

Stables Gordon

Kenneth McAlpine: A Tale of Mountain, Moorland and Sea



Gordon Stables

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Mountain, Moorland and Sea**

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Chapter One

Early Days

“Away, ye gay landscapes, ye garden of roses,
And bring me the land where the dewdrop reposes.”

Byron.

“Poor woolly mother, be at peace!
Whither thou goest I will bear thy care.”

M. Arnold.

Scene: A Highland mountain, clad almost to the summit in purple heather. On the right a ravine, half hidden by drooping birch trees. On the left a pine forest. Sheep grazing in the foreground. Smoke upcurling from a humble cottage in the distance. A shepherd-boy talking to his dog; between them a lamb is lying on the ground.

“It is dead, Kooran, dead, dead, dead. It is as dead as ever a lamb was, Kooran. Ay, my doggie, I ken you’re sorrowful and anxious, but you may stand there and lick its little face and legs, till this time the morn, Kooran, but you can never bring back life to it again.

“What do you say, Kooran? Its eyes are still bright and shinin’ and life-like? True; but wait a wee, Kooran. Yes, wait a wee, dear frien’. In less than an hour, Kooran, its poor eyes will be glassy enough, and its bits o’ legs as cold and stiff as the crook I’m holding in my hand.

“Let us hide it awa’ in under this bush o’ whins, – out o’ sight of the poor woeful mother of it. I canna bear to bury it just yet, while the heart is still warm, but by-and-bye, Kooran; by-and-bye, doggie.

“Yonder comes the mother, Kooran. She has left the flock again.”

The sheep bleats.

“Listen, Kooran, listen. What a mournfu’ bleat! It makes my blood creep. And look at her eyes, Kooran. They seem starting out o’ the sockets wi’ excitement. Drive her back, Kooran, but *walk*, doggie; dinna run. Drive her ever so gently. She’ll never have her lammie to trot at her heels again. Gently, Kooran, gently.

“And now, Kooran, off you trot home for the barley scones and the flagon o’ milk. I’ll have the lammie buried before you come back, so the sight of that will trouble you no more. Then we’ll have dinner, doggie, and it is time, too. Look at the sun where it is, right over the highest peak of Ben Varra. Off you trot, Kooran, and dinna let the grass grow under your feet till you’re back again.

“Heigho! another lammie dead!” The boy was alone now; the faithful dog had departed at once on his mission. In a bee-line down the mountain’s side went he, feathering along through the grass and the patches of blooming heather, jumping over boulders, and springing down from rocky ledges with a daring that would assuredly have proved fatal to any other kind of dog, save a Highland collie or a Scottish deerhound. Finally he went splashing through a broad though shallow river, and immediately

after disappeared in a clump of those sweet-scented birch trees that grow so plentifully in “the land of the mountain and flood.”

“Heigho! another lammie dead!”

The boy had gone farther up the hill, and as he spoke he threw himself down on top of a couch made of heather, dislodging as he did so several mossy bees that had come to suck the honey from the little purple bells.

Quite a work of art was this couch. It had taken the boy all the livelong morning and forenoon to make it, Kooran meanwhile trotting about after him or standing by his side, with one ear pricked up, the other down, very much interested indeed in the progress of the work, and apparently sorry that he was only a dog and could not lend a hand.

Wouldst know how this couch was built? First and foremost, then, the lad had sought out a proper site, flat and smooth, on which to make it. This was chosen close to a steep-rising rock far up the mountain’s side, and whence he could see not only all the country far and wide, but the grazing ground of his flock of sheep some distance down beneath him.

Under the rock, but fully exposed to the rays of the summer sun, for Kenneth was not a bit afraid of spoiling his complexion. Indeed, such an accident would have been impossible, for neither his face nor his knees – he wore the Highland garb – could have been one whit browner than they were. And as for the sun giving him a headache, that was out of the question – the sun’s rays had not the power. For when taking a *siesta*, as shepherd lads are wont to do sometimes, his favourite attitude was lying on his back with one arm under his head and his face upturned to the god of day, for he feared the sun no more than does yonder eagle that goes circling up and up towards it, even as moths, on a summer’s evening, go wheeling round and round the lamp flame.

A black, bare, bleak-looking rock it was, but canopied over with the greenest of green moss and trailing saxifrages, bearing tiny flowerets of pink and white and blue.

