

Munro Neil

The Lost Pibroch, and other Sheiling Stories



Neil Munro

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THE LOST PIBROCH

TO the make of a piper go seven years of his own learning and seven generations before. If it is in, it will out, as the Gaelic old-word says; if not, let him take to the net or sword. At the end of his seven years one born to it will stand at the start of knowledge, and leaning a fond ear to the drone, he may have parley with old folks of old affairs. Playing the tune of the “Fairy Harp,” he can hear his forefolks, plaided in skins, towsy-headed and terrible, grunting at the oars and snoring in the caves; he has his whittle and club in the “Desperate Battle” (my own tune, my darling!), where the white-haired sea-rovers are on the shore, and a stain’s on the edge of the tide; or, trying his art on Laments, he can stand by the cairn of kings, ken the colour of Fingal’s hair, and see the moon-glint on the hook of the Druids!

To-day there are but three pipers in the wide world, from the Sound of Sleat to the Wall of France. Who they are, and what their tartan, it is not for one to tell who has no heed for a thousand dirks in his doublet, but they may be known by the lucky ones who hear them. Namely players tickle the chanter and take out but the sound; the three give a tune the charm that I mention – a long thought and a bard’s thought, and they bring the notes from the deeps of time, and the tale from the heart of the man who made it.

But not of the three best in Albainn today is my story, for they have not the Lost Pibroch. It is of the three best, who were not bad, in a place I ken – Half Town that stands in the wood.

You may rove for a thousand years on league-long brogues, or hurry on fairy wings from isle to isle and deep to deep, and find no equal to that same Half Town. It is not the splendour of it, nor the riches of its folk; it is not any great routh of field or sheep-fank, but the scented winds of it, and the comfort of the pine-trees round and about it on every hand. My mother used to be saying (when I had the notion of fairy tales), that once on a time, when the woods were young and thin, there was a road through them, and the pick of children of a country-side wandered among them into this place to play at sheilings. Up grew the trees, fast and tall, and shut the little folks in so that the way out they could not get if they had the mind for it. But never an out they wished for. They grew with the firs and alders, a quiet clan in the heart of the big wood, clear of the world out-by.

But now and then wanderers would come to Half Town, through the gloomy coves, under the tall trees. There were packmen with tales of the out-world. There were broken men flying from rope or hatchet. And once on a day of days came two pipers – Gilian, of Clan Lachlan of Strathlachlan, and Rory Ban, of the Macnaghtons of Dundarave.

They had seen Half Town from the sea – smoking to the clear air on the hillside; and through the weary woods they came, and the dead quiet of them, and they stood on the edge of the fir-belt.

Before them was what might be a township in a dream, and to be seen at the one look, for it stood on the rising hill that goes back on Lochow.

The dogs barked, and out from the houses and in from the fields came the quiet clan to see who could be here. Biggest of all the men, one they named Coll, cried on the strangers to come forward; so out they went from the wood-edge, neither coy nor crouse, but the equal of friend or foe, and they passed the word of day.

“Hunting,” they said, “in Easachosain, we found the roe come this way.”

“If this way she came, she’s at Duglas Water by now, so you may bide and eat. Few, indeed, come calling on us in Half Town; but whoever they are, here’s the open door, and the horn spoon, and the stool by the fire.”

He took them in and he fed them, nor asked their names nor calling, but when they had eaten well he said to Rory, “You have skill of the pipes; I know by the drum of your fingers on the horn spoon.”

“I have tried them,” said Rory, with a laugh, “a bit – a bit. My friend here is a player.”

“You have the art?” asked Coll.

“Well, not what you might call the whole art,” said Gilian, “but I can play – oh yes! I can play two or three parts.”

“You can that!” said Rory.

“No better than yourself, Rory.”

“Well, maybe not, but – anyway, not all tunes; I allow you do ‘Mackay’s Banner’ in a pretty style.”

“Pipers,” said Coll, with a quick eye to a coming quarrel, “I will take you to one of your own trade in this place – Paruig Dali, who is namely for music.”

“It’s a name that’s new to me,” said Rory, short and sharp, but up they rose and followed Big Coll.

He took them to a bothy behind the Half Town, a place with turf walls and never a window, where a blind man sat winding pirns for the weaver-folks.

“This,” said Coll, showing the strangers in at the door, “is a piper of parts, or I’m no judge, and he has as rare a stand of great pipes as ever my eyes sat on.”

“I have that same,” said the blind man, with his face to the door. “Your friends, Coll?”

“Two pipers of the neighbourhood,” Rory made answer. “It was for no piping we came here, but by the accident of the chase. Still and on, if pipes are here, piping there might be.”

“So be it,” cried Coll; “but I must go back to my cattle till night comes. Get you to the playing with Paruig Dali, and I’ll find you here when I come back.” And with that he turned about and went off.

Parig put down the ale and cake before the two men, and “Welcome you are,” said he.

They ate the stranger’s bite, and lipped the stranger’s cup, and then, “Whistle ‘The Macraes’ March,’ my fair fellow,” said the blind man.

“How ken you I’m fair?” asked Rory.

“Your tongue tells that. A fair man has aye a soft bit in his speech, like the lapping of milk in a cogie; and a black one, like your friend there, has the sharp ring of a thin burn in frost running into an iron pot. ‘The Macraes’ March,’ *laochain*.”

Rory put a pucker on his mouth and played a little of the fine tune.

“So!” said the blind man, with his head to a side, “you had your lesson. And you, my Strathlachlan boy without beard, do you ken ‘Muintir a’ Ghlinne so’?”

“How ken ye I’m Strathlachlan and beardless?” asked Gilian.

“Strathlachlan by the smell of herring-scale from your side of the house (for they told me yesterday the gannets were flying down Strathlachlan way, and that means fishing), and you have no beard I know, but in what way I know I do not know.” Gilian had the *siubhal* of the pibroch but begun when the blind man stopped him.

