

Barr Robert

A Prince of Good Fellows



Robert Barr

A Prince of Good Fellows

«Public Domain»

Barr R.

A Prince of Good Fellows / R. Barr — «Public Domain»,

© Barr R.

© Public Domain

Содержание

The King Intervenes	5
The King Dines	13
The King's Tryst	18
The King Investigates	26
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	29

Barr Robert

A Prince of Good Fellows

The King Intervenes

Late evening had fallen on the grey walls of Stirling Castle, and dark night on the town itself, where narrow streets and high gables gave early welcome to the mirk, while the westward-facing turrets of the castle still reflected the departing glory of the sky.

With some suggestion of stealth in his movements, a young man picked his way through the thickening gloom of the streets. There was still light enough to show that, judging by his costume, he was of the well-to-do farmer class. This was proclaimed by his broad, coarse, bonnet and the grey check plaid which he wore, not looped to the shoulder and pinned there by a brooch, Highland fashion, but wrapped round his middle, with the two ends brought over the shoulders and tucked under the wide belt which the plaid itself made, the fringes hanging down at each knee, as a Lowland shepherd might have worn the garment. As he threaded his way through the tortuous streets, ever descending, he heard the clatter of a troop of horse coming up, and paused, looking to the right and left, as if desirous of escaping an encounter which seemed inevitable. But if such were his object, the stoppage, although momentary, was already too long, for ere he could deflect his course, the foremost of the horsemen was upon him, a well known noble of the Scottish Court.

“Out of the way, fellow!” cried the rider, and, barely giving him time to obey, the horseman struck at the pedestrian fiercely with his whip. The young man’s agility saved him. Nimbly he placed his back against the wall, thus avoiding the horse’s hoof and the rider’s lash. The victim’s right hand made a swift motion to his left hip, but finding no weapon of defence there, the arm fell back to his side again, and he laughed quietly to himself. The next motion of his hand was more in accordance with his station, for it removed his bonnet, and he stood uncovered until the proud cavalcade passed him.

When the street was once more clear and the echoing sounds had died away in the direction of the castle, the youth descended and descended until he came to the lower part of the town where, turning aside up a narrow lane, he knocked at the door of a closed and shuttered building, evidently an abiding place of the poorer inhabitants of Stirling. With some degree of caution the door was slightly opened, but when the occupant saw, by the flash of light that came from within, who his visitor was, he threw the portal wide and warmly welcomed the newcomer.

“Hey, guidman!” he cried, “ye’re late the night in Stirling.”

“Yes,” said the young man stepping inside, “but the farm will see nothing of me till the morning. I’ve a friend in town who gives me a bed for myself and a stall for my horse, and gets the same in return when he pays a visit to the country.”

“A fair exchange,” replied the host as he closed and barred the door.

The low room in which the stranger found himself was palpably a cobbler’s shop. Boots and shoes of various sizes and different degrees of ill repair strewed the floor, and the bench in the corner under a lighted cruzie held implements of the trade, while the apron which enveloped the man of the door proclaimed his occupation. The incomer seated himself on a stool, and the cobbler returned to his last, resuming his interrupted work. He looked up however, from time to time, in kindly fashion at his visitor, who seemed to be a welcome guest.

“Well,” said the shoemaker with a laugh, “what’s wrong with you?”

“Wrong with me? Nothing. Why do you think there is anything amiss?”

“You are flushed in the face; your breath comes quick as if you had been running, and there’s a set about your lips that spells anger.”

"You are a very observing man, Flemming," replied he of the plaid. "I have been walking fast so that I should have little chance of meeting any one. But it is as well to tell the whole truth as only part of it. I had a fright up the street. One of those young court sprigs riding to the castle tried to trample me under the feet of his horse, and struck at me with his whip for getting into his road, so I had just to plaster my back against somebody's front door and keep out of the way."

"It's easy to see that you live in the country, Ballengeich," replied the cobbler, "or you would never get red in the face over a little thing like that."

"I had some thought of pulling him off his horse, nevertheless," said the Laird of Ballengeich, whose brow wrinkled into a frown at the thought of the indignity he had suffered.

"It was just as well you left him alone," commented the cobbler, "for an unarmed man must even take whatever those court gallants think fit to offer, and if wise, he keeps the gap in his face shut, for fear he gets a bigger gap opened in his head. Such doings on the part of the nobles do not make them exactly popular. Still, I am speaking rather freely, and doubtless you are a firm friend of the new king?" and the shoemaker cast a cautious sidelong glance at his visitor.

"A friend of the king? I wonder to hear you! I doubt if he has a greater enemy than myself in all Scotland."

"Do you mean that, Ballengeich?" inquired the shoemaker, with more of interest than the subject appeared to demand, laying down his hammer as he spoke, and looking intently at his guest.

"I'd never say it, if it wasn't true," replied the laird.

It was some moments before the workman spoke, and then he surprised the laird by a remark which had apparently nothing to do with what had been said before.

"You are not a married man, I think you told me?"

"No, I am not. There's time enough for that yet," returned the other with a smile. "You see, I am new to my situation of responsibility, and it's as well not to take in the wife till you are sure you can support her."

"What like a house have you got, and how far is it from Stirling?"

"The house is well enough in its way; there's more room in it than I care to occupy. It's strongly built of stone, and could stand a siege if necessary, as very likely it has done in days long past, for it's a stout old mansion. It's near enough to Stirling for me to come in and see my friend the cobbler in the evening, and sleep in my own bed that night, if I care to do so."

"Is it in a lonely place?"

"I can hardly say that. It is at the top of a bit hill, yet there's room enough to give you rest and retirement if you should think of keeping retreat from the busy world of the town. What's on your mind, Flemming? Are you swithering whether you'll turn farmer or no? Let me inform you that it's a poor occupation."

"I'll tell you what's on my mind, Ballengeich, if you'll swear piously to keep it a secret."

"Indeed, I'll do nothing of the sort," replied the young man decisively. "An honest man's bare word is as good as his bond, and the strongest oath ever sworn never yet kept a rascal from divulging a secret intrusted to him."

"You're right in that; you're right in that," the cobbler hastened to add, "but this involves others as well as myself, and all are bound to each other by oaths."

"Then I venture to say you are engaged in some nefarious business. What is it? I'll tell nobody, and mayhap, young as I am, I can give you some plain, useful advice from the green fields that will counteract the pernicious notions that rise in the stifling wynds of the crowded town."

"Well, I'm not at all sure that we don't need it, for to tell the truth I have met with a wild set of lads, and I find myself wondering how long my head will be in partnership with my body."

"Is the case so serious as that?"

"Aye, it is."

"Then why not withdraw?"

“Ah, that’s easier said than done. When you once shut a spring door on yourself, it isn’t by saying ‘I will’ that you get out. You’ll not have forgotten the first night we met, when you jumped down on my back from the wall of the Grey Friars’ Church?”

“I remember it very distinctly, but which was the more surprised, you or I, I have never yet been able to settle. I know I was very much taken aback.”

“Not so much as I,” interrupted the cobbler dryly, “when you came plump on my shoulders.”

“I was going to say,” went on Ballengeich, “that I’m afraid my explanation about taking a short cut was rather incoherent.”

“Oh, no more than mine, that I was there to catch a thief. It was none of my business to learn why you were in the kirkyard.”

“By the way, did you ever hear any more of the thief you were after?”

“That’s just the point I am coming to. The man we were after was his youthful majesty, James the Fifth, of Scotland.”

“What, the king!” exclaimed the amazed laird.

“Just him, and no other,” replied the cobbler, “and very glad I am that the ploy miscarried, although I fear it’s to come on again.”

“I never heard the like of this!”

“You may well say that. You see it is known that the king in disguise visits a certain house, for what purpose his majesty will be able to tell you better than I. He goes unattended and secretly, and this gives us our chance.”

“But what in the name of the god of fools whoever he happens to be, would you do with Jamie once you got him?”

“Deed there’s many things that might be mended in this country, as you very well know, and the king can mend them if he likes, with a word. Now rather than have his throat cut, our leader thinks he will agree to reasonable reform.”

“And supposing he doesn’t agree, are you going to cut his throat?”

“I don’t know what would happen if he proved stubborn. The moderate section is just for locking him by somewhere until he listens to wisdom.”

“And it is in your mind that my house should become a prison for the king?”

“It seems to me worth considering.”

“There seems to me very little worth considering in the matter. It is a mad scheme. Supposing the king promised under compulsion, what would be his first action the moment he returned to Stirling Castle? He would scour the country for you, and your heads would come off one by one like buttons from an old coat.”

“That’s what I said. ‘Trust the word of a Stuart,’ says I, ‘it’s pure nonsense!’”