Quite a work of art was this heather couch, and as perfect as any one could wish to see it. Not from any place near to the rock, however, had the boy pulled the heather with which he formed it. There was something of the poet and the artist about the lad, and he would never have dreamt of spoiling the gorgeous purple carpet that grew on the hill immediately in front of and beneath him. He went farther afield and higher up for his couch material. And he *cut* it close off by the roots, for if you *pull* heather, then with the roots are sure to come up both moss and turf.

When he had culled quite an armful, he proceeded to tie it up into little bundles or sheaves, and so on sheaf after sheaf he manufactured, singing to himself or talking to Kooran, until he had quite enough to build his heather sofa withal.

Then he took all his sheaves down to the rock and commenced operations, placing them side by side close together with the bloom uppermost, and lo and behold, in less than half an hour, a couch soft and fragrant enough for the dainty limbs of some fairy queen to recline upon.

It was on this heather bed, then, that Kenneth threw himself at full length as soon as Kooran had disappeared in the distant birch wood.

For fully a quarter of an hour Kenneth lay looking up at the white-grey clouds, that were scudding swiftly across the blue of the beautiful sky. He was wishing he could be up there, up riding on yonder cloud, away from the earth entirely. “Just for a time, oh! only for a time,” he muttered; “I would come back to my sheep and Kooran. Yonder is a laverock,” (lark). “I can hardly see it, it has flown so high but I can hear it, and how bonnie it sings as it flutters its wings, and seems to fan the very clouds. Let me see what the song says. But no, I mustn’t sing, and I mustn’t read. Kooran will soon be back wi’ the dinner, and I haven’t buried the poor lammie yet.”

So saying, he jumped up. He had a spade handy. Alas! much to Kenneth’s sorrow, that spade had been used many times too often this summer, for it had been a bad season among the sheep. He got the spade, and carried that and the dead lamb far up above the spot where he had cut the heather.

Here the mountain was split as it were in two, or rather there were two hills, with a green strath or glen between, formed thousands of years or ages ago, by the gradual descent of some mighty glacier.

The glade was green and in many places soft, though by no means boggy. Near a bush Kenneth quickly dug a grave, and with a sigh he laid the lamb therein, and covered it up, laying the sod down again, so that it was scarcely discernible from the turf around it.

Then he shouldered his spade and prepared to go back. But remembering something else, he made a détour and came at last to a patch of whins.

Hidden in a cosy corner close to the ground was a nest well lined with feathers, and the little bird popped stealthily out as he approached.

“Oh! the beauties,” cried the boy, “the bonnie wee ‘hoties,’” (a kind of finch). “There were four white and red eggs when I saw you last, and there lie four naked gorbles, gaping up at me with wide yellow mouths. Now that nest is easily seen, and if other boys find it when I’m no’ here, they’ll kill the young and break the mither’s heart. I’ll try and hide it. It’s maybe the last nest I’ll find this season.” As he spoke he looked about, and soon found a branchlet of withered whins, which he placed carefully in front of the nest, then took up his spade again and was about to withdraw, when his eyes lighted on one of those curious green knolls, that are common enough in some bare mountain glens in the Scottish Highlands.

“A fairy hill!” he said half aloud. “I do wonder now if there are such things as fairies, and if on moonlight nights they come oot, and dance on this green hillock. Oh! wouldn’t I like to see them just! I’ve a good mind to come and watch here some bonnie night. I could bring Kooran; I wouldna be feared if Kooran was with me.”

He climbed up to the top of the green knoll as he spoke. It was perfectly round and smooth, and the grass grew softer and greener here than anywhere else in all the glade. “Why,” he said, “here is a hole near the top for all the world like a lum,” (chimney). “Is it possible, I wonder, that fairies do live inside?”

Down he went now and commenced marching round and round the knoll, prodding it everywhere as he went with his long sharp spade. The spade sank deep each time he thrust it in, until he came round to the upper side, and here it rang against a stone.

The boy went to work with a will, and soon laid that stone bare. It was merely a large flat slab and quite loose. Kenneth leapt up above it, and using the spade as a lever, he prised it up, and over it fell, revealing to the boy’s astonished gaze the entrance to a dark cave. Here was indeed a discovery, and a discovery, too, that dovetailed most completely and perfectly with this lad’s romantic nature.