“You have it,” he said, “you have it in a way, the Macarthur’s way, and that’s not my way. But, no matter, let us to our piping.”

The three men sat them down on three stools on the clay floor, and the blind man’s pipes passed round between them.

“First,” said Paruig (being the man of the house, and to get the vein of his own pipes) – “first I’ll put on them ‘The Vaunting.’” He stood to his shanks, a lean old man and straight, and the big drone came nigh on the black rafters. He filled the bag at a breath and swung a lover’s arm round about it. To those who know not the pipes, the feel of the bag in the oxters is a gaiety lost. The sweet

round curve is like a girl's waist; it is friendly and warm in the crook of the elbow and against a man's side, and to press it is to bring laughing or tears.

The bothy roared with the tuning, and then the air came melting and sweet from the chanter. Eight steps up, four, to the turn, and eight down went Paruig, and the *piobaireachd* rolled to his fingers like a man's rhyming. The two men sat on, the stools, with their elbows on their knees, and listened. He played but the *urlar*, and the *crunluadh* to save time, and he played them well.

"Good indeed! Splendid, my old fellow!" cried the two; and said Gilian, "You have a way of it in the *crunluadh* not my way, but as good as ever I heard."

"It is the way of Padruig Og," said Rory.

"Well I know it! There are tunes and tunes, and 'The Vaunting' is not bad in its way, but give me 'The Macraes' March.'"

He jumped to his feet and took the pipes from the old man's hands, and over his shoulder with the drones.

"Stand back, lad!" he cried to Gilian, and Gilian went nearer the door.

The march came fast to the chanter – the old tune, the fine tune that Kintail has heard before, when the wild men in their red tartan came over hill and moor; the tune with the river in it, the fast river and the courageous that kens not stop nor tarry, that runs round rock and over fall with a good humour, yet no mood for anything but the way before it. The tune of the heroes, the tune of the pinelands and the broad straths, the tune that the eagles of Loch Duich crack their beaks together when they hear, and the crows of that country-side would as soon listen to as the squeal of their babies.

"Well! mighty well!" said Paruig Dali. "You have the tartan of the clan in it."

"Not bad, I'll allow," said Gilian. "Let me try."

He put his fingers on the holes, and his heart took a leap back over two generations, and yonder was Glencoe! The grey day crawled on the white hills and the Mack roofs smoked below. Snow choked the pass, *eas* and corn filled with drift and flatted to the brae-face; the wind tossed quirky and and in the little bashes and among the smooing lintels and joists; the Mood of old and young lapped on the hearthstone, and the bairn, with a knifed throat, had an icy lip on a frozen teat. Out of the place went the tramped path of the Campbell butchers – far on their way to Glenlyon and the towns of paper and ink and liars – "Muinntir a' ghlinne so, muinntir a' ghlinne so! – People, people, people of this glen, this glen, this glen!"

"Dogs! dogs! O God of grace – dogs and cowards!" cried Rory. "I could be dirking a Diarmaid or two if by luck they were near me."

"It is piping that is to be here," said Paruig, "and it is not piping for an hour nor piping for an evening, but the piping of Dunvegan that stops for sleep nor supper."

So the three stayed in the bothy and played tune about while time went by the door. The birds flew home to the branches, the longnecked beasts flapped off to the shore to spear their flat fish; the rutting deers bellowed with loud throats in the deeps of the wood that stands round Half Town, and the scents of the moist night came gusty round the door. Over the back of Auchnabreac the sun trailed his plaid of red and yellow, and the loch stretched salt and dark from Cairn Dubh to Creaggans.

In from the hill the men and the women came, weary-legged, and the bairns nodded at their heels. Sleepiness was on the land, but the pipers, piping in the bothy, kept the world awake.

"We will go to bed in good time," said the folks, eating their suppers at their doors; "in good time when this tune is ended." But tune came on tane, and every tune better than its neighbour, and they waited.

A cruisie-light was set alow in the blind man's bothy, and the three men played old tunes and new tunes – salute and lament and brisk dances and marches that coax tired brogues on the long roads.

"Here's 'Tulloch Ard' for you, and tell me who made it," said Rory.

"Who kens that? Here's 'Raasay's Lament,' the best port Padruig Mor ever put together."

"Tunes and tunes. I'm for 'A Kiss o' the King's Hand.'"

“Thug mi pòg ‘us pòg ‘us pòg,
Thug mi pòg do làmh an rìgh,
Cha do chuir gaoth an craicionn caorach,
Fear a fhuair an fhaoilt ach mi!”

Then a quietness came on Half Town, for the piping stopped, and the people at their doors heard but their blood thumping and the night-hags in the dark of the firwood.

“A little longer and maybe there will be more,” they said to each other, and they waited; but no more music came from the drones, so they went in to bed.

There was quiet over Half Town, for the three pipers talked about the Lost Tune.

“A man my father knew,” said Gilian, “heard a bit of it once in Moideart. A terrible fine tune he said it was, but sore on the mind.”

“It would be the tripling,” said the Macnaghton, stroking a reed with a fond hand.

“Maybe. Tripling is ill enough, but what is tripling? There is more in piping than brisk fingers. Am I not right, Paruig?” “Right, oh! right. The Lost *Piobaireachd* asks for skilly tripling, but Macruimen himself could not get at the core of it for all his art.”

“You have heard it then!” cried Gilian.

The blind man stood up and filled out his breast.

“Heard it!” he said; “I heard it, and I play it – on the *feadan*, but not on the full set. To play the tune I mention on the full set is what I have not done since I came to Half Town.”

“I have ten round pieces in my sporran, and a bonnet-brooch it would take much to part me from; but they’re there for the man who’ll play me the Lost *Piobaireachd*” said Gilian, with the words tripping each other to the tip of his tongue.