“Oh I’m not sure but the word of a Stuart is as good as the word of any other man,” replied Ballengeich with a ring of anger in his voice, at which the cobbler looked up surprised.

“You’re not such an enemy of the king as you let on at first,” commented the mender of shoes. “I doubt if I should have told you all this.”

“Have no fear. I can pledge you that my word is as good as a Stuart’s at least.”

“I hope it’s a good deal better.”

“Your plan is not only useless, but dangerous, my friend. I told you I would give you my advice, and now you have it. Do you think James is a lad that you can tie to your bench stool here, lock your door, and expect to find him when you came back? You must remember that James has been in captivity before, when the Earl of Angus thought he had him secure in the stronghold of Falkland, and yet, Jamie, who was then but a lad of sixteen, managed to escape. Man Flemming, I must tell you about that some day.”

“Tell me about what?” inquired the shoemaker.

“Oh well, it may not be true after all,” said young Ballengeich in confusion, “but a friend of mine was gardener at Falkland and knew the whole story about James’s escape. Never mind that; my advice to you is to shake hands with all such schemes, and turn your back on them.”

“Oh, that’s soon said,” cried the cobbler with some impatience. “‘Keep out of the fire and ye’ll not be burnt,’ says the branch on the tree to the faggot on the woodman’s back. You see, Ballengeich, in this matter I’m between the cart-wheel and the hard road. My head’s off if this ploy miscarries, as you’ve just told me, and my throat’s cut if I withdraw from the secret conclave. It’s but a choice between two hashings. There’s a dead cobbler in any event.”

“I see your difficulty,” said the laird; “do you want to be helped out of it?”

“Does the toad want to get from under the harrow?”

“When is your next meeting, and where?”

“The meetings are held in this room, and the next will be on Wednesday night at eleven o’clock.”

“Bless my soul!” cried Ballengeich. “Would nothing content you but to drink the whole bucketful? The rendezvous in your shop! Then whoever escapes, your head’s on a pike.”

“Aye,” murmured the shoemaker dismally.

“It isn’t taking very many of you to overturn the House of Stuart,” said the laird, looking about the room, which was small.

“There’s just one less than a dozen,” replied the cobbler.

“Then we’ll make up the number to the even twelve, hoping good luck will attend us, for we will be as many as the Apostles. Between now and Wednesday you might confer with your leaders, Flemming. Tell them you know a young man you can trust, who owns exactly the kind of house that James can be kept fast in, if he is captured. Say that your new conspirator will take the oath, or anything else they like to give, and add, what is more to the purpose, that he has a plot of his own which differs from theirs, in giving at least as much chance of success, and possesses the additional advantage of being safe. Whether his plan miscarries or not, there will be no need to fear a reprisal, and that is much to say in its favour.”

“It is everything in its favour,” said the shoemaker with a sigh of relief.

“Very well, then, I will meet you here on Wednesday night at this time, and learn whether or no they agree to have me as one of their number. If they refuse, there’s no harm done; I shall say nothing, and the king will know no more about the matter than he does now.”

“I could not ask better assurance than that,” said the host cordially as his guest rose.

They shook hands, and the guidman of Ballengeich, after peering out into the darkness to see that the way was clear, took his leave.

The laird was prompt in keeping his appointment on the following Wednesday, and learned that the conspirators were glad of his assistance. The cobbler’s tool-box had been pushed out of the way, and a makeshift table, composed of three boards and two trestles, occupied the centre of the room. A bench made up in similar fashion ran along the back wall, and there were besides, half a dozen stools. A hospitable pitcher of strong drink stood on the rude table, with a few small measures, cups and horns.

As if the weight of conspiracy had lain heavy on his shoulders, the young Laird of Ballengeich seemed older than he had ever looked before. Lines of care marked his brow, and his distraught manner proclaimed the plot-monger new to a dangerous business. The lights, however, were dim, and Ballengeich doubted if any there present would recognise him should they meet him in broad day, and this, in a measure, was comforting. The cobbler sat very quiet on his accustomed bench, the others occupying the stools and the board along the wall.

“We have been told,” began the leader, who filled the chair at the head of the table, where he had administered the oath with much solemnity to their new member, “we have been told that you own a house which you will place at our disposal should the purpose for which we are gathered here together, succeed.”

“I have such a house,” said the laird, “and it is of course, placed freely at your service. But the plan you propose is so full of danger that I wondered if you have given the project the deep consideration it deserves. It will be a hazardous undertaking to get the king safely into my house, but let us suppose that done. How are you going to keep him there?”

“We will set a guard over him.”

“Very good. Which of you are to be the guardsmen, and how many?”

The conspirators looked one at another, but none replied. At last the leader said, —

“It will be time to settle that when we have him safely under bolt.”

“Pardon me, not so. The time to arrange all things is now. Everything must be cut and dried, or failure is certain. The moment the king is missing the country will be scoured for him. There will be no possible place of refuge for miles round that will not be searched for the missing monarch. We will suppose that four of you are guarding the king, two and two, turn about. What are the four, and myself, to say to the king’s soldiers when they demand entrance to my house?”

“The king is but a boy, and when he sees death or compliance before him he will accede to our demands.”

“He is a boy, it is true,” agreed the laird, “but he is a boy, as I pointed out to my friend Flemming, who escaped from the clutches of the Earl of Angus, out of the stronghold of Falkland Palace, and who afterwards drove the earl and many of the Douglas leaders into English exile. That is the kind of boy you have to deal with. Suppose then, he gives consent to all you place before him? Do you think he will keep his word?”

“I doubt it,” said the cobbler, speaking for the first time. “The word of a Stuart is not worth the snap of my finger.”

“On the other hand, if he does not accede,” continued Ballengeich, “what are we to do with him?”

“Cut his throat,” replied the leader decisively.

“No, no,” cried several others, and for a moment there was a clamour of discussion, all speaking at once, while the laird stood silently regarding the vociferous disputants. Finally their leader said, —

“What better plan have you to propose?”

“The king is a boy,” spoke up Ballengeich, “as you have said.” At the sound of his voice instant silence reigned. “But he is a boy, as I have told you, extremely difficult to handle with violence. I propose then to approach him peaceably. The fact that he is a boy, or a very young man at least, implies that his mind will be more impressionable than that of an older person whose ideas are set. I propose then that a deputation wait upon his majesty and place before him the evils that require remedying, being prepared to answer any question he may ask regarding the method of their amendment. If peaceable means fail, then try violence, say I, but it is hardly fair to the young man to approach him at the beginning of his reign with a dirk in the hand. His answer would likely be a reference to his headsman; that is a favourite Stuart mode of argument. I have some friends about the castle,” continued the laird. “I supply them with various necessities from the farm; and if I do say it myself, I am well thought of by some in authority. I can guarantee you, I am sure, a safe conduct for your mission.”

“But if safe conduct be refused?” said the leader.

“In that case, no harm’s done. I shall divulge the names of none here present, for indeed I know the name of none, except of my friend the cobbler.”

“Will you head the delegation, and be its spokesman?”

“No. My power to serve you lies in the fact that I am well thought of in the palace. This power would be instantly destroyed were I known as disaffected. I would put it on this basis. My friend, Flemming, is the spokesman of ten others who have grievances to place before his majesty. Therefore, as a matter of friendship between Flemming and myself, I ask safe conduct for the eleven.”

“Indeed,” cried the cobbler, “I wish you would leave my name out of the affair, since no one else seems eager to put his own forward.”

“I put mine forward in making the request,” said Ballengeich.

“Aye, but not as one of the deputation.”

“Very well,” agreed the laird in an offhand manner, “if you make a point of it, I have no objection to saying that I shall make one of the concert. I only proposed to keep out of it, because it is always wise to have an unbiased person to put in his word at a critical moment, and it seems to me important to have such a person on the outside. But it shall be exactly as you please; I care little one way or the other. I have made my proposal, and with you rests the acceptance or the rejection of it. If you think it safer to kidnap a king than to have a friendly chat with him, amicably arranged beforehand, then all I can say is, that I don’t in the least agree with you. Please yourselves; please yourselves. We have but one neck apiece, and surely we can risk it in the manner that brings us most content.”

“There is wisdom in what the laird says,” cried one of the more moderate party. “I never liked the kidnapping idea.”

“Nor I,” said the cobbler. “It was but a wild Hielan’ notion.”

“My project has this advantage,” continued Ballengeich with nonchalant impartiality, “that if it does not succeed, you can then fall back upon abduction. Nothing in this proposal interferes with the ultimate carrying out of your first plan.”

“It is putting our heads in the lion’s mouth,” objected the leader, but in the discussion that followed he was outvoted. Then came the choosing of the delegates, on which rock the enterprise was nearly wrecked, for there seemed to be no anxiety on the part of any four present to form the committee of expostulation which was to meet the monarch. At last it was decided that all should go, if Ballengeich could produce a written safe-conduct signed by the king, which would include eleven persons.