“Well,” he said, “this *is* something to think about at last. But I must go to dinner now. Kooran must come with me to explore.”

He left his spade and went away singing down the glade, and back to his heather couch.

But Kooran had not returned, so the lad, giving a look first to see that the sheep were all right, lay down and took out a volume of songs and commenced to read. Poetry, however, had lost its charm to-day, for his mind would, in spite of all he could do, revert to that dark cave in the fairy knoll. So he threw down the book and gave himself up to the pleasant occupation of castle-building.

The day was warm and sultry, the bees were humming lazily from heather bloom to heather bloom, and high up against the fleecy cloudlets the laverock still fluttered and sang; no wonder Kenneth’s eyelids drooped, and that he soon lost himself in dreams of fairyland.

Kenneth’s mother lived in the long low turf-thatched cottage beyond the birch wood. He had neither sister nor brother, and for many a long year his father had been quietly sleeping in the humble little churchyard that surrounded the ruins of the old parish kirk.

“Oh, Kooran, doggie, here you are,” cried Kenneth’s mother as the dog came trotting in, open-mouthed and gasping with the race he had had. “Here ye are, and I haven’t milked the cow yet. But I won’t be long, laddie.”

Kooran signified his intention of waiting, and threw himself down on the kitchen floor, but not before he had lapped up all the cat's milk. Pussy jumped down from the three-legged stool, near the peat fire, and began purring and rubbing herself against Ivooran's chin. The cat and dog were the best of friends; perhaps pussy thought it was good policy to keep in with Kooran.

As soon as Kenneth's mother had milked the cow, she filled a tin flagon with the rich white fluid, made up a large parcel of buttered scones and cheese, tied the whole in a large red napkin, and put it on the floor.

Kooran was up and off before the cat could have winked, had she wanted to wink.

He took time to recross the stream and held the parcel high up as he did so, but he did not let the grass grow under his feet, ere he returned to the spot where he had left his young master. He was not there, but Kooran soon found him asleep on the fragrant heather couch. The dog dropped the bundle, sat down and looked at his master, and considered. This did not wake him, so Kooran gave vent to an impatient whine or two. As even that did not wake the sleeping boy, the dog licked his cheek, then clawed at his arm with his paw, and finally Kenneth sat up, rubbed his eyes, and then burst out laughing.

"What silly dreams I've had," he said, proceeding to undo the knot on the napkin, "such silly dreams! But go and fetch your dish, doggie."

Kooran trotted off, and was back again in a moment with a tin saucer, and the scones and milk were shared.

"But oh! Kooran," continued the boy presently, "I've such news for you."

The dog pricked his ears, and turning his head a little on one side, looked wondrous wise.

"No," said Kenneth, "it isn't rats, and it isn't rabbits. There is never anything else in your noddle, Kooran, but rats and rabbits. It's a cave, Kooran. Of course you don't know what a cave is, but here, — there is some more dinner for you. Eat that, and then we'll go and explore."

The boy and his dog started off up the glen immediately after, and Kooran, knowing there was something on the *tapis*, commenced to frisk and bark around his young master.

"That won't do, Kooran," said the boy, shaking his finger at his companion. "Ye mustna do that. Look down there at the sheep; every single one o' them has stopped eating to snuff the air. Come to heel and keep quiet."

They soon reached the fairy knoll, and as soon as Kooran saw the hole, his mind still running on rats and rabbits, he disappeared inside.

Never a rat nor rabbit was there, but several unwholesome-looking bats came whirring out, and dazzled by the sunlight, dropped into the first bush they came to. Kenneth himself now entered the cave, spade in hand, and as soon as his eyes got used to the darkness, he began to examine it thoroughly. It was large and roomy, the walls and floor of solid stone, with marks of tools thereon, as if the place had either been wholly excavated or enlarged by human hands. The light glimmered down the chimney and fell on some large round brown article. It was a huge kettle. Then, young though he was, Kenneth knew that at some time or other this cave had been occupied not by fairies, but by a gang of smugglers.

"It was wise of them," thought Kenneth, "to use a place like this."

Well might he think so, for even to this day, in remote districts of the Highlands, so much of superstition clings around these fairy knolls that no peasant would dare to go near them after nightfall.