“And here’s a Macnaghton’s fortune on the top of the round pieces,” cried Rory, emptying his purse on the table.

The old man’s face got hot and angry. “I am not,” he said, “a tinker’s minstrel, to give my tuning for bawbees and a quaich of ale. The king himself could not buy the tune I ken if he had but a whim for it. But when pipers ask it they can have it, and it’s yours without a fee. Still if you think to learn the tune by my piping once, poor’s the delusion. It is not a port to be picked up like a cockle on the sand, for it takes the schooling of years and blindness forbye.”

“Blindness?”

“Blindness indeed. The thought of it is only for the dark eye.”

“If we could hear it on the full set!”

“Come out, then, on the grass, and you’ll hear it, if Half Town should sleep no sleep this night.”

They went out of the bothy to the wet short grass. Ragged mists shook o’er Cowal, and on Ben Ime sat a horned moon like a galley of Lorn.

“I heard this tune from the Moideart man – the last in Albainn who knew it then, and he’s in the clods,” said the blind fellow.

He had the mouthpiece at his lip, and his hand was coaxing the bag, when a bairn’s cry came from a house in the Half Town – a suckling’s whimper, that, heard in the night, sets a man’s mind busy on the sorrows that folks are born to. The drones clattered together on the piper’s elbow and he stayed.

“I have a notion,” he said to the two men. “I did not tell you that the Lost *Piobaireachd* is the *piobaireachd* of good-byes. It is the tune of broken clans, that sets the men on the foray and makes cold hearth-stones. It was played in Glenshira when Gilleasbuig Gruamach could stretch stout swordsmen from Boshang to Ben Bhuidhe, and where are the folks of Glenshira this day? I saw a cheery night in Carnus that’s over Lochow, and song and story busy about the fire, and the Moideart man played it for a wager. In the morning the weans were without fathers, and Carnus men were scattered about the wide world.”

“It must be the magic tune, sure enough,” said Gilian.

“Magic indeed, *laochain!* It is the tune that puts men on the open road, that makes restless lads and seeking women. Here’s a Half Town of dreamers and men fattening for want of men’s work. They forget the world is wide and round about their fir-trees, and I can make them crave for something they cannot name.”

“Good or bad, out with it,” said Rory, “if you know it at all.”

“Maybe no’, maybe no’. I am old and done. Perhaps I have lost the right skill of the tune, for it’s long since I put it on the great pipe. There’s in me the strong notion to try it whatever may come of it, and here’s for it.”

He put his pipe up again, filled the bag at a breath, brought the booming to the drones, and then the chanter-reed cried sharp and high.

“He’s on it,” said Rory in Gilian’s ear.

The groundwork of the tune was a drumming on the deep notes where the sorrows lie – “Come, come, come, my children, rain on the brae and the wind blowing.”

“It is a salute.” said Rory.

“It’s the strange tune anyway,” said Gilian; “listen to the time of yon!”

The tune searched through Half Town and into the gloomy pine-wood; it put an end to the whoop of the night-hag and rang to Ben Bhreac. Boatmen deep and far on the loch could hear it, and Half Town folks sat up to listen.

It’s story was the story that’s ill to tell – something of the heart’s longing and the curious chances of life. It bound up all the tales of all the clans, and made one tale of the Gaels’ past. Dirk nor sword against the tartan, but the tartan against all else, and the Gaels’ target fending the hill-land and the juicy straths from the pock-pitted little black men. The winters and the summers passing fast and furious, day and night roaring in the ears, and then again the clans at variance, and warders on every pass and on every parish.

Then the tune changed.

“Folks,” said the reeds, coaxing. “Wide’s the world and merry the road. Here’s but the old story and the women we kissed before. Come, come to the flat-lands rich and full, where the wonderful new things happen and the women’s lips are still to try!”

“To-morrow,” said Gilian in his friend’s ear – “to-morrow I will go jaunting to the North. It has been in my mind since Beltane.”

“One might be doing worse,” said Rory, “and I have the notion to try a trip with my cousin to the foreign wars.”

The blind piper put up his shoulder higher and rolled the air into the *crunluadh breabach* that comes prancing with variations. Pride stiffened him from heel to hip, and hip to head, and set his sinews like steel.

He was telling of the gold to get for the searching and the bucks that may be had for the hunting. “What,” said the reeds, “are your poor crops, slashed by the constant rain and rotting, all for a scart in the bottom of a pot? What are your stots and heifers – black, dun, and yellow – to milch-cows and horses? Here’s but the same for ever – toil and sleep, sleep and toil even on, no feud nor foray nor castles to harry – only the starved field and the sleeping moss. Let us to a brisker place! Over yonder are the long straths and the deep rivers and townships strewn thick as your corn-rigs; over yonder’s the place of the packmen’s tales and the packmen’s wares: steep we the withies and go!”

The two men stood with heads full of bravery and dreaming – men in a carouse. “This,” said they, “is the notion we had, but had no words for. It’s a poor trade piping and eating and making amusement when one might be wandering up and down the world. We must be packing the haversacks.”

Then the *crunluadh mach* came fast and furious on the chanter, and Half Town shook with it. It buzzed in the ear like the flowers in the Honey Croft, and made commotion among the birds rocking on their eggs in the wood.

“So! so!” barked the *iolair* on Craig-an-eas.

“I have heard before it was an ill thing to be satisfied; in the morning I’ll try the kids on Maam-side, for the hares here are wersh and tough.”

“Hearken, dear,” said the *londubh*, “I know now why my beak is gold; it is because I once ate richer berries than the whortle, and in season I’ll look for them on the braes of Glenfinne.”

“Honk-unk,” said the fox, the cunning red fellow, “am not I the fool to be staying on this little brae when I know so many roads elsewhere?”

