crowd had by this time gathered in the lane, but they were kept far back from the gate lest their footsteps should deface any traces of the murder. Even the imprint of a shoe might be invaluable in clearing up an awful mystery like this. Mr C., the detective, and the surgeon immediately started their investigations.

It was only too evident that Craig Nicol had been stabbed to the heart. His clothes were one mass of gore, and hard with blood. On turning the body over, a discovery was made that caused the detective's heart to palpitate with joy. Here, underneath it, was found a Highlander's *skean dhu* (stocking dirk). The little sheath itself was found at a distance of a few yards, and it must evidently have been dropped by the murderer, in his haste to conceal the body.

"Ha! this is indeed a clue," said the detective. "This knife did the deed, George. See, it is encrusted with blood."

"I think so, sir."

"And look, on the silver back of the little sheath are the letters R.G."

He took the dagger in his hand, and went back to the little crowd.

"Can anyone identify this knife?" he asked, showing it to them.

No one could.

"Can you?" said the detective, going to the rear and addressing Shufflin' Sandie. Sandie appeared to be in deep grief.

"Must I tell?"

"You needn't now, unless you like, but you must at the inquest."

"Then, sir, I may as well say it now. The knife belongs to Mr Grahame."

A thrill of horror went through the little crowd, and Sandy burst into tears.

"Where does he live, this Mr Grahame?"

"He did live at Bilberry Hall, sir," blubbered Sandie; "but a few days ago he sailed away for the Southern Seas."

"Was he poor or rich, Sandie?"

“As poor as a church mouse, sir. I’ve heard him tell Miss Annie Lane so. For I was always dandlin’ after them.”

“Thank you; that will do in the meantime.”

Craig had evidently been robbed, for the pockets were turned inside out, and another discovery made was this: the back of the coat was covered with dust or dried mud, so that, in all human probability, he must have been murdered on the road, then dragged and hidden here. There was a terrible bruise on one side of the head, so it was evident enough to the surgeon, as well as to the detective, that the unfortunate man must first have been stunned and afterwards stabbed. There was evidence, too, that the killing had been done on the road; there were marks of the gravel having been scraped away, and this same gravel, blackened with blood, was found in the ditch.

The detective took his notes of the case, then calling his man, proceeded to have the man laid on the litter. The body was not taken home, but to the barn of an adjoining cottage.

Here when the coroner was summoned and arrived from Aberdeen, part of the inquest was held. After viewing the body, the coroner and jury went to Birnie-Boozle, and here more business was gone through.

The housekeeper was the first to be examined. She was convulsed with grief, and could only testify as to the departure and date of departure of her master for the distant city, with the avowed intention of drawing money.

“That will do, my good woman; you can retire.”

The next witness to be examined was Shufflin’ Sandie. He was exceedingly cool, and took a large pinch of snuff before answering a question.

“Were not Craig Nicol and Reginald Grahame particular friends?”

“Once upon a time, sir; but he was awfully jealous was Craig, and never brought Grahame to the Hall; but after the fight with thae devils of poachers, Grahame was carried, wounded, to Bilberry Hall, and nursed by Miss Annie. Not much wonder, sir, that they fell in love. I would have done the same myself. I – ”

“Now, don’t be garrulous.”

“Oh, devil a garrulus; I’ll not say another word if ye like.”

“Well, go on.”

“Well, sir, they were engaged. Then one day Craig comes to the Hall, and there was terrible angry words. Craig cursed Grahame and called him all the ill names he could lay his tongue to.”

“And did Grahame retaliate?”

“Indeed did he, sir; he didn’t swear, but he said that as soon as he was well, the *quarrel should end in blood*.” (Sensation in court.) “Had Craig any other enemy?”

“That he had – old Laird Fletcher. They met at the riverside one day, and had a row, and fought. I saw and heard everything. Craig Nicol told the old Laird that he would have nobody snuffling round his lady love. Then they off-coat and fought. Man! it was fine! The Laird put in some good ones, but the young ’un had it at last. Then he flung the Laird into the river, and when he got out he threatened to do for poor Craig Nicol.” (Sensation.)

Sandie paused to wipe his eyes with his sleeve, and took snuff before he could proceed.

“You think,” said the coroner, “that Laird Fletcher meant to carry out his threat?”

“I don’t know. I only know this – he was in doonright devilish earnest when he made it.”