Now there is one thing in which Scotland and Germany have long resembled each other. The very poorest people belonging to the two countries have from time immemorial been taught to read and write. Kenneth had had the advantages of an education far superior to most lads of his class and age. He had spent many a long year at the parish school and evening school, his mother had taught him, the clergyman's daughter had helped him, but, better than all this, he had helped himself.

When talking, as must have already been perceived, he sometimes made use of Scotch words and phrases. He did so, not because he could not speak pure English, but simply because they are often more expressive than the Saxon idiom.

“Well, Kooran,” said Kenneth, “this is the best find ever we made. Dinna ye think so, doggie?”

But Kooran’s nose was turned up to the roof, and his eyes wide with excitement, for he perceived, clinging by its claws up there, the strangest-looking rat ever he had seen in his life before. A rat, and still not a rat, for it had wings; yes, and it could fly, too, for even as he gazed it let go its hold and made straight for the doorway. Kooran was far too quick for it, though. He sprang up, and next moment it lay half-dead apparently between his two forepaws.

“Strangest thing ever I came across,” Kooran appeared to observe as he looked wonderingly up into his young master’s face. “Rats flying; this *must* be a fairy knoll, and I feel half afraid.”

“That’s a bat, Kooran, a bat, boy, and you mustn’t touch it. Look at its two rows of white and glittering wee teeth. Poor little thing! Kooran, it is well-nigh dead. And this cave really belongs by rights to that bat and his brothers. We’ll tie it up in the napkin, and you shall carry it home, and mother will cure it and let it fly off again.”

As he spoke the boy suited the action to his words.

“Yes, Kooran, this is a grand discovery. After reading ‘Robinson Crusoe’ so often, I’ve always wished to have an island all to myself; but a cave, Kooran, is nearly as good as an island. I wonder what Dugald McCrane will say about it. I’m sure he will help me to make things to furnish it, and we’ll have our dinner here, Kooran, and a fire when the weather grows cold, and everything so jolly. Come, we must go this very evening and see Dugald McCrane.”

True to his word, when Kenneth had driven his sheep into their fold for the night, and had eaten his supper at his mother’s fireside, then, instead of taking down his books and lying down on the great wooden dais to read by the light of the little black whale-oil lamp, with its wicks of peeled and dried rushes, he got up whistled to Kooran, and said to his mother, —

“I’m going down the glen, mother.”

“Dinna be lang, laddie, dinna be lang,” was all his mother said.

It was a clear moonlight night, all the brighter stars were shining, and there was hardly a cloud to be seen.

Kenneth had two long Scotch miles to walk, down into a thicket of fir trees first, across a rustic bridge, under which the brown stream was dashing and swirling and ever and anon breaking itself into foam against the boulders. It was very dark down here, but Kenneth was soon away out into the open country again, and the roar of the river was no more heard. By-and-bye the road led through a wood of oak, ash, and elm trees, with now and then the dark head of a pine tree shooting high up into the sky. The moonlight showed in patches here all along the road, there was the sound of falling water not far off, mingling with the whispering of the wind among the leaves, now crisp with the sunshine of the long bright summer, and there was occasionally the mournful cry of the brown owl, which made Kenneth feel lonesome and “eerie,” and he was not sorry when he was clear of that dark gloomy wood, and saw up on a hillside the light shining yellow through the blind of Keeper McCrane’s cottage.

A black retriever came rushing down, growling and showing his teeth, but when he saw it was Kenneth he wagged his bell-rope of a tail, and bade him and Kooran welcome.

Kenneth left his dog in the garden to dance and caper about with the retriever. No doubt Kooran told this black dog all about the flying rats. Kenneth just opened the door and walked straight in.

Both Dugald and his young wife jumped up from their seats beside the fire, and welcomed Kenneth, and their only boy, a wonderful little fellow of some nine or ten summers old, with hair not unlike in colour to a bundle of oaten straw, got out of bed and ran to pull Kenneth by the jacket, without waiting to dress.

Dugald and his wife and boy all listened with wondering eyes to the story of the fairy knoll.

“Bless me, dear laddie,” said Mrs McCrane, “were you no’ afraid to venture in?”