And the people sitting up in their beds in Half Town moaned for something new. “Paruig Dall is putting the strange tune on her there,” said they. “What the meaning of it is we must ask in the morning, but, *ochanoch!* it leaves one hungry at the heart.” And then gusty winds came snell from the north, and where the dark crept first, the day made his first showing, so that Ben Ime rose black against a grey sky.

“That’s the Lost *Piobaireachd*,” said Paruig Dali when the bag sunk on his arm.

And the two men looked at him in a daze.

Sometimes in the spring of the year the winds from Lorn have it their own way with the Highlands. They will come tearing furious over the hundred hills, spurred the faster by the prongs of Cruachan and Dunchuach, and the large woods of home toss before them like corn before the hook. Up come the poor roots and over on their broken arms go the tall trees, and in the morning the deer will trot through new lanes cut in the forest.

A wind of that sort came on the full of the day when the two pipers were leaving Half Town.

“Stay till the storm is over,” said the kind folks; and “Your bed and board are here for the pipers forty days,” said Paruig Dali. But “No” said the two; “we have business that your *piobaireachd* put us in mind of.”

“I’m hoping that I did not play yon with too much skill,” said the old man.

“Skill or no skill,” said Gilian, “the like of yon I never heard. You played a port that makes poor enough all ports ever one listened to, and piping’s no more for us wanderers.”

“Blessings with thee!” said the folks all, and the two men went down into the black wood among the cracking trees.

Six lads looked after them, and one said, “It is an ill day for a body to take the world for his pillow, but what say you to following the pipers?”

“It might,” said one, “be the beginning of fortune. I am weary enough of this poor place, with nothing about it but wood and water and tufty grass. If we went now, there might be gold and girls at the other end.”

They took crooks and bonnets and went after the two pipers. And when they were gone half a day, six women said to their men, “Where can the lads be?”

“We do not know that,” said the men, with hot faces, “but we might be looking.” They kissed their children and went, with *cromags* in their hands, and the road they took was the road the King of Errin rides, and that is the road to the end of days.

A weary season fell on Half Town, and the very bairns dwined at the breast for a change of fortune. The women lost their strength, and said, “To-day my back is weak, tomorrow I will put things to right,” and they looked slack-mouthed and heedless-eyed at the sun wheeling round the trees. Every week a man or two would go to seek something – a lost heifer or a wounded roe that was never brought back – and a new trade came to the place, the selling of herds. Far away in the low country, where the winds are warm and the poorest have money, black-cattle were wanted, so the men of Half Town made up long droves and took them round Glen Beag and the Rest.

Wherever they went they stayed, or the clans on the roadside put them to steel, for Half Town saw them no more. And a day came when all that was left in that fine place were but women and children and a blind piper.

“Am I the only man here?” asked Paruig Dali when it came to the bit, and they told him he was.

“Then here’s another for fortune!” said he, and he went down through the woods with his pipes in his oxters.

RED HAND

THE smell of wet larch was in the air, and Glennaora was aburst to the coaxing of Spring. Paruig Dali the piper – son of the son of Iain Mor – filled his broad chest with two men’s wind, and flung the drones over his shoulder. They dangled a little till the bag swelled out, and the first blast rang in the ear of the morning. Rough and noisy, the reeds cried each other down till a master’s hand held them in check, and the long soft singing of the *piobaireachd* floated out among the tartan ribbons. The grey peak of Drimfern heard the music; the rock that wards the mouth of Carnus let it pass through the gap and over the hill and down to the isles below; Dun Corr-bhile and Dunchuach, proud Kilmune, the Paps of Salachary, and a hundred other braes around, leaned over to listen to the vaunting notes that filled the valley. “The Glen, the Glen is mine!” sang the blithe chanter; and, by Finne’s sword, Macruimen himself could not have fingered it better!

It was before Paruig Dali left for Halt Town; before the wars that scorched the glens; and Clan Campbell could cock its bonnet in the face of all Albainn. Paruig was old, and Paruig was blind, as the name of him tells, but he swung with a king’s port up and down on the short grass, his foot firm to every beat of the tune, his kilt tossing from side to side like a bard’s song, his sporran leaping gaily on his brown knees. Two score of lilting steps to the bumside, a slow wheel on a brogue-heel, and then back with the sun-glint on the buckles of his belt.

The men, tossing the caber and hurling the *clachncart* against the sun beyond the peat-bog, paused in their stride at the chanter’s boast, jerked the tartan tight on their loins, and came over to listen; the women, posting blankets for the coming sheiling, stopped their splashing in the little linn, and hummed in a dream; and men and women had mind of the days that were, when the Glen was soft with the blood of men, for the Stewarts were over the way from Appin.

“God’s splendour! but he can play too,” said the piper’s son, with his head areel to the fine tripling.

Then Paruig pushed the bag further into his oxters, and the tune changed. He laid the ground of “Bodaich nam Briogais,” and such as knew the story saw the “carles with the breeks” broken and flying before Glenurchy’s thirsty swords, far north of Morven, long days of weary march through spoiled glens.

“It’s fine playing, I’ll allow,” said the blind man’s son, standing below a saugh-tree with the bag of his bannered pipes in the crook of his arm. He wore the dull tartan of the Diarmaids, and he had a sprig of gall in his bonnet, for he was in Black Duncan’s tail. “Son of Paruig Dali,” said the Chief seven years ago come Martinmas, “if you’re to play like your father, there’s but Dunvegan for you, and the schooling of Patrick Macruimen.” So Tearlach went to Skye – cold isle of knives and caves – and in the college of Macruimen he learned the *piob-mhor*. Morning and evening, and all day between, he fingered the *feadan* or the full set – gathering and march, massacre and moaning, and the stately salute. Where the lusty breeze comes in salt from Vatemish across Loch Vegan, and the purple loom of Uist breaks the sunset’s golden bars, he stood on the braes over against Borearaig and charmed the grumbling tide. And there came a day that he played “The Lament of the Harp-Tree,” with the old years of sturdy fight and strong men all in the strain of it, and Patrick Macruimen said, “No more, lad; go home: Lochow never heard another like you.” As a cock with its comb uncut, came the stripling from Skye.