Within three days this document was placed in the hands of the cobbler by Ballengeich, who told him that it had been signed that morning. And he added that the king had expressed himself as well pleased to receive a deputation of his loyal subjects.

The cobbler handled the passport gingerly, as if he were not altogether assured of its potency to protect him.

“The conference is for Wednesday at midday,” said Ballengeich. “Assemble some minutes before that hour in the courtyard of the castle, and you will be conducted to the Presence.”

“Wednesday!” echoed the cobbler, his face turning pale. “Why Wednesday, the day of our weekly meetings? Did you suggest it?”

“It was the king’s suggestion, of course,” replied Ballengeich. “It is merely a coincidence, and is, I think, a good omen.”

“I wish I were sure of it,” moaned the cobbler.

Before the bell rang twelve the conspirators were gathered together in the courtyard of Castle Stirling; huddled would perhaps be the more accurate word, for they were eleven very frightened men. More than one cast longing looks towards the gate by which they had come in, but some places are easier to enter than to leave, and the portal was well guarded by stalwart soldiers.

As the bell slowly tolled twelve, an official came from the palace into the courtyard, searched the delegation for concealed weapons, and curtly commanded them to follow him. Climbing the stone stairway they were ushered into a large room containing a long oaken table with five chairs on one side and six on the other. At the head of the table was a high-backed seat resembling a throne. The official left them standing there alone, and after he had closed the door they heard the ominous sound of bolts being thrust into their places. The silence which followed seemed oppressive; almost suffocating. No man spoke, but each stood like a statue holding his cap in his hand. At last the tension was broken, but it would scarcely be correct to say that it was relieved. The heavy curtains parted and the king entered

the room, clad in the imposing robes of his high state. A frown was on his brow, and he advanced straight from the doorway to the throne at the head of the table, without speaking or casting a glance at any one of the eleven. When he had seated himself he said gruffly, —

“There is a chair for each of you; sit down.”

It is doubtful if any of the company, except the cobbler, at first recognised their ruler as the alleged Laird of Ballengeich; but at the sound of the monarch’s voice several started and looked anxiously one at another. Again the king addressed them, —

“A week ago to-night I met you in Flemming’s room. I appointed this day for the conference that the routine of your meetings might not be disturbed, as I thought it well that the last of your rebellious gatherings should be held in the Castle of Stirling, for I am resolved that this conclave shall be your final effort in treason. One of your number has stated that the word of a Stuart is not to be trusted. This reputation appears to have descended to me, and it is a pity I should not take advantage of it.”

When the king ceased speaking he lifted a small mallet and smote a resounding bell, which was on the table before him. A curtain parted and two men entered bearing between them a block covered with black cloth; this they placed silently in the centre of the floor and withdrew. Again the king smote the bell and there entered a masked executioner with a gleaming axe over his shoulder. He took his place beside the block, resting the head of his axe on the floor.

“This,” continued the king, “is the entertainment I have provided for you. Each of you shall taste of that,” and he pointed to the heading block.

The cobbler rose unsteadily to his feet, drawing from his bosom with trembling fingers the parchment bearing the king’s signature. He moistened his dry lips with his tongue, then spoke in a low voice.

“Sir,” he said, “we are here under safe conduct from the king.”

“Safe conduct to where?” cried James angrily, “that is the point. I stand by the document; read it; read it!”

“Sir, it says safe conduct for eleven men here present, under protection of your royal word.”

“You do not keep to the point, cobbler,” shouted the king bringing his fist down on the table. “Safe conduct to where? I asked. The parchment does not say safe conduct back into Stirling again. Safe conduct to Heaven, or elsewhere, was what I guaranteed.”

“That is but an advocate’s quibble, your majesty. Safe conduct is a phrase well understood by high and low alike. But we have placed our heads in the lion’s mouth, as our leader said last Wednesday night, and we cannot complain if now his jaws are shut. Nevertheless I would respectfully submit to your majesty that I alone of those present doubted a Stuart’s word, and am like to have my doubts practically confirmed. I would also point out to your majesty that my comrades would not have been here had I not trusted the Master of Ballengeich, and through him the king, therefore, I ask you to let me alone pay the penalty of my error, and allow my friends to go scatheless from the grim walls of Stirling.”

“There is reason in what you say,” replied the king. “Are you all agreed to that?” he asked of the others.

“No, by God,” cried the leader springing to his feet and smiting the table with his fist as lustily as the king had done. “We stand together, or fall together. The mistake was ours as much as his, and we entered these gates with our eyes open.”

“Headsman,” said the king, “do your duty.”

The headsman whipped off the black cloth and displayed underneath it a box containing a large jug surrounded by eleven drinking-horns. Those present, all now on their feet, glanced with amazement from the masked man to the king. The sternness had vanished from his majesty’s face, as if a dark cloud had passed from the sun and allowed it to shine again. There sparkled in the king’s eye all the jubilant mischief of the incorrigible boy, and his laughter rang to the ceiling. Somewhat recovering his gravity he stretched out his hand and pointed a finger at the cobbler.

“I frightened you, Flemming,” he cried. “I frightened you; don’t deny it. I’ll wager my gold crown against a weaver’s woollen bonnet, I frightened the whole eleven of you.”

“Indeed,” said the cobbler with an uneasy laugh, “I shall be the first to admit it.”

“Your face was as white as a harvest moon in mid-sky, and I heard somebody’s teeth chatter. Now the drink we have had at our meetings heretofore was vile, and no more fitted for a Christian throat than is the headsman’s axe; but if you ever tasted anything better than this, tell me where to get a hogshead of it.”

The headsman having filled their horns, the leader raised the flagon above his head and said, —

“I give you the toast of The King!”

“No, no,” proclaimed the boyish monarch, “I want to drink this myself. I’ll give you a toast. May there never come a time when a Scotchman is afraid to risk his head for what he thinks is right.”

And this toast they drank together.

The King Dines

“When kings frown, courtiers tremble,” said Sir Donald Sinclair to the Archbishop of St. Andrews, “but in Stirling the case seems reversed. The courtiers frown, and the king looks anxiously towards them.”

“Indeed,” replied the prelate, “that may well be. When a man invites a company to dine with him, and then makes the discovery that his larder is empty, there is cause for anxiety, be he king or churl. In truth my wame’s beginning to think my throat’s cut.” And the learned churchman sympathetically smoothed down that portion of his person first named, whose rounded contour gave evidence that its owner was accustomed to ample rations regularly served.

“Ah well,” continued Sir Donald, “his youthful majesty’s foot is hardly in the stirrup yet, and I’m much mistaken in the glint of his eye and the tint of his beard, if once he is firmly in the saddle the horse will not feel the prick of the spur, should it try any tricks with him.”

“Scotland would be none the worse of a firm king,” admitted the archbishop, glancing furtively at the person they were discussing, “but James has been so long under the control of others that it will need some force of character to establish a will of his own. I doubt he is but a nought posing as a nine,” concluded his reverence in a lower tone of voice.

“I know little of mathematics,” said Sir Donald, “but yet enough to tell me that a nought needs merely a flourish to become a nine, and those nines among us who think him a nought, may become noughts should he prove a nine. There’s a problem in figures for you, archbishop, with a warning at the end of it, like the flourish at the tail of the nine.”

The young man to whom they referred, James, the fifth of that name, had been pacing the floor a little distance from the large group of hungry men who were awaiting their dinner with some impatience. Now and then the king paused in his perambulation, and gazed out of a window overlooking the courtyard, again resuming his disturbed march when his brief scrutiny was completed. The members of the group talked in whispers, one with another, none too well pleased at being kept waiting for so important a function as a meal.

Suddenly there was a clatter of horse’s hoofs in the courtyard. The king turned once more to the window, glanced a moment at the commotion below, then gave utterance to an exclamation of annoyance, his right hand clenching angrily. Wheeling quickly to the guards at the door he cried, —

“Bring the chief huntsman here at once, and a prod in the back with a pike may make up for his loitering in the courtyard.”

The men, who stood like statues with long axes at the doorway, made no move; but two soldiers, sitting on a bench outside, sprang to their feet and ran clattering down the stair. They returned presently with the chief huntsman, whom they projected suddenly into the room with a violence little to the woodman’s taste, for he neglected to remove his bonnet in the royal presence, and so far forgot himself as to turn his head when he recovered his equilibrium, roundly cursing those who had made a projectile of him.

“Well, woodlander!” cried the king, his stern voice ringing down again from the lofty rafters of the great hall. “Are there no deer in my forests of the north?”