“I’ll tell you what we’ll do,” said the keeper. “We’ll go up the glen and see the old witch wife, Nancy Dobbell. She can tell us all about it. They tell me she knows everything that ever happened for a hundred years back and more.”

“Will she no’ be in bed?” said his wife.

“In bed?” said Dugald. “Not she. She never goes to bed till ‘the wee short hour ayont the twal,’ and there is no saying what she may be doing till then.”

“Well, let us go,” cried Kenneth, starting up.

One glance at the walls of the room in Dugald’s cottage, that did duty as both kitchen and dining-hall, would have given a stranger an insight into both the character and calling of the chief inmate. Never a picture adorned the room, but dried grasses and ferns did duty instead, and here were the skins of every kind of wild animal and bird to be found in the wilds of the Scottish Highlands, the fougart or polecat, the whitterit or weasel, the wild cat and fox, ptarmigan, plovers of every kind, including the great whaup or curlew, hawks, owls, and even the golden-headed eagle itself stood stuffed in a corner, with glaring fiery eyes and wings half outspread.

“Come,” said Dugald.

And away went the keeper and Kenneth, the two dogs following closely at their masters’ heels, as if to protect them from all harm.

Chapter Two

Kenneth and his Friends

“Still o’er these scenes my memory wakes,
And fondly broods with miser care;
Time but the impression deeper makes,
As streams their channels deeper wear.”

Burns.

Scene: A long, low-thatched cottage, in the midst of a wild, bleak moorland. No other hut nor house in sight. Around the cottage is a garden or kail-yard, with a fence of flat, slab-like stones. In this is a gate half open, and hanging by one hinge. The cottage has its door in the gable, and is windowless, save for some holes ’twixt thatch and eaves, through which light is now glimmering. A bright round moon is riding in the sky, among a few white clouds, that look like wings. Coming towards the gateway, two figures may be seen, both in the Highland garb. Behind them two dogs.

“Losh! man,” said Dugald McCrane, “I’m almost ’feared to gang farther. Who knows what company she may have in this lonesome dreary spot? Hark! What was that?”

Dugald started and stared about him in some trepidation as the prolonged and mournful shriek of an owl rose on the night air.

“It is only an owl,” said Kenneth, laughing.

“Ach! man,” said Dugald, “it is not me that’s afraid of an owlet, but goodness be about us, Kenneth, there are owls *and* owls. Hush! there it goes again. Losh! look how the dogs are shaking and trembling?”

It was true what Dugald had said; both the retriever and collie had thrown themselves at their masters’ feet, and gave every indication of mortal dread. After all, it was merely owing to a kind of magnetic influence which fear always has. This had been communicated from Dugald to his dog, and from the retriever to the collie.

“It’s nothing,” said Kenneth, “nothing, Dugald. I’m not afraid, if you are.”

“Fear!” replied the stalwart Highland keeper. “Dugald never feared the face o’ clay. But look how they’re shakin’ yet. These dogs hear voices we cannot listen to and live; they see things that human eyes, dare not scan. Dinna deny it, Kenneth, lad; dinna seek to deny it.

“Do you remember, Kenneth, that dreary, dark December night two years ago, when Walie’s wife – goodness be about us – went and hanged herself in the woods o’ Alva, and how Shot there sat a’ the livelong night on the top of the old turf wall and howled so mournfully? It made me tremble in my bed to hear him. And did you no’ tell me that your Kooran did the same one night the year before last, and that next morning a hat and a stick were found on the brink o’ Beattie’s mill-dam, and poor Jock Grey’s body stark and stiff – ”

“Stop! stop!” cried Kenneth. “This is no time of night for such stories. Kooran, come on.”

And the boy began to lead the way up through the garden to Nancy’s door.

“Just a moment,” said Dugald, laying a hand on Kenneth’s shoulder. “Have you got your flute?”

“Yes.”

“Well, just give us a toot. If Nancy has company that’s no’ canny, it will give them time to bolt up the chimney. Sirs! Sirs!”

Kenneth laughed, put his flute together, and started a merry air.

“The Campbells are coming; hurrah, hurrah?” was the tune he played.

Dugald forgot his fear, and began to sing. The “twa dogs” forgot theirs, and began to dance and caper and bark, and in the very middle of this “rant” the cottage door opened, and Nancy herself appeared.