“Father,” he had said, “you play not ill for a blind man, but you miss the look on the men’s faces, and that’s half the music. Forbye, you are old, and your fingers are slow on the grace-notes. Here’s your own flesh and blood can show you fingering there was never the like of anywhere east the Isles.”

The stepmother heard the brag. “A *pheasain!*” she snapped, with hate in her peat-smoked face. “Your father’s a man, and you are but a boy with no heart for a long day. A place in Black Duncan’s tail, with a gillie to carry your pipes and knapsack, is not, mind ye, all that’s to the making of a piper.”

Tearlach laughed in her face. “Boy or man,” said he, “look at me! north, east, south, and west, where is the one to beat me? Macruimen has the name, but there were pipers before Macruimen, and pipers will come after him.”

“It’s maybe as you say,” said Paruig. “The stuff’s in you, and what is in must out; but give me *cothrom na Feinne*, and old as I am, with Finne’s chance, and that’s fair play, I can maybe make you crow less crouse. Are ye for trying?”

“I am at the training of a new chanter-reed,” said Tearlach; “but let it be when you will.”

They fixed a day, and went out to play against each other for glory, and so it befell that on this day Paruig Dali was playing “The Glen is Mine” and “Bodaich nam Briogais” in a way to make stounding hearts.

Giorsal snapped her fingers in her stepson’s face when her husband closed the *crunluadh* of his *piobaireachd*.

“Can you better it, bastard?” snarled she.

“Here goes for it, whatever!” said Tearlach, and over his back went the banner with its boar’s head sewn on gold. A pretty lad, by the cross! clean-cut of limb and light of foot, supple of loin, with the toss of the shoulder that never a decent piper lacked. The women who had been at the linn leaned on each other all in the soft larch-scented day, and looked at him out of deep eyes; the men on the heather arose and stood nigher.

A little tuning, and then

“Is comadh leam’s comadh leam, cogadh na sithe,
Marbhar ‘sa chogadh na crochar’s an t-sith mi.”

“Peace or war!” cried Giorsal, choking in anger, to her man – “peace or war! the black braggart! it’s an asp ye have for a son, goodman!”

The lad’s fingers danced merry on the chanter, and the shiver of something to come fell on all the folk around. The old hills sported with the prancing tune; Dun Corrbhile tossed it to Drimfem, and Drimfern sent it leaping across the flats of Kilmune to the green corries of Lecknamban. “Love, love, the old tune; come and get flesh!” rasped a crow to his mate far off on misty Ben Bhreac, and the heavy black wings flapped east. The friendly wind forgot to dally with the pine-tuft and the twanging bog-myrtle, the plash of Aora in its brown linn was the tinkle of wine in a goblet. “Peace or war, peace or war; come which will, we care not,” sang the pipe-reeds, and there was the muster and the march, hot-foot rush over the rotting rain-wet moor, the jingle of iron, the dunt of pike and targe, the choked roar of hate and hunger, batter and slash and fall, and behind, the old, old feud with Appin!

Leaning forward, lost in a dream, stood the swank lads of Aora. They felt at their hips, where were only empty belts, and one said to his child, “White love, get me yon long knife with the nicks on it, and the basket-hand, for I am sick of shepherding.” The bairn took a look at his face and went home crying.

And the music still poured on. ‘Twas “I got a Kiss o’ the King’s Hand” and “The Pretty Dirk,” and every air better than another. The fairy pipe of the Wee Folk’s Knowe never made a sweeter fever of sound, yet it hurt the ears of the women, who had reason to know the payment of pipers’ springs.

“Stop, stop, O Tearlach og!” they cried; “enough of war: have ye not a reel in your budget?”

“There was never a reel in Borerraig,” said the lad, and he into “Duniveg’s Warning,” the tune Coll Ciotach heard his piper play in the west on a day when a black bitch from Dunstaffnage lay panting for him, and his barge put nose about in time to save his skin.

“There’s the very word itself in it,” said Paruig, forgetting the taunting of Giorsal and all but a father’s pride.

‘Twas in the middle of the “Warning” Black Duncan, his toe on the stirrup, came up from Castle Inneraora, with a gillie-wet-foot behind, on his way to Lochow.

“It’s down yonder you should be, Sir Piper, and not blasting here for drink,” said he, switching his trews with his whip and scowling under black brows at the people. “My wife is sick of the *clarsach* and wants the pipes.”

“I’m no woman’s piper, Lochow; your wife can listen to the hum of her spinning-wheel if she’s weary of her harp,” said the lad; and away rode the Chief, and back to the linn went the women, and the men to the *cabar* and the stone, and Tearlach, with an extra feather in his bonnet, home to Inneraora, leafing a gibe as he went, for his father.

Paruig Dali cursed till the evening at the son he never saw, and his wife poisoned his mind.

“The Glen laughs at you, man, from Carnus to Croit-bhile. It’s a black, burning day of shame for you, Paruig Dall!”

“Lord, it’s a black enough day for me at the best!” said the blind man.

“It’s disgraced by your own ill-got son you are, by a boy with no blood on his *biodag*, and the pride to crow over you.”

And Paruig cursed anew, by the Cross and the Dogs of Lorn, and the White Glaive of Light the giants wear, and the Seven Witches of Cothmar. He was bad though he was blind, and he went back to the start of time for his language. “But *Dhé!* the boy can play!” he said at the last.

“Oh, *amadain dhoill*” cried the woman; “if it was I, a claw was off the cub before the mouth of day.”

“Witless woman, men have played the pipes before now, lacking a finger: look at Alasdair Corrag!”