“Deer in plenty, your majesty,” answered the fellow with a mixture of deference and disrespect, which in truth seemed to tinge the manners of all present. “There are deer in the king’s forest, and yet a lack of venison in the king’s larder!”

“What mean you by that, you scoundrel?” exclaimed the king, a flush overspreading his face, ruddy as his beard. “Have your marksmen lost their skill with bow and arrow, that you return destitute to the castle?”

“The marksmen are expert as ever, your majesty, and their arrows fly as unerringly to their billet, but in these rude times, your majesty, the sting of an arrow may not be followed by the whetting of a butcher’s knife.”

The king took an impatient step forward, then checked himself. One or two among the group of noblemen near the door laughed, and there was a ripple of suppressed merriment over the whole company. At first the frown on the king’s brow deepened, and then as suddenly it cleared away, as a puff of wind scatters the mist from the heights of Stirling. When the king spoke again it was in a calm, even voice. “As I understand you, there was no difficulty in capturing the deer, but you encountered some obstacle between the forest and Stirling which caused you to return empty-handed. I hope you have not added the occupation of itinerant flesher to the noble calling of forest huntsman?”

“Indeed, your majesty,” replied the unabashed hunter, “the profession of flesher was forced upon me. The deer we had slaughtered found it impossible to win by the gates of Arnprior.”

“Ah! John Buchanan then happened to need venison as you passed?”

“Your majesty has hit the gold there. Buchanan not only needed it but took it from us.”

“Did you inform him that your cargo was intended for the larder of the king?”

“I told him that in so many words, your majesty; and he replied that if James was king in Stirling, John was king in Kippen, and having the shorter name, he took the shorter method of supplying his kitchen.”

“Made you any effort to defend your gear?”

“Truth to say, your majesty, that were a useless trial. The huntsman who will face the deer thinks no shame to turn his back on the wild boar, and Buchanan, when he demanded your majesty’s venison, was well supported by a number of mad caterans with drawn swords in their hands, who had made up for a lack of good meat with a plentitude of strong drink. Resistance was futile, and we were fain to take the bannock that was handed to us, even though the ashes were upon it. Ronald of the Hills, a daft Heilan’man who knew no better, drew an arrow to his ear and would have pinned Buchanan to his own gate, resulting in the destruction of us all, had I not, with my stave, smote the weapon from his hand. Then the mad youth made such to-do that we had just to tie him up and bring him to Stirling on the horse’s back like a sack of fodder.”

“Your caution does credit to your Lowland breeding, Master huntsman, and the conduct of Ronald cannot be too severely condemned. Bring him here, I beg of you, that he may receive the king’s censure.”

Ronald was brought in, a wild, unkempt figure, his scanty dress disordered, bearing witness to the struggle in which he had but lately been engaged. His elbows were pinioned behind him, and his shock of red hair stood out like a heather broom. He scowled fiercely at the huntsman, and that cautious individual edged away from him, bound as he was.

“By my beard! as the men of the heathen East swear,” said the king, “his hair somewhat matches my own in hue. Ronald, what is the first duty of a huntsman?”

“He speaks only the Gaelic, your majesty,” explained the royal ranger.

“You have the Gaelic, MacNeish,” continued the king, addressing one of his train. “Expound to him, I beg of you, my question. What is the first duty of a huntsman?”

MacNeish, stepping forward, put the question in Gaelic and received Ronald’s reply.

“He says, your majesty, that a huntsman’s first duty is to kill the game he is sent for.”

“Quite right,” and the king nodded approval. “Ask him if he knows as well the second duty of a huntsman.”

Ronald’s eye flashed as he gave his answer with a vehemence that caused the chief huntsman to move still farther away from him.

“He says, your majesty,” translated MacNeish, “that the second duty of a huntsman is to cut the throat of any cateran who presumes to interfere with the progress of the provender from the forest to his master’s kitchen.”

“Right again,” cried the king, smiting his thigh, “and an answer worthy of all commendation. Tell him this, MacNeish, that hereafter he is the chief huntsman to the Castle of Stirling. We will place this cowardly hellion in the kitchen where he will be safe from the hungry frenzy of a Buchanan, drunk or sober.”

“But, your majesty – ” protested the deposed ranger.

“To the kitchen with him!” sternly commanded the king. “Strip off the woodlander’s jacket he has disgraced and tie round him the strings of a scullion’s apron, which will suit his middle better than the belt of a sword.” Then the king, flashing forth his own weapon and stepping aside, swung it over the head of the Highlander, who stood like a statue in spite of the menace, and the sword came down with a deft accuracy which severed the binding cords without touching the person of the prisoner, freeing him at a stroke. A murmur of admiration at the dexterity of the king went up from the assemblage, every member of which was himself an expert with the weapon. The freed Highlander raised his brawny arms above his head and gave startling vent to the war-cry of his clan, “Loch Sloy! Loch Sloy!” unmindful of the presence in which he stood. Then he knelt swiftly and brought his lips to the buckle of the king’s shoe.

“Gratitude in a MacFarlane!” sneered MacNeish.

“Aye,” said the king, “and bravery too, for he never winked an eyelash when the sword swung above him; an admirable combination of qualities whether in a MacFarlane or a MacNeish. And now, gentlemen,” continued his majesty, “although the affair of the huntsman is settled, it brings us no nearer our venison. If the cook will not to the king, then must the king to the cook. Gentlemen, to your arms and your horses! They say a Scotsman fights well when he is hungry; let us put the proverb to the test. We ride and dine with his majesty of Kippen.”

A spontaneous cheer burst from every man in the great hall to the accompaniment of a rattle of swords. Most of those present were more anxious to follow the king to a contest than into a council chamber. When silence ensued, the mild voice of the archbishop, perhaps because it was due to his profession, put in a seasonable word; and the nobles scowled for they knew he had great influence with the king.

“Your majesty, if the Buchanans are drunk – ”

“If they are drunk, my lord archbishop,” interrupted James, “we will sober them. ’Tis a duty even the Church owes to the inebriate.” And with that he led the way out of the hall, his reply clearing the brows of his followers.

A few minutes later a clattering cavalcade rode forth from the Castle of Stirling, through the town and down the path of Ballengeich, a score of soldiers bringing up the tail of the procession; and in due time the company came to the entrance of Arnprior Castle. There seemed like to be opposition at the gate, but Sir Donald, spurring his horse forward among the guard, scattered the members of it right and left, and, raising both voice and sword, shouted, —

“The king! The king! Make way for the King of Scotland!”

The defenders seeing themselves outnumbered, as the huntsmen had been in that locality a short time before, gave up their axes to the invaders as meekly as the royal rangers had given up their venison.

The king placed his own guard at the gate. Springing from his horse he entered the castle door, and mounted the stone steps, sword in hand, his retinue close at his heels. The great hall to which they ascended was no monk’s chapel of silence. There was wafted to them, or rather blown down upon them like a fierce hurricane, the martial strains of “Buchanan for ever,” played by pipers anything but scant of wind; yet even this tornado was not sufficient to drown the roar of human voices, some singing, others apparently in the heat of altercation, and during the height of this deafening clamour the king and his followers entered the dining-hall practically unobserved.

On the long oaken table, servitors were busily placing smoking viands soon to be consumed; others were filling the drinking-horns, while some of the guests were engaged in emptying them,

although the meal had not yet begun. Buchanan, his back towards the incomers, his brawny hands on the table, leaning forward, was shouting to the company, commanding his guests to seat themselves and fall to while the venison was hot. There seemed to be several loud voiced disputes going on regarding precedence. The first intimation that the bellowing laird had of the intruder's presence was the cold touch of steel on his bare neck. He sprang round as if a wasp had stung him, his right hand swinging instinctively to the hilt of his sword, but the point of another was within an inch of his throat, and his hand fell away from his weapon.

"The fame of your hospitality has spread abroad, Buchanan," spoke the clear voice of the king, "so we have come to test its quality."

The pipers had stopped in their march, and with the ceasing of the music, the wind from the bags escaped to the outer air with a long wailing groan. The tumult of discussion subsided, and all eyes turned towards the speaker, some of the guests hastily drawing swords but returning them again to the scabbards when they saw themselves confronted by the king. Buchanan steadied himself with his back against the table, and in the sudden silence it seemed long ere he found his tongue. At last he said, —

"Does the king come as a guest with a drawn sword in his hand?"

"As you get north of Stirling, Buchanan," replied James with a smile, "it is customary to bring the knife with you when you go out to dine. But I am quite in agreement with the Laird of Arnprior in thinking the sword an ill ornament in a banqueting-hall, therefore bestow your weapons on Sir Donald here, and command your clan now present to disarm."