“Come in, come in, you twa daft laddies,” she cried, “or ’deed you’ll start Nancy hersel’ to dance, for as auld as she is. Come in; you’ll leave the dogs outside, winna ye, for fear o’ my poor cat?”

“Ay, Grannie,” said Dugald, “we’ll leave the dogs outside, and I’m thinkin’ neither o’ them would show face inside your door if you asked them e’er so kindly. My Shot there hasn’t forgotten the salute your cat gave him last time he came here. If you mind, Grannie, she jumped on his back and rode him a’ round the kail-yard, and never missed him a whack, till he flew out o’ the gate and ran helter-skelter o’er the moor. I dinna think your cat’s canny, Grannie.”

“What a beautifu’ nicht!” said Grannie; “but come in, laddies.”

“You’re sure you have no company?” said Dugald, still hesitating to enter.

“Come, ye stoopid loon,” she replied. “There’s nobody here but me and the cat. Sit doon. Tak’ a stool, Kennie, my bonnie boy.”

A bonnie boy? Yes, there was no denying it. Kenneth, our hero, was a bonnie boy, and gave promise of growing up into a fine handsome man.

His broad blue bonnet was usually worn pretty far back, but even had he worn it forward, I do not think it would have been possible for it to suppress the wealth of dark short curls that rose up over his broad brown brow. His cheeks had the tint that health, the winds, and the sun had given them. His lips were rosy, and when he laughed he showed a set of teeth even and white, and a merry twinkle went upwards and danced about his dark, dark eyes. But at all other times those eyes were somewhat dreamy withal. Such was Kenneth McAlpine, and it was probably that same dreamy, thoughtful look in his eyes that made him appear older than he really was, for he had not yet seen his thirteenth year.

But there was one other reason to account for Kenneth’s looking somewhat older than his years. He had already come through a good deal of grief.

His father had once been a prosperous crofter or small farmer. Not that the crofts in Glen Alva were very large or very wealthy, but, when well cultivated, the land was grateful and yielded up its fruits abundantly.

Then the sea was not very far away, only a few miles, and fish therein were abundant and to be had only for the catching.

It was the broad Atlantic Ocean whose waves broke and thundered ceaselessly on the rocky shore just beyond the hills yonder. Only two years ago – what long, long years they had seemed to Kenneth! – this lad had used to spend many an hour by the seashore. Indeed, every hour that he could spare from school, or from home, he spent with the ocean.

I am quite right in saying *with* the ocean instead of *by* the sea, for Kenneth looked upon the sea as a friend and as a companion; he used to speak with it and talk to it; it seemed to understand him, and he *it*. What baskets of glorious fish he used to get from the sea! and what dozens of splendid steel blue lobsters and lordly crabs!

Kenneth used to fish from the rocks on days when he could not borrow old Duncan Reed’s cobble. Old Duncan was frail and rheumatic, and could not always go out to fish himself, but one way or another he had taught Kenneth nearly all he knew about the sea and fishing. He had taught him to row, and to scull, and to make and bait and busk a line, and to swim as well.

The making of a good strong line used to be a great pleasure to Kenneth. It was manufactured from horsehair. There was first and foremost the getting of this horsehair, for quite a quantity was required. It consisted of combings from the manes and tails of horses, and many a mile Kenneth used to pad to procure it. The main source of supply was the stables of a noble lord who lived in a great old-fashioned castle miles from Glen Alva. For the horsehair so obtained Kenneth used to give to the stablemen largess in fish. Then, having obtained his supply and carried it home, it was quite a long and tedious process to plait the line. But Kenneth knew no such word as tire, so he worked

and worked away at early morning and late at night, and as yard after yard of the line was made, it was rolled upon a reel roughly hewn from a branch of the silvery birch, and probably at the end of a fortnight the line would be complete, and away Kenneth would rush like a young deer over the hills.

Nancy's house on the moor lay between him and the shore, and however great a hurry Kenneth was in, he did not fail to call and speak a few moments with the "old witch wife," as she was universally called, the truth being that she was no more a witch than you or I, reader, only she was an herbalist, and wise in many other ways.

Yes, Kenneth would always find time to call at old Nancy's hut, and he never left the house without a drink of milk or whey – for Nancy kept a cow – or a cupful of heather ale. Nancy was famed far and near for making heather ale, and on Sundays the lads and lasses from a good way round, used to make a pilgrimage to Nancy's and taste her wondrous brew.