“Allowing; but a hand’s as easy to cut as a finger for a man who has gralloched deer with a keen *sgian-dubh*. Will ye do’t or no’?”

Parig would hearken no more, and took to his pillow.

Rain came with the gloaming. Aora, the splendid river, roared up the dark glen from the Salmon Leap; the hills gathered thick and heavy round about the scattered townships, the green new tips of fir and the copper leaves of the young oaks moaned in the wind. Then salt airs came tearing up from the sea, grinding branch on branch, and the whole land smoked with the drumming of rain that slanted on it hot and fast.

Giorsal arose, her clothes still on her, put a plaid on her black head, and the thick door banged back on the bed as she dived into the storm. Her heavy feet sogged through the boggy grass, the heather clutched at her draggled coat-tails to make her stay, but she filled her heart with one thought, and that was hate, and behold! she was on the slope of the Black Bull before her blind husband guessed her meaning. Castle Inneraora lay at the foot of the woody dun, dozing to the music of the salt loch that made tumult and spume north and south in the hollow of the mountains. Now and then the moon took a look at things, now and then a night-hag in the dripping wood hooted as the rain whipped her breast feathers; a roe leaped out of the gloom and into it with a feared hoof-plunge above Carlonan; a thunderbolt struck in the dark against the brow of Ben Ime and rocked the world.

In the cold hour before the mouth of day the woman was in the piper’s room at the gate of Inneraora, where never a door was barred against the night while Strong Colin the warder could see from the Fort of Dunchuach to Cladich. Tearlach the piper lay on his back, with the glow of a half-dead peat on his face and hands. “Paruig, Paruig!” said the woman to herself, as she softly tramped out the peat-fire and turned to the bed. And lo! it was over. Her husband’s little black knife made a fast sweep on the sleeper’s wrist, and her hand was drenched with the hot blood of her husband’s son.

Tearlach leaped up with a roar in the dark and felt for his foe; but the house was empty, for Giorsal was running like a hind across the soaked stretch of Caimban. The lightning struck at Glennaora in jagged fury and confusion; the thunder drummed hollow on Creag

Dubh: in a turn of the pass at the Three Bridges the woman met her husband.

“Daughter of hell!” said he, “is’t done? and was’t death?”

“Darling,” said she, with a fond laugh, “twas only a brat’s hand. You can give us ‘The Glen is Mine!’ in the morning.”

THE SECRET OF THE HEATHER-ALE

DOWN Glenaora threescore and ten of Diarmaid's stout fellows took the road on a fine day. They were men from Carnus, with more of Clan Artair than Campbell in them; but they wore Gilleasbuig Gruamach's tartan, and if they were not on Gilleasbuig Gruamach's errand, it makes little difference on our story. It was about the time Antrim and his dirty Irishers came scouring through our glens with flambeaux, dirk and sword and other arms invasive, and the country was back at its old trade of fighting, with not a sheiling from end to end, except on the slopes of Shira Glen, where a clan kept free of battle and drank the finest of heather-ale that the world envied the secret of.

"Lift we and go, for the Cattle's before!" said Alasdair Piobaire on the chanter of a Dunvegan great-pipe – a neat tune that roared gallant and far from Carnus to Bara-caldine; so there they were, the pick of swank fellows on the road!

At the head of them was Niall Mor a' Chamais – the same gentleman namely in story for many an art and the slaughter of the strongest man in the world, as you'll find in the writings of my Lord Archie. "God! look at us!" said he, when his lads came over the hill in the grey mouth of day. "Are not we the splendid men? Fleas will there be this day in the hose of the Glenshira folk." And he sent his targe in the air in a bravado, catching it by the prong in its navel, smart and clean, when it whirled back.

Hawks yelped as they passed; far up on Tullich there was barking of eagles; the brogues met the road as light as the stagslot; laughing, singing, roaring; sword-heads and pikes dunting on wooden targets – and only once they looked back at their women high on the brae-face.

The nuts were thick on the roadside, hanging heavy from swinging branches, and some of the men pulled them off as they passed, stayed for more, straggled, and sang bits of rough songs they ken over many of on Lochowside to this day. So Niall Mor glunched at his corps from under his bonnet and showed his teeth.

"Gather in, gather in," said he; "ye march like a drove of low-country cattle. Alasdair, put 'Baile Inneraora' on her!"

Alasdair changed his tune, and the good march of Clan Diarmaid went swinging down the glen.

The time passed; the sun stood high and hot; clucking from the fir-plantings came woodcock and cailzie; the two rivers were crossed, and the Diarmaids slookened their thirst at the water of Altan Aluinn, whose birth is somewhere in the bogs beside tall Bhuidhe Ben.

Where the clans met was at the Foal's Gap, past Maam. A score of the MacKellars ran out in a line from the bushes, and stotted back from the solid weight of Diarmaid moving in a lump and close-shouldered in the style Niall Mor got from the Italian soldier. Some fell, hacked on the head by the heavy slash of the dry sword; some gripped too late at the pikes that kittled them cruelly; and one – Iver-of-the-Oars – tripped on a root of heather, and fell with his breast on the point of a Diarmaid's dirk.

To the hills went a fast summons, and soon at the mouth of the gap came twoscore of the MacKellars. They took a new plan, and close together faced the green tartan, keeping it back at the point of steel, though the pick of Glenaora wore it, and the brogues slipped on the brae-face. It was fast cut and drive, quick flash of the dirk, with the palm up and the hand low to find the groin, and a long reach with the short black knife. The choked breath hissed at teeth and nose, the salt smell of new blood brought a shiver to birch-leaf and gall. But ever the green tartan had the best of it.