With visible reluctance Buchanan divested himself of sword and dirk, and his comrades, now stricken dumb, followed his example. The weapons were thrown together in a corner of the hall where some of the king's soldiers stood guard over them. His majesty's prediction regarding the sobering effect of his advent was amply fulfilled. The disarmed men looked with dismay on one another, for they knew that such a prelude might well have its grand finale at the block or the gibbet. The king, although seemingly in high spirits, was an unknown quantity, and before now there had been those in power who, with a smile on their lips, had sent doomed men to a scaffold.

"In intercepting my venison, Buchanan," continued the king with the utmost politeness, "you were actuated by one of two motives. Your intervention was either an insult to the king, or it was an intimation that you desired to become his cook. In which light am I to view your action, Buchanan?"

There was in the king's voice a sinister ring as he uttered this sentence that belied the smile upon his lips, and apprehension deepened as all present awaited Buchanan's reply. At the word "cook," he had straightened himself, and a deeper flush than the wine had left there, overspread his countenance; now he bowed with deference and said, —

"It has ever been my ambition to see your majesty grace with his presence my humble board."

"I was sure of it," cried James with a hearty laugh which brought relief to the anxious hearts of many standing before him. The king thrust his sword into a scabbard, and, with a clangour of hilt on iron, those behind him followed his example.

"And now," cried James, "let the king's men eat while the laird's men wait upon them. And as for you, John Buchanan, it is to-day my pleasure that you have the honour of being my cup-bearer."

Whether the honour thus thrust upon the Laird of Arnprior was as much to his liking as an invitation to sit down with his guest would have been, is questionable, but he served his majesty with good grace, and the king was loud in his praise of the venison, although his compliments fell sadly on the ears of the hungry men who watched it disappear so rapidly. At the end of the feast James rose with his flagon in his hand.

"I give you the king," he cried, "the King of Kippen. When I left Stirling I had made up my mind that there could be but one king in a country, but glorious Scotland shall have no such restriction, and I bestow upon Buchanan, whose ample cheer we have done justice to, the title of King of Kippen, so long as he does not fall into the error of supposing that Kippen includes all of Scotland, instead of

Scotland including Kippen. And so, Laird of Arnprior, King of Kippen, we drink your good health, and when next my venison passes your door, take only that portion of it which bears the same relation to the whole, as the district of Kippen does to broad Scotland.”

The toast was drunk with cheers, and when silence came, the King of Kippen, casting a rueful glance along the empty board, said, —

“I thank your majesty for your good wishes, but in truth the advice you give will be hard to follow, for I see I should have stolen twice the quantity of venison I did, because as I have not done so, I and my men are like to go hungry.”

And thus Buchanan came into his title of King of Kippen, although he had to wait some time for his dinner on the day he acquired the distinction.

The King's Tryst

The king ruled. There was none to question the supremacy of James the Fifth. At the age of twenty-two he now sat firmly on his throne. He was at peace with England, friendly with France, and was pledged to take a wife from that country. His great grandfather, James the Second, had crushed the Black Douglas, and he himself had scattered the Red Douglas to exile. No Scottish noble was now powerful enough to threaten the stability of the throne. The country was contented and prosperous, so James might well take his pleasure as best pleased him. If any danger lurked near him it was unseen and unthought of.

The king, ever first in the chase, whether the quarry ran on four legs or on two, found himself alone on the road leading north-west from Stirling, having outstripped his comrades in their hunt of the deer. Evening was falling and James being some miles from Stirling Castle, raised his bugle to his lips to call together his scattered followers, but before a blast broke the stillness, his majesty was accosted by a woman who emerged suddenly and unnoticed from the forest on his left hand.

"My lord, the king;" she said, and her voice, like the sound of silver bells, thrilled with a note of inquiry.

"Yes, my lassie," answered the young man, peering down at his questioner, lowering his bugle, and reining in his frightened horse, which was startled by the sudden apparition before him. The dusk had not yet so far thickened but the king could see that his interlocutor was young and strikingly beautiful. Although dressed in the garb of the lower orders, there was a quiet and imposing dignity in her demeanour as she stood there by the side of the road. Her head was uncovered, the shawl she wore over it having slipped down to her shoulders, and her abundant hair, unknotted and unribboned, was ruddy as spun gold. Her complexion was dazzlingly fair, her eyes of the deepest blue, and her features perfection, except that her small mouth showed a trifle too much firmness, a quality which her strong but finely moulded chin corroborated and emphasised. The king, ever a connoisseur of womanly loveliness, almost held his breath as he gazed down upon the comely face upturned to him.

"They told me at Stirling," she said, "that you were hunting through this district, and I have been searching for you in the forest."

"Good heavens, girl!" cried the king; "have you walked all the way from Stirling?"

"Aye, and much further. It is nothing, for I am accustomed to it. And now I crave a word with your majesty."

"Surely, surely!" replied the king with enthusiasm, no thought of danger in this unconventional encounter even occurring to him. The natural prudence of James invariably deserted him where a pretty woman was concerned. Now, instead of summoning his train, he looked anxiously up and down the road listening for any sound of his men, but the stillness seemed to increase with the darkness, and the silence was profound, not even the rustle of a leaf disturbing it.

"And who, my girl, are you?" continued the king, noticing that her eyes followed his glance up and down the road with some trace of apprehension in them, and that she hesitated to speak.

"May it please your gracious majesty, I am humble tirewoman to that noble lady, Margaret Stuart, your honoured mother."

The king gave a whistle of astonishment.

"My mother!" he exclaimed. "Then what in the name of Heaven are you doing here and alone, so far from Methven?"

"We came from Methven yesterday to her ladyship's castle of Doune."

"Then her ladyship must have come to a very sudden resolution to travel, for the constable of Doune is in my hunting-party, and I'll swear he expected no visitors."

"My gracious lady did not wish Stuart the constable to expect her, nor does she now desire his knowledge of her presence in the castle. She commanded me to ask your majesty to request the

constable to remain in Stirling, where, she understands, he spends most of his time. She begs your majesty to come to her with all speed and secrecy.”

“I wonder what is wrong now?” mused the king. “I have not heard from her for nearly a year. She has quarrelled with her third husband, I suppose, for the Tudors are all daft where matrimony is concerned.”

“What does your majesty say?” asked the girl.

“I was speaking to myself rather than to you, but I may add that I am ready to go anywhere if you are to be my guide. Lend me your hand and spring up here behind me. We will gallop to Doune at once.”

The young woman drew back a step or two.

“No, no,” she said. “The Lady Margaret is most anxious that your visit should be unknown to any but herself, so she begs you to dismiss your followers and lay your commands upon Constable Stuart of Doune.”

“But my followers are all of them old enough to look after themselves,” objected the king, “and the constable is not likely to leave Stirling where he has remained these many months.”

“The Lady Margaret thought,” persisted the girl, “that if your retinue returned to Stirling and learned of your continued absence, anxiety would ensue, and a search might be undertaken that would extend to Doune.”

“How did my lady mother know I was hunting when you could not have learned of my excursion until you reached Stirling?” asked the king, with a glimmer of that caution which appeared to have deserted him.

The girl seemed somewhat nonplussed by the question, but she answered presently with quiet deliberation, —

“Her ladyship was much perturbed and feared I should not find you at the castle. She gave me various instructions, which she trusted I could accommodate to varying contingencies.”

“My girl,” said the king leaning towards her, “you do not speak like a serving-maid. What is your name?”

“I have been a gentlewoman, sire,” she answered simply, “but women, alas, cannot control their fortunes. My name is Catherine. I will now forward to Doune, and wait for you at the further side of the new bridge the tailor has built over the Teith. If you will secure your horse somewhere before coming to the river, and meet me there on foot, I will conduct you to the castle. Will you come?”

“Of a surety,” cried the king, in a tone that left no doubt of his intentions. “I shall overtake you long before you are at the bridge!” As he said this the girl fled away in the darkness, and then he raised his bugle to his lips and blew a blast that speedily brought answering calls.

James’s unexplained absences were so frequent that his announcement of an intention not to return home that night caused no surprise among his company; so, bidding him good-night, they cantered off towards Stirling, while he, unaccompanied, set his face to the north-west, and his spurs to the horse’s flanks, but his steed was already tired out and could not now keep pace with his impatience. To his disappointment, he did not overtake the girl, but found her waiting for him at the new bridge, and together they walked the short half mile to the castle. The young man was inclined to be conversational, but the girl made brief replies and finally besought his silence.

The night had proved exceedingly dark, and they were almost at the castle before its huge bulk loomed blackly before them. There was something so sinister in its dim, grim contour that for the first time since he set out on this night adventure, a suspicion that he was acting unwisely crossed the king’s mind.

Still, he meditated, it was his mother’s own castle, the constable of which was a warm friend of his – almost, as one might say, a relative, for Stuart was the younger brother of his mother’s husband, so what could be amiss with this visit?