“I am here,” said Laird Fletcher, “and here, too, are five witnesses to prove that I have not been twice outside my own gate since Craig Nicol started for Aberdeen. Once I was at the Hall, and my groom here drove me there and back; I was too ill to walk.”

The witnesses were examined on oath, and no alibi was ever more clearly proven. Laird Fletcher was allowed to leave the court without a stain on his character.

“I am sorry to say, gentlemen,” addressing the jury, “that there appears no way out of the difficulty, and that his poverty would alone have led Grahame to commit the terrible deed, to say

nothing of his threat that the quarrel would end in blood. Poor Craig Nicol has been robbed, and foully, brutally murdered, and Reginald Grahame sails almost immediately after for the South Seas. I leave the verdict with you.”

Without leaving the box, and after a few minutes of muttered conversation, the foreman stood up.

“Have you agreed as to your verdict?”

“Unanimously, sir.”

“And it is?”

“Wilful murder, sir, committed by the hands of Reginald Grahame.”

“Thank you. And now you may retire.”

Ill news travels apace, and despite all that Fanny and Annie’s maid could do, the terrible accusation against her lover soon reached our poor heroine’s ears.

At first she wept most bitterly, but it was not because she believed in Reginald’s guilt. No, by no means. It was because she felt sorrow for him. He was not here to defend himself, as she was sure he could. Perhaps love is blind, and lovers cannot see.

But true love is trusting. Annie had the utmost faith in Reginald Grahame – a faith that all the accusations the world could make against him could not shake, nor coroners’ verdicts either.

“No, no, no,” she exclaimed to her maid passionately, through her tears, “my darling is innocent, though things look black against him. Ah! how unfortunate that he should have gone to the city during those three terrible days!” She was silent for a couple of minutes. “Depend upon it, Jeannie,” she added, “someone else was the murderer. And for all his alibi, which I believe to be got up, I blame that Laird Fletcher.”

“Oh, don’t, dearest Annie,” cried the maid, “believe me when I say I could swear before my Maker that he is not guilty.”

“I am hasty, because in sorrow,” said Annie. “I may alter my mind soon. Anyhow, he does not look the man to be guilty of so terrible a crime, and he has been always kind and fatherly to me, since the day I ran away from the harbour. Knowing that I am engaged, he will not be less so now. But, oh, my love, my love! Reginald, when shall I ever see thee again? I would die for thee, with thee; as innocent thou as the babe unborn. Oh Reginald my love, my love!”

Her perfect confidence in her lover soon banished Annie’s grief. He would return. He might be tried, she told herself, but he would leave the court in robes of white, so to speak, able to look any man in the face, without spot or stain on his character. Then they would be wedded.

A whole month flew by, during which – so terrible is justice – an expedition was sent to San Francisco overland, with policemen, to meet the *Wolverine* there, and at once to capture their man.

They waited and waited a weary time. Six months flew by, nine months, a year; still she came not, and at last she was classed among the ships that ne’er return.

Reginald Grahame will never be seen again – so thought the ’tecs – “Till the sea gives up the dead.”

Chapter Seven.

Buying the Bonnie Things

To say that Annie was not now in grief would be wrong. Still hope told a flattering tale. And that tale sufficed to keep her heart up.

He must have been wrecked somewhere, but had she not prayed night and day for him? Yes, he was safe – must be. Heaven would protect him. Prayers are heard, and he *would* return safe and sound, to defy his enemies and his slanderers as well.

Fletcher had been received back into favour. Somewhat penurious he was known to be, but so kind and gentle a man as he could never kill. Had she not seen him remove a worm from the garden path lest it might be trodden upon by some incautious foot?

He kept her hopes up, too, and assured her that he believed as she did, that all would come right in the end. If everybody else believed that the *Wolverine* was a doomed ship, poor Annie didn't.

There came many visitors to the Hall, young and middle-aged, and more than one made love to Annie. She turned a deaf ear to all. But now an event occurred that for a time banished some of the gloom that hung around Bilberry Hall.

About two months before this, one morning, after old Laird McLeod had had breakfast, Shufflin' Sandie begged for an audience.

"Most certainly," said McLeod. "Show the honest fellow in."

So in marched Sandie, bonnet in hand, and determined on this occasion to speak the very best English he could muster.

"Well, Sandie?"