"*Bas, bas, Dhiarmaid!*" cried Calum Dubh, coming up on the back of his breaking two-score with fresh lads from Elerigmor, bed-naked to the hide, and a new fury fell on the two clans tearing at it in the narrow hollow in between the rocky hills. So close they were, there was small room for the whirl of the basket-hilt, and "Mind Tom-a-Phubai! and the shortened steel!" cried Niall Mor, smashing a pretty man's face with a blow from the iron guard of his Ferrara sword. The halberts,

snapped at the haft to make whittles, hammered on the target-hides like stones on a coffin, or rang on the bosses; the tartan ripped when the stuck one rolled on his side before the steel could be twisted out; below the foot the grass felt warm and greasy, and the reason was not ill to seek.

Once it looked like the last of Calum Dubh. He was facing Niall Mor, sword and targe, and Niall Mor changed the sword to the other hand, pulled the *sgian-dubh* from his garter, and with snapping teeth pushed like a lightning fork below MacKellar's target. An Elerigmor man ran in between; the little black knife sunk into his belly with a moist plunge, and the blood spouted on the deer-horn haft.

"*Mallachd ort!* I meant yon for a better man," cried Niall Mor; "but it's well as it is, for the secret's to the fore," and he stood up dour and tall against a new front of Mac-Kellar's men.

Then the sky changed, and a thin smirr of warm rains fell on the glen like smoke; some black-cattle bellowed at the ford in a wonder at where their herds could be, and the herds – stuck, slashed, and cudgelled – lay stiffening on the torn grass between the gap and Mac-Kellar's house. From end to end of the glen there was no man left but was at the fighting. The hook was tossed among the corn; the man hot-foot behind the roe, turned when he had his knife at its throat, to go to war; a lover left his lass among the heather; and all, with tightened belts, were at the old game with Clan Diarmaid, while their women, far up on the sappy levels between the hill-tops and beside the moor-lochs, span at the wheel or carded wool, singing songs with light hearts and thinking no danger.

Back went MacKellar's men before Niall

Mor and his sturdy lads from Camus, the breeder of soldiers – back through the gap and down on the brae to the walls of Calum Dubh.

"Ilean, 'ilean!" cried Calum; "lads, lads! they have us, sure enough. Oh! pigs and thieves! squint mouths and sons of liars!"

The cry gathered up the strength of all that was left of his clan, Art and Uileam, the Maam lads, the brothers from Drimlea and two from over Stron hill, and they stood up together against the Carnus men – a gallant madness! They died fast and hard, and soon but Calum and his two sons were left fencing, till a rush of Diarmaids sent them through the door of the house and tossed among the peats.

"Give in and your lives are your own," said Niall Mor, wiping his sword on his shirtsleeve, and with all that were left of his Diarmaids behind his back.

To their feet stood the three MacKellars.

Calum looked at the folk in front of him, and had mind of other ends to battles. "To die in a house like a rat were no great credit," said he, and he threw his sword on the floor, where the blades of Art and Uileam soon joined it.

With tied arms the father and his sons were taken outside, where the air was full of the scents of birch and gall new-washed. The glen, clearing fast of mist, lay green and sweet for mile and mile, and far at its mouth the fat Blaranbuie woods chuckled in the sun.

"I have you now," said Niall Mor. "Ye ken what we seek. It's the old ploy – the secret of the ale."

Calum laughed in his face, and the two sons said things that cut like knives.

"Man! I'm feared ye'll rue this," said Niall Mor, calm enough. "Ye may laugh, but – what would ye call a gentleman's death?"

"With the sword or the dagger in the hand, and a Diarmaid or two before me," cried Calum.

"Well, there might be worse ways of travelling yont – indeed there could ill be better; but if the secret of the ale is not to be ours for the asking, ye'll die a less well-bred death."

"Name it, man, name it," said Calum. "Might it be tow at the throat and a fir-branch."

"Troth," said Niall Mor, "and that were too gentle a travelling. The Scaurnoch's on our way, and the crows at the foot of it might relish a Glen Shira carcass."

Uileam whitened at the notion of so ugly an end, but Calum only said, "Die we must any way," and Art whistled a bit of a pipe-tune, grinding his heel on the moss.

Niall Mor made to strike the father on the face, but stayed his hand and ordered the three in-by, with a few of his corps to guard them. Up and down Glen Shira went the Diarmaids, seeking the

brewing-cave, giving hut and home to the flame, and making black hearths and low lintels for the women away in the sheilings. They buried their dead at Kilbloan, and, with no secret the better, set out for Scaurnoch with Calum and his sons.

The MacKellars were before, like a *spreidh* of stolen cattle, and the lot of the driven herd was theirs. They were laughed at and spat on, and dirk-hilts and *cromags* hammered on their shoulders, and through Blaranbuie wood they went to the bosky elbow of Dun Corr-bhile and round to the Dun beyond.

Calum, for all his weariness, stepped like a man with a lifetime's plans before his mind; Art looked about him in the fashion of one with an eye to woodcraft; Uileam slouched with a heavy foot, white at the jaw and wild of eye.

The wood opened, the hunting-road bent about the hill-face to give a level that the eye might catch the country spread below. Loch Finne stretched far, from Ardno to French Foreland, a glassy field, specked with one sail off Creaggans. When the company came to a stand, Calum Dubh tossed his head to send the hair from his eyes, and looked at what lay below. The Scaurnoch broke at his feet, the grey rock-face falling to a depth so deep that weary mists still hung upon the sides, jagged here and there by the top of a fir-tree. The sun, behind the Dun, gave the last of her glory to the Cowal Hills; Hell's Glen filled with wheeling mists; Ben Ime, Ben Vane, and Ben Arthur crept together and held princely converse on the other side of the sea.

All in a daze of weariness and thinking the Diarmaids stood, and looked and listened, and the curlews were crying bitter on the shore.

"Oh, haste ye, lads, or it's not Carnus for us to-night," cried Niall Mor. "We have business before us, and long's the march to follow. The secret, black fellow!"

Calum Dubh laughed, and spat in a bravado over the edge of the rock.