Many a word of good advice Nancy had for Kenneth, too, her bonnie boy, and many a blessing.

He would soon arrive at the old fisherman's hut, which was a boat turned upside down and let into a crevice of the rocks high enough up to prevent green seas from swamping it, although in stormy weather, with a west wind blowing, the spray used to dash right over the roof.

"On days like these," old Duncan used to say, "I don't need to put any salt in my porridge, for the sea-bree that drops down the chimney makes it salt enough."

When Duncan got Kenneth's horsehair line, he used to unroll it and try the strength of it, foot by foot and yard by yard, and if it bore the test, then Duncan would put his hand on the lad's head and say, —

"My dear Kennie, you'll be as good a fisherman as myself yet."

And Kennie would smile, and say he hoped so, for he never meant to be anything else. How little he knew then the truth of the poet's words, —

"There is a Divinity that shapes our ends,
Rough-hew them as we will."

There isn't much fancy work about the flies one needs to catch fish with, on the western shores of Scotland, nor about the rod you use. Only a strongish hook, and tied over that a morsel of white feather or even a bit of wool from the back of a lamb. The fish are not particular when hungry, and they nearly always are hungry, and there are times when you really cannot draw them in fast enough.

But at certain seasons of the year they don't rise; they then prefer bait lowered down to them. They take breakfast in bed. The bait which they love most dearly of all is the inside of a crab, but as this is rather expensive, Kenneth and Duncan Reed were in the habit of using limpets, and they never failed to have good fortune with these.

Of course the limpets had to be gathered first, and as Kenneth was young and Duncan was old, it was the work of the boy to collect these. And when the tide was back you might have seen him at any time, far away out among the weed-covered boulders and rocks, with a chisel and hammer to knock the limpets off and a tiny basket on his back to pop them into.

Nor was there a deal of fancy work to be learned in rowing or sculling a cobble, but then, you know, the fisherman and little Kennie used to venture quite a long distance out to sea, for there was an island three miles away where the fish were very numerous, and thither they often went. And sometimes the sea was both rough and wild before they got back, and skill was then needed to keep her right and straight. For had a sea struck her broadside on, it might have capsized or staved the cobble, and if a great wave had broken over the stern, it might have swamped her, and she would have sunk, and both Kennie and his friend would then have been food for the creatures that dwell down in the dark caves beneath the ocean.

As to swimming, Kenneth seemed to take to it quite naturally, and many a little adventure he had in the water.

Once when swimming he was bitten on the knee by a horrible fish called on the shores of the Atlantic the miller's thumb. It is a kind of skate or ray of immense size, with a fearfully large mouth filled with sharp teeth.

On this particular day the sun had been very bright and the water warm and clear, and Kenneth swam a long distance from the shore. When he returned he was very faint, and his knee was bleeding; he fell and lost consciousness almost immediately after he reached the pebbly beach. Duncan ran to his assistance, and soon got him round; then he bound up his knee.

“Was it a shark?” Kenneth had inquired.

“Oh! horrible! no, Kennie, no, for had a shark seized you, his teeth are so arranged and so hook-like that he couldn't have let you go again had he wanted to ever so much.”

Another day, when Duncan and he were hauling in a hand line with an immensely great cod at the end of it, suddenly, for some unexplained reason or other, the line slipped, and almost at the same moment Kenneth fell overboard.

A codfish of say twenty pounds pulls with fearful force.

Kenneth was dragged under the water.

It was a trying time then for old Duncan's nerves. Would the poor boy be dead before he got the great fish checked and in charge again?

Duncan dragged in the line as speedily as he dared.

Oh! how his heart had throbbed to think that there was a possibility of the line breaking, and his little friend being kept under the water till dead.

And oh! how joyful he was when Kenneth reappeared.

Kenneth really came up smiling, though he was spluttering a great deal as well. “I'm sure,” he said when he got into the boat again, and the fish was there as well, “I'm sure I've swallowed fully a pint of salt water, Duncan.”

Yes, Kenneth laughed heartily about it, but poor old Duncan was weeping, and before he could be himself again he must take off his broad blue bonnet and kneel down upon it in the stern sheets of the cobble, and return thanks to Him who holds the sea in the hollow of His hand.