“You are not taking me to the main entrance,” he whispered.

“No, to the postern door.”

“But the postern door is situated in the wall high above my reach; it is intended for the exit of a possible messenger during a siege and not for the entrance of a guest.”

“I am acting in accordance with my instructions,” replied the girl. “A rope ladder descends from the postern door.”

“A rope ladder! that sounds promising; will you ascend it?”

“Yes, sire, but meanwhile, I implore your majesty to be silent.”

The king said no more until the rope ladder was in his hand.

“I hope it is strong,” he murmured.

Then he mounted lightly up in the darkness, until he stood on the sill of the narrow doorway, when he reached forward his hand to assist his slower comrade in mounting, but she sprang past him without availing herself of his aid. In a low voice she begged pardon for preceding him. Then walked up and up a winding stone staircase, on whose steps there was barely room for two to pass each other. She pushed open a door and allowed some light to stream through on the turret stair, which disappeared in the darkness still further aloft.

The king found himself in a large square apartment either on the first or second story. It appeared in some sort to be a lady’s boudoir, for the benches were cushioned and comfortable, and there were evidences, about on small tables, of tapestry work and other needle employment recently abandoned.

“Will your majesty kindly be seated,” said the girl. “I must draw up the ladder, close the postern door, and then inform my lady that you are here.”

She went out by the way they had entered and shut the door with a force that seemed to the king unnecessary, but he caught his breath an instant later as his quick ear seemed to tell him that a bolt had fallen. He rose at once, tried to open the door, and discovered it was indeed barred on the outside. One other exit remained to be tested; a larger door evidently communicating with another room or passage; that also he found locked. He returned to the middle of the room and stood there for a few moments with knitted brow.

“Trapped, Jamie, my lad! Trapped!” he muttered to himself. “Now what object can my mother have in this? Does she expect by such childish means to resume her authority over me? Does she hope that her third husband shall rule Scotland in my name as did her second, with me a prisoner? By Saint Andrew, no!”

The king seized a bench, raised it over his head and crashed it in bits against the larger door with a noise that reverberated through the castle.

“Open!” he cried; “open instantly!”

Then he paused, awaiting the result of his fury. Presently he thought he heard light footsteps coming along the passage and an instant later the huge key turned slowly in the lock. The door opened, and to his amazement he saw standing before him with wide frightened eyes, his guide, but dressed now as a lady.

“Madam,” said the king sternly, “I ask you the meaning of this pleasantry?”

“Pleasantry,” echoed the girl, staring at him with her hand upon a huge iron key, alert to run if this handsome maniac, strewn round by the wreckage of the bench he had broken, attempted to lay hands on her.

“Pleasantry?” she repeated; “that is a question I may well ask you. Who are you, sir, and what are you doing here?”

“Who I am, and what I am doing here, you know very well, because you brought me here. A change of garb does not change a well-remembered face,” and the king bowed to his visitor with a return of his customary courtliness, now that his suspicions were allayed, for he knew how to deal with pretty women. “Madam, there is no queen in Scotland, but you are queen by right of nature, and though you doff your gown, you cannot change your golden crown.”

The girl's hand unconsciously went up to her ruddy hair, while she murmured more to herself than to him, —

“This is some of Catherine's work.”

“Catherine was your name in the forest, my lady, what is your name in the castle?”

“Isabel is my name in castle and forest alike. You have met my twin sister, Catherine. Why has she brought you here?”

“Like an obedient son, I am here at the command of my honourable mother; and your sister — if indeed goddesses so strangely fair, and so strangely similar can be two persons — has gone to acquaint my mother of my arrival.”

The girl's alarm seemed to increase as the king's diminished. Trouble, dismay, and fear marred her perfect face, and as the king scrutinised her more minutely, he saw that the firm mouth and the resolute chin of her sister had no place in the more softened and womanly features of the lady before him.

“Your mother? Who is she?”

“First, Margaret Tudor, daughter of the King of England, second, Margaret Stuart, wife of the King of Scotland, third, Margaret Douglas, ill mate of the Earl of Angus; fourth, and let us hope finally, Margaret Stuart again, spouse of Lord Methven, and owner of this castle.”

The girl swayed as if she would fall, all colour struck suddenly from her face. She leaned, nearly fainting, against the stone wall, passing her hand once or twice across her terror-filled eyes.

“Great God,” she moaned, “do not tell me that you are James, King of Scotland, here, and alone, in this den of Douglasses!”

“Douglas!” cried the king roused at the hated name. “How can there be Douglasses in the Castle of Doune; my mother's house, constabled by my friend, young Stuart.”

“Your mother's house?” said the girl with an uncanny laugh. “When has the Lady Margaret set foot in Doune? Not since she was divorced from my uncle, Archibald Douglas, Earl of Angus! And the constable? Aye, the constable is in Stirling. Doune Castle stands gloomy and alone, but in Stirling with the young king, there are masques, and hunting and gaiety. Young Stuart draws the revenues of his charge, but pays slight attention to the fulfilment of his duty.”

“You are then Isabel Douglas? And now, to echo your own question, how came you here? If this is a den of Douglasses, as you say, how comes my mother's castle to be officered by the enemies of her son?”

“That you ask such a question shows little foresight or knowledge of men. When your first step-father, and my uncle, Archibald Douglas, had control of this castle through your mother's name, he filled it with his own adherents.”

“Naturally; nepotism was a well-known trait of my domineering step-father, which did not add to his popularity in Scotland. Who can get office, or justice against a Douglas? was their cry. But did not young Stuart, when he was made constable, put in his own men?”

“The constable cares nothing for this stronghold so long as it furnishes money which he may spend gaily in Stirling.”

“I see. So you and your sister found refuge among your underlings? and where so safe from search as within the king's mother's own fortress, almost under the shadow of Stirling? An admirable device. Why then do you jeopardise your safety by letting me into the secret?”

The girl sighed deeply with downcast eyes, then she flashed a glance at him which had something in it of the old Douglas hauteur.

“I fear,” she said, “that it is not our safety which is jeopardised.”

“You mean that I am in danger?”

“The same stronghold which gives immunity to a family of the Red Douglasses can hardly be expected to confer security upon James the Fifth, their persecutor.”

“No. Certainly that would be too much to expect. Are you then in this plot against me, my lady?”

"I have not heard of any plot. If there is one I know nothing of it. I merely acquaint you with some hint of my fears."

"Then I charge you as a loyal subject of the lawful king, to guide me from this stronghold, into which I have been cozened by treachery and falsehood."

Catherine, who had entered silently and unnoticed through the smaller door, now stepped forward, drew her sister into the room, took out the huge key, closed the door and locked it, then turned fiercely to the king. Her beautiful white right arm was bare to the elbow, the loose sleeve rolled up, and in her hand she held a dagger. With her back against the newly locked door, she said, —

"I'll be your majesty's guide from this castle, and your perjured soul shall find exit through a postern gate made by my dagger!"

"Oh, Catherine, Catherine," sobbed Isabel, weeping in fear and horror of the situation, "you cannot contemplate so awful a deed, a murder so foul, for however unworthy he may be, he is still the king."

"What is there foul in ridding the world of a reptile such as he? How many innocent lives has he taken to encompass his revenge? How many now of our name are exiled and starving because of his action? I shall strike the blow with greater surety, for in killing him I extinguish his treacherous race."

"No good can come from assassination, Catherine."

"What greater evil can spring from his death than from his life?"

"His killing will not bring back those whom he has slain; it will not cause our banished kinsmen to return. It will be a murder for revenge."

"And not the first in Scotland," said Catherine grimly.

The king had once more seated himself, and now, resting his chin on his open palm, listened to the discussion with the interested bearing of one who had little concern with its result. A half amused smile wreathed his lips, and once or twice he made a motion as if he would intervene, but on second thoughts kept silent.

"Do not attempt this fell deed, dear sister," pleaded Isabel earnestly. "Let us away as we intended. The horses are ready and waiting for us. Our mother is looking for our coming in her room. The night wears on and we must pass Stirling while it is yet dark, so there is no time to be lost. Dear sister, let us quit Scotland, as we purposed, an accursed land to all of our name, but let us quit it with unstained hands."

"Isabel, darling," said Catherine in a low voice that quavered with the emotion caused by her sister's distress and appeal, "what unlucky chance brought you to this fatal door at such a moment? Can you not understand that I have gone too far to retreat? Who, having caged the tiger, dare open again the gate and set him free? If for no other reason, the king must die because he is here and because I brought him here. Open the door behind you, Isabel, go down the circular stair, and at the postern step you will find the rope ladder by which I ascended. Get you to the courtyard and there wait for me, saying nothing."

"Catherine, Catherine, the king will pardon you. He will surely forgive what you have done in exchange for his life."