"Come, fool; if we have not the word from you before the sun's off Sithean Sluaidhe, your sleep this night is yonder," and he pointed at the pit below.

Calum laughed the more. "If it was hell itself," said he, "I would not save my soul from it."

"Look, man, look! the Sithean Sluaidhe's getting black, and any one of ye can save the three yet. I swear it on the cross of my knife."

Behind the brothers, one, John-Without-Asking, stood, with a gash on his face, eager to give them to the crows below.

A shiver came to Uileam's lips; he looked at his father with a questioning face, and then stepped back a bit from the edge, making to speak to the tall man of Chamis.

Calum saw the meaning, and spoke fast and thick.

"Stop, stop," said he; "it's a trifle of a secret, after all, and to save life ye can have it."

Art took but a little look at his father's face, then turned round on Shira Glen and looked on the hills where the hunting had many a time been sweet. "Maam no more," said he to himself; "but here's death in the hero's style!"

"I thought you would tell it," laughed Niall Mor. "There was never one of your clan but had a tight grip of his little life."

"Ay!" said Calum Dubh; "but it's *my* secret. I had it from one who made me swear on the holy steel to keep it; but take me to Carnus, and I'll make you the heather-ale."

"So be't, and –"

"But there's this in it, I can look no clansmen nor kin in the face after telling it, so Art and Uileam must be out of the way first."

"Death, MacKellar?"

"That same."

Uileam shook like a leaf, and Art laughed, with his face still to Shira, for he had guessed his father's mind.

“Faith!” said Niall Mor, “and that’s an easy thing enough,” and he nodded to John-Without-Asking.

The man made stay nor tarry. He put a hand on each son’s back and pushed them over the edge to their death below. One cry came up to the listening Diarmaids, one cry and no more – the last gasp of a craven.

“Now we’ll take you to Camus, and you’ll make us the ale, the fine ale, the cream of rich heather-ale,” said Niall Mor, putting a knife to the thongs that tied MacKellar’s arms to his side.

With a laugh and a fast leap Calum Dubh stood back on the edge of the rock again.

“Crook-mouths, fools, pigs’ sons! did ye think it?” he cried. “Come with me and my sons and ye’ll get ale, ay, and death’s black wine, at the foot of Scaurnoch.” He caught fast and firm at John-Without-Asking, and threw himself over the rock-face. They fell as the scart dives, straight to the dim sea of mist and pine-tip, and the Diarmaids threw themselves on their breasts to look over. There was nothing to see of life but the crows swinging on black feathers; there was nothing to hear but the crows scolding.

Niall Mor put the bonnet on his head and said his first and last friendly thing of a foe.

“Yon,” said he, “had the heart of a man!”

BOBOON'S CHILDREN

FROM Knapdale to Lorn three wandering clans share the country between them, and of the three the oldest and the greatest are the swart Macdonalds, children of the Old Boboon.

You will come on them on Wade's roads, – jaunty fellows, a bit dour in the look, and braggart; or girls with sloe-eyes, tall and supple, not with a flat slouching foot on the soil, but high in the instep, bounding and stag-sure. At their head will be a long lean old man on crutches – John Fine Macdonald —

Old Boboon, the father and head of the noblest of wandering tribes.

“Sir,” will Boboon say to you, “I am the fellow you read of in books as the teller of Fingalian tales; wilt hear one of them for a poor Saxon shilling, or wilt buy my lures for the fish? Or perhaps a display of scholarly piping by my daughter's son – the gallant scamp! – who has carried arms for his king?”

If one must have the truth, the piping is bad piping, but the fish-lures and the tales are the best in the world. You will find some of the tales in the writings of Iain Og of Isla – such as “The Brown Bear of the Green Glen”; but the best are to hear as Boboon minds them when he sits with you on the roadside or on the heather beside the evening fire, when the brown fluffy eagles bark at the mist on Braevallach. Listen well to them, for this person has the gift. He had it from his father, who had it from *his* father, who had it from a mother, who, in deep trouble and disease, lay awake through long nights gathering thoughts as healthy folks gather nuts – a sweet thing enough from a sour husk.

And if time were your property (as it should be the portion of every wiselike man), you might hear many tales from Old Boboon, but never the tale of his own three chances.

It happened once upon a time that the captain in the town took a notion to make Boboon into a tame house-man instead of a creature of the woods and highways. He took him first by himself and clapped him into a kilt of his own tartan eight yards round the buttocks, full pleated, with hose of fine worsted, and a coat with silver buttons. He put a pickle money in his sporran, and gave him a place a little way down his table. The feeding was high and the work was to a wanderer's fancy; for it was but whistling to a dog now and then, chanting a stave, or telling a story, or roaming through the garden behind the house.

“Ho, ho!” said Boboon, “am not I the sturdy fellow come to his own?” and about the place he would go with a piper's swagger, switching the grass and shrubs with a withie as he went, in the way gentlemen use riding-sticks.

But when Inveraora town lay in the dark of the winter night, and the captain's household slept, Boboon would hear his clan calling on him outside the wall.

“Boboon! oh, Boboon! old hero! come and colloque with your children.”

He would go to the wall, which was lower on the inside than the out (and is, indeed, the wall of old Quinten, where a corps of Campbells, slaughtered by Inverloch dogs, lie under a Latin stone), and he would look down at his friends running about like pole-cats in the darkness, in their ragged kilts and trows, their stringy hair tossing in the wind. The women themselves would be there, with the bairns whining on their backs.

“Ay! ay! this is you, my hearty folk!” he would say; “glad am I to see you and smell the wood-fire reek off you. How is it on the road?”

“From here we have not moved since you left us, John Fine. We are camped in the Blue Quarry, and you never came near your children and friends.”

“God! and here's the one that's sorry for that same. But over the walls they will not let me. ‘If gentleman you would be,’ says the captain, ‘you must keep out of woods and off the highway.’”

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