"Well, Laird. I think if a man has to break the ice, he'd better do it at once and have done with it. Eh? What think *you*?"

"That's right, Sandie."

"Well, would you believe that a creature like me could possibly fall in love over the ears, and have a longing to get married?"

"Why not, Sandie? I don't think you so bad-looking as some other folks call you."

Sandie smiled and took a pinch.

"Not to beat about the bush, then, Laird, I'm just awfully gone on Fanny."

"And does she return your affection?"

"That she does, sir; and sitting on a green bank near the forest one bonnie moonlit night, she promised to be my wife. You wouldn't turn me away, would you, sir, if I got married?"

"No, no; you have been a faithful servant for many a day."

"Well, now, Laird, here comes the bit. I want to build a bit housie on the knoll, close by the forest, just a but and a ben and a kennel. Then I would breed terriers, and make a bit out of that. Fanny would see to them while I did your work. But man, Laird, I've scraped and scraped, and saved and saved, and I've hardly got enough yet to begin life with."

"How much do you need?"

"Oh, Laird, thirty pounds would make Fanny and me as happy as a duke and duchess."

"Sandie, I'll lend it to you. I'll take no interest. And if you're able some time to pay it back, just do it. That will show you are as honest as I believe you are."

The tears sprang, or seemed to spring, to Sandie's eyes, and he had to take another big noseful of snuff to hide his emotions.

"May the Lord bless ye, Laird! I'll just run over now and tell Fanny."

It does not take so long to build a Highland cot as it would to erect a Crystal Palace, and in three weeks' time Shufflin' Sandie's house was complete and furnished. He had even laid out a garden or

kail-yard, and planted a few suitable trees. Then, when another month had passed away, Sandie once more sought audience of the good Laird, and formally begged for Fanny's hand.

Next the wedding-day was settled, and the minister's services requisitioned. And one day Shufflin' Sandie set off for Aberdeen by train to buy the "bonnie things," as they are termed.

Perhaps there are no more beautiful streets in Great Britain than Union Street and King Street, especially as seen by moonlight. They then look as if built of the whitest and purest of marble. While the beautiful villas of Rubislaw, with their charming flower-gardens, are of all sorts of architecture, and almost rival the snow in their sheen.

Fanny was charmed. Strange to say this simple servant lassie had never been to the city before. It was all a kind of fairyland to her, and, look wherever she might, things of beauty met her eyes. And the windows – ah, the windows! She must pull Sandie by the sleeve every other minute, for she really could not pass a draper's shop nor a jeweller's without stopping to glance in and admire.

"Oh!" she would cry, "look, look, Sandie, dear, at the chains and the watches, and the bracelets and diamonds and pearls. Surely all the gold in Ophir is there!"

One particularly well-dressed window – it was a ladies' drapery shop – almost startled her. She drew back and blushed a little as her eyes fell on a full-length figure of a lady in fashionable array.

"Oh, Sandie, is she living?"

"De'il a living?" said Sandie. "Her body's timber, and her face and hands are made out of cobbler's wax. That's how living she is."

"But what a splendid dress! And yonder is another. Surely Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these!"

"Well, Fanny, lassie, beautiful though this shop be, it is a pretty cheap one, so we'll buy your marriage dress here."

The shop-walker was very obsequious. "Marriage dress, sir. Certainly, sir. Third counter down, my lady."

Fanny had never been so addressed before, and she rose several inches in her own estimation.

"I – that is, she – is needing a marriage dress, missie."

"Ready-made?"

"Ay, that'll do, if it isn't over dear. Grand though we may look in our Sunday clothes, we're not o'er-burdened with cash; but we're going to be married for all that."

Sandie chuckled and took snuff, and Fanny blushed, as usual.

"I'm sure I wish you joy," said the girl in black.

"I'm certain ye do. You're a bit bonnie lassie yerself, and some day ye'll get a man. Ye mind what the song says:

"Oh, bide ye yet, and bide ye yet,
Ye little know what may betide ye yet;
Some bonnie wee mannie may fa' to your lot,
So ay be canty and thinkin' o't."

The girl in black certainly took pleasure in fitting Fanny, and, when dressed, she took a peep in the tall mirror – well, she didn't know herself! She was as beautiful as one of the wax figures in the window. Sandy was dazed. He took snuff, and, scarce knowing what he was doing, handed the box to the lassie in black who was serving them.

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