"Forgiveness!" cried Catherine, her eyes blazing again. "I want no forgiveness from the king of Scotland. Pardon! The tiger would pardon, till once he is free again. The king must die."

"I shall go as you have bid me, Catherine, but not to do your bidding. I shall arouse this castle and prevent an abominable crime."

Catherine laughed harshly.

"Whom would you call to your assistance? Douglasses, Douglasses, Douglasses! How many of your way of thinking will you find in the castle? You know well, one only, and that is our mother, old and helpless. Rouse the castle, Isabel, if you will, and find a dead man, and perhaps a dead sister, when you break in this locked door."

The helpless Isabel sank her head against the wall and burst into a fury of weeping.

“Ladies,” said the king soothingly, rising to his feet, “will you graciously condone my intervention in this dispute? You are discussing an important act, from the commission of which all sentiment should be eliminated; an act which requires the hard strong mind of a man brought to bear upon the pros and cons of its consummation. You are dealing with it entirely from the standpoint of the heart and not of the head, an error common with women, and one that has ever precluded their effective dealing with matters of State. You will pardon me, Lady Isabel, when I say that your sister takes a much more practical view of the situation than you do. She is perfectly right in holding that, having me prisoner here, it is impossible to allow me to go scatheless. There is no greater folly than the folly of half doing a thing.”

“Does your majesty argue in favour of your own murder?” asked Isabel amazed, gazing at the young man through her tears.

“Not so, but still that is a consideration which I must endeavour to eliminate from my mind, if my advice is to be impartial, and of service to you. May I beg of you to be seated? We have the night before us, and may consider the various interesting points at our leisure, and thus no irremediable mistake need be made.”

Isabel, wellnigh exhausted with the intensity of her feelings, sank upon the bench, but Catherine still stood motionless, dagger in hand, her back against the door. The king, seeing she did not intend to obey, went on suavely. There was a light of intense admiration in his eye as he regarded the standing woman.

“Ladies,” he said, “can you tell me when last a King of Scotland – a James also – and a Catherine Douglas bore relation to each other in somewhat similar circumstances?”

The king paused, but the girl, lowering at him, made no reply, and after a few moments the young man went on.

“It was a year more than a century ago, when the life of James the First was not only threatened, but extinguished, not by one brave woman, but by a mob of cowardly assassins. Then Catherine Douglas nearly saved the life of her king. She thrust her fair young arm into the iron loops of a door, and had it shattered by those craven miscreants.”

Isabel wept quietly, her face in her two open hands. But Catherine answered in anger, —

“Why did the Catherine Douglas of that day risk her life to save the king? Because James the First was a just monarch. Why does the Catherine Douglas of to-day wish to thrust her dagger into the false heart of James the Fifth? Because he has turned on the hand that nurtured him — ”

“The hand that imprisoned him, Lady Catherine. Pardon my correction.”

“He turned on the man who governed Scotland wisely and well.”

“Again pardon me; he had no right to govern. I was the king, not Archibald Douglas. But all that is beside the question, and recrimination is as bad as sentiment for clouding cold reason. What I wished to point out is, that assassination of kings or the capture of them very rarely accomplishes its object. James the First was assassinated and as result two Stuarts, two Grahams and two Chamberses were tortured and executed; so his murderers profited little. My grandfather James the Third was carried off by the Boyds, but Sir Alexander Boyd was beheaded and his brother and nephew suffered forfeiture. I think I have shown then that violence is usually futile.”

“Not so,” answered Catherine; “your grandfather was assassinated, and the man who killed him is not known to this day. Your great-grandfather basely murdered the Black Douglas in Stirling, thus breaking his word of honour for he had given Douglas safe conduct, yet he profited by his act and crushed my kinsmen.”

“I see, Lady Catherine, that you are too well versed in history for me to contend with you successfully on that subject,” said the king with a silent laugh. “We will therefore restrict the inquiry to the present case, as wise people should. Tell me then, so that I may be the better able to advise you, what is your true object – revenge and my death, or the wringing from me of concessions for your family?”

"I could not wring concessions from you, because you could not make good those concessions unless I released you. I dare not release you, because I dare not trust you."

"I foresaw your difficulty, and so I told your sister that, having gone so far, you could not retreat. The issue is therefore narrowed down to death, and how it may best be accomplished. You have made the tactical mistake of forewarning me. I cannot understand why you did not mount my horse beside me and stab me in the back as we rode through the forest. Did this not occur to you, Lady Catherine?"

"It did, but there were objections. Your horse would doubtless have escaped me, and would have galloped riderless to Stirling; your body would have been found by break of day, and we but a few hours' march from Stirling. Here I expect you to lie undiscovered in this locked room till we are safe in England."

"That is clear reasoning," commented the king with impartiality, "but have you looked beyond? Who will be the successor of the throne? I have neither brother nor sister; my two uncles died before I was born, and I perish childless. I think you mentioned that you wished to extinguish our line. Very well; what follows? Who is heir to the throne?"

"It matters nothing to me," said Catherine firmly. "Whoever rules Scotland could not be a greater enemy to my race than you are."

"I am not so sure of that. I think your dagger-blow will bring consequences you do not look for, and that your kin, now exiled in England will find the stroke a savage one for them. You forget that the stern King of England is my uncle, and on this relationship may lay claim to the Scottish throne. Be that as it may, it will be no secret that a Douglas committed the murder; and think you Henry VIII will offer safe refuge to his nephew's assassins? You much misjudge him if you do. It would have been far better to have slain me in the forest. This castle business is but an ill-judged, ill thought-out plan. I am sorry to appear adversely critical, but such is my opinion, and it confirms me in the belief that women should leave steel and State alone."

"I dare not let you go," reiterated Catherine.

"Of a surety you dare not; that is what I have said from the beginning. On the other hand, I can make no concession, under coercion, that would save my life. You see we are both cowardly, each in a different way. And now having come to the absolutely logical conclusion that the king must die, you should turn your mind to the difficulties that confront you. I, you see, am also armed."

The king as he spoke took from his doublet a dagger almost similar to the one held by the girl. A gentle smile graced his lips as he ran his thumb along the edge, and then glanced up at the two in time to notice their consternation at this new element in the situation.

"If you enter a tiger's cage you should expect a touch of his claws, so, Lady Catherine, your task is more serious than you anticipated. There is furthermore another source of danger against you, and it is my sincere wish that in the struggle to come you may not be too severely handicapped. While the issue of our contest is still in doubt, your sister will assuredly unlock the door and give the alarm, hoping to prevent your contemplated crime, or my killing of you. I think it right that you should not be called upon to suffer this intervention, for, if you will permit me to say so, I admire your determination as much as I admire, in another way, the Lady Isabel's leaning towards mercy. I shall then, take this key from the larger door and place it, with your sister, outside on the narrow stairway. You have withdrawn the rope ladder so she cannot alarm the garrison."

"But I have not withdrawn it," said Catherine quickly. "My sister must not leave this room or she will bring interference."

"Then," said the king calmly, as he rose and took the key from the large door, "we shall at least make it impossible for her to open the way into the hall." And so saying, he stepped to the smaller door, which he opened, and before either of the women could prevent his action, or even grasp an inkling of his design, he stepped outside, key in hand, and thrust to their places the bolts of the stairway door.

The two girls looked at each other for a moment in silence, Isabel plainly panic-stricken, while in Catherine's face anger struggled with chagrin. Each was quick to see the sudden consequences of this turning of the tables; the two were helpless prisoners in a remote portion of the castle, no one within its walls being acquainted with their whereabouts. The king, insulted, hoodwinked, and all but murdered, was now at liberty, free to ride the few short leagues that lay between Doune and Stirling, and before daybreak the fortress would be in the hands of an overwhelming force with the present garrison prisoners. In the awed stillness an unexpected sound came to them from the outside; the sound of a man endeavouring to suppress the hearty laughter that overmastered him. To be doomed is bad enough, but to be made the subject of levity was too much for the dauntless Catherine. She flung her dagger ringing to the stone floor with a gesture of rage, then sank upon a bench and gave way to tears; tears of bitter humiliation and rage.

"Ladies," said the king from the outside, "I beg that you will allow me to open the door." But, receiving no answer, the bolts were drawn once more; James again entered the apartment and gazed down upon two fair proud heads, crowned with ruddy hair.

"Dear ladies," said the king, "forgive me my untimely mirth. Both of you take matters much too seriously; a little laughter is necessary in this world. My Lady Catherine, I told you that I could grant no concessions under coercion, but now coercion has vanished and I enter this room a free man of my own will. Tell me, my girl, what is it you want? The rescinding of your father's exile? It is granted. The right to live unmolested in your own castle? It is granted. Safe conduct to England? It is granted. The privilege of remaining in Doune? It is granted. But do not ask me to rescind banishment against Archibald Douglas, Earl of Angus, for that I shall not concede. The Douglas ambition, and not the Scottish king, has wrecked the Douglas family, both Black and Red. But as far as concerns your own immediate kin, with one exception, I shall give anything you like to ask."

Catherine rose to her feet, threw back her auburn tresses, and said curtly, —

"We ask nothing but the privilege of leaving the country you rule."

The king bowed.

"And you, Lady Isabel?"

"I go with my sister and my mother."

"I grieve at your decision, ladies, and for the first time in my life envy England in getting an advantage over poor old Scotland, which I hope will not be irreparable, for I trust you will return. But if such be your determination, then go in peace, and in the daylight. Your journey shall not be molested by me. But, before you add finality to your intentions, I think it would be but fair to inform your lady mother that the king is anxious to be of service to her, and perhaps she may be content to accept what her daughters are apparently too proud to receive."

James placed the key once more in the lock, and turning to Catherine said, —

"My fair antagonist, I bid you good-night."

He stretched out his right hand, and she, with some hesitation and visible reluctance placed her palm in his. Then the king raised to his lips the hand which at one time seemed like to have stricken him.

"And you, sweet Isabel, whose gentle words I shall not soon forget, you will not refuse me your hand?"

"No, your majesty, if you will promise to think kindly of me."

The king, however, did not raise her hand to his lips, but placing an arm about her waist he drew her towards him and kissed her. Next moment he was hurrying down the stone steps, and the two were left alone together.

The King Investigates

The king, wishing to decide wisely, was troubled by a conflict of evidence, the bane of impartial judges all the world over. A courier from England had brought formal complaint that, while the two countries were ostensibly at peace, the condition along the border was practically a state of war. Raids were continually being made from the southern portion of Scotland across the boundary into England, and the robbers retreated unscathed to hide themselves among their hills, carrying their booty with them. These ruffians had long gone unpunished, and now England made friendly protest in the matter.

The king gathered his nobles about him and laid the case before them. Not a man among them but was older than himself, and therefore more experienced. James requested advice regarding the action it might be thought wise to take. Many of the nobles whose estates lay in the Lowlands of Scotland had themselves suffered from Highland cattle-lifters, and thus they were imbued with a fellow feeling for the raided English across the border. The English protest, they said, was courteously made. The evil was undoubted, and had existed unchecked for years, growing worse rather than better. Henry VIII, who now occupied the English throne, was a strong and determined man, and this continued source of irritation in the northern part of his realm might easily lead to a deplorable war between the two countries. In addition, James of Scotland was nephew to Henry of England, and the expostulation from uncle to nephew was of the mildest, without any threat even intimated.

The nobles thought that James might well put a stop to a state of things which no just man could approve, and thus do an act of justice which would at the same time please an august relative. James admitted that these were powerful arguments, but still if the Border robbers, who had many followers, resisted the Scottish force sent against them, there would be civil war, an outcome not to be looked forward to with light heart.

"In truth," said the king, "I would rather lead an army against England, with England in the right, than against my own countrymen, even if they were in the wrong."

This remark seemed to encourage certain gentlemen there present, who up to that moment had not spoken. The Earl of Bothwell, as the highest in rank among the silent phalanx, stepped forward and said, —

"Your majesty, there are always two sides to a question, and, with your permission, I should be glad to put in a word for those Border riders who have been so ruthlessly condemned by men who know nothing of them."

"It is for the purpose of hearing all there is to say that I called you together," rejoined the king. "Speak, my Lord of Bothwell."

"In the first place, your majesty, these Border men have had to stand the first brunt of all invasions into our country for centuries past. It is, therefore, little to be wondered at that they have small liking for the English. We are at peace with those to the south of us now, it is true; but how long that peace will remain unbroken, no man can say. There is, however, one thing certain, that if the King of Scotland exercises the power he undoubtedly possesses, and crushes the Border forces, he will have destroyed a staunch bulwark of his realm, and I quite agree with those gentlemen who have spoken so eloquently against the Borderers, that the King of England, and the people of England, will be well pleased."

This statement had a marked effect on King James, and it would have been well if those who agreed with the Earl of Bothwell had been as moderate in their denunciation. But some of them, apparently, could not forget the youth of the king, and, not having the sense to see that his majesty's desire was to render a just decision, thought he might be frightened by strong language.

"It is easy for those to speak well of the pike, who have not felt the prod of its point," cried Lord Maxwell angrily. "Few English invasions have reached Stirling, but every one of them have crossed the Border. What matters the lifting of some English cattle? The Southerners never scrupled to eat

good Scottish beef whenever they set foot on Scottish soil. I would hang the English envoy for daring to come to a Scottish king with complaints of cattle lifting.”

The king frowned slightly but said nothing, and then Adam Scott of Tushielaw had to thrust his bull neck into the noose.

“I give you fair warning,” he cried, “that if the king’s forces are turned against the Borderers, my sword helps my neighbours.”

“And I say the same,” shouted Cockburn of Henderland.

Some of the opposition were about to speak, but the king held up his hand for silence.

“That is treason,” he said quietly. “Adam Scott, I have heard that you are called King of the Border. Scotland is blessed with a number of men who are king of this, or king of that, and I am sure I make no objection, as long as they do not forget the difference that exists between a king in name and a king in reality. I asked for advice, but not for threats.”

Then to the whole assemblage he went on —

“Gentlemen, I thank you for your counsel. I shall give a soothing reply to my uncle’s ambassador, keeping in mind the peace that exists between the two countries, and then I shall take what has been said on each side into consideration and let you know the result.”

Accepting this as dismissal, those there congregated withdrew, save only Sir David Lyndsay, the king having made a sign for him to remain. “Well, Davie,” he said, when they were alone, “what do you think of it all?”

“To tell truth, your majesty,” answered the poet, “it’s a knotty problem, not to be solved by rhyming brain. When the first spokesman finished I was entirely of his opinion, but, after that, the Earl of Bothwell’s plea seemed equally weighty, and between the two I don’t know what to think.”

“That is the disadvantage of an unbiased mind, Davie. Now, with good, strong prejudices, one side or the other, the way would be clear, and yet I despise a man who doesn’t know his own mind.”

“Scott and Cockburn seemed to know their minds very well,” ventured the poet, with a smile.

“Yes, and if one or two more of them had spoken as decidedly, I would have been off to the Border to-night at the head of my troops. It is a weakness of mine, but I can’t put up with a threat very well.”

“Kings are rarely called upon to thole a threat,” said Sir David, with a laugh.

“I’m not so sure of that, Davie. Kings have to thole many things if they are to rule justly. Now, Davie, if you’ll but tell me just what to do, it will be a great help, for then I can take the opposite direction with confidence.”

But the poet shook his head.

“I cannot tell you,” he said. “There seems much to be said for both sides.”

“Then, Davie, send down to the town for the cobbler; send for Flemming, he is a common-sense, canny body; he shall be the Solomon of the occasion. That broad-faced hammer of his seems to rap out wisdom as well as drive pegs. Bring him up with you, and we’ll place the case before him.”

As the rhymster left the room, Sir Donald Sinclair came clanking in, seemingly in something of a hurry.

“Was it your majesty’s pleasure,” began Sir Donald, “to have detained Adam Scott and Cockburn?”

“No. Why do you ask?”

“Because they have mounted their horses and are off to the Border as fast as two good steeds can carry them.”

“And where are Bothwell, Home, and Maxwell, and the Lairds of Fairniherst, Johnston and Buccleuch?”

“They are all closeted in the Earl of Bothwell’s room, your majesty. Shall I take any action regarding them?”

“Oh no; do not meddle with them. You heard the opinions given a while since, Donald? What conclusion did you arrive at?”

“I am scarcely an impartial judge, your majesty. A soldier is ever for fighting, and I fear he pays little attention to the right or wrong of it.”

“You would try a fall with the Border kings perhaps?”

“Yes, your majesty, I would.”

“Then I need have no fear but the troops will respond if I call on them?”

“None in the least, your majesty.”

“Well, I am glad to hear that, Sir Donald, and, meanwhile, I can think of the project without any doubt regarding my army.”

When the cobbler came to the castle with Sir David, the king led the way to one of his small private rooms, and there sketched out the argument on both sides of the question with great impartiality.

“Now, Flemming,” he said, at the conclusion, “what is there to do?”

For a long time the shoemaker made no reply; then he scratched his head in perplexed fashion. At last he said:

“It gets beyond me, your majesty. Thieving is not right unless it’s done under cover of law, which these reiving lads to the South seem to take small account of. On the other hand, to destroy them root and branch may be leaving Scotland naked to her enemy. I admit I’m fairly in a corner.”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.