There were days in summer when the sea was so blue and bright and still, that I think Kenneth used almost to go to sleep while floating on its surface.

Gathering the eggs of the sea-birds from off the cliffs and rocks was dangerous sport, but Kenneth loved it all the more on that account.

But he loved the sea in storm as well, and used to play among the billows and spray along the shore, or venture out a little distance for the pleasure of being rolled up again like a log of wood upon the beach.

Kenneth really could have said with the immortal Byron —

“And I have loved thee, Ocean! and my joy
Of youthful sports was on thy breast to be,
Borne, like thy bubbles, onward; from a boy
I wantoned with thy breakers – they to me
Were a delight; and if the freshening sea
Made them a terror, 'twas a pleasing fear,
For I was, as it were, a child of thee,
And trusted to thy billows far and near,
And laid my hand upon thy mane, as I do here.”

Old Duncan Reed owned and worked a little lobster fishery of his own. And before the great grief came that deprived poor Kenneth of a father, he used to take great delight in helping the fisherman with this part of his work. It was very simple. They had wooden cages which they sank

at the bottom of a deep pool among the rocks. There was a stone or two at the bottom of each cage to make it sink, and it was lowered down at night by a rope which was attached at the top of the water to a wooden float.

The cages were baited, and Duncan used to find it a capital plan to put a live crab or lobster into the cage. There was a hole at the top of each cage for the creatures to crawl in, but it was so arranged that once in they did not get out again.

As soon as one was sunk, rejoiced to find himself once more in his native element, the imprisoned shell-fish would begin to eat. And presently round would come another crab or lobster and look in for a little at him with his eyes, which, you know, are upon stalks.

“You seem to be enjoying yourself in there,” the newcomer would say.

The imprisoned animal would wave a claw at him, as much as to say, —

“Oh! very nicely indeed, but go away; don’t stand there and stare at a fellow when he is having his dinner. It is rude.”

“Is it good, though?” the other would ask.

“Delicious!” the reply would be.

“How ever did you get inside?”

“Look and see.”

Then the new-come lobster would find the hole in the top of the cage, and in he would pop. And presently more and more lobsters would come round and pop in one by one.

Well, but when they wanted to pop out again they would not find it so easy. In fact, there would be no way out for them, until Duncan hauled up the creel and pulled them forth to be boiled.

“It is so easy to get into a trap, but so difficult to get out again,” old Duncan would say to Kenneth, “so, my dear laddie, always all your life be sure to look before you leap.”

Old Duncan was a very merry old man; he used to tell Kenneth such funny stories, and tales of the deep blue sea, and all about sea-fairies, and water babies, and mermaids that live deep down beneath the ocean in coral caves. I do not think that old Duncan believed in these things himself, nor that he expected Kenneth to believe in them either, but they helped to pass the time, and often of a winter’s evening the boy would stay in the fisherman’s hut so late that night came on before he started for Glen Alva, and the stars would be all shining as he took his road across the hills and over the dreary moorland where Nancy lived.

Old Duncan Reed did not know the time except by the sun, and Kenneth had no watch, so he could never be sure on occasions like these what o’clock it really was.

But one thing Kenneth never did forget, and that was to bring a few fish or a lobster or a lovely crab for Nancy.

If her light was burning when he reached the little cottage, then he would go in; if not, he knew she had gone to bed, so he would hang the string of fish to the door latch – a very old-fashioned one with a thumb-piece – and go quietly away with Kooran. Or if it was a lobster with its claws tied, he used to tether it to the foot of a rose tree that grew near the door, and poor old Nancy found it in the morning, and was thankful accordingly. I’m sure of this, that Nancy never said her prayers without asking guidance, and a blessing for her bonnie boy.

And it was in this very cottage that Kenneth and Duncan the keeper now found themselves, in front of a nice peat fire, for though it was yet early in autumn, in this bleak Highland moorland the evenings struck chill and cold.

Nancy herself sat in the corner, with her grey grimalkin on her shoulder. The cat seemed asleep, only she had one eye open, and that eye was watching the door.

Chapter Three

The Story of the Fairy Knoll

“I’ve heard my reverend Grannie say
In lanely glens ye like to stray,
Or where auld ruined castles grey
Nod to the moon.
Ye fright the nightly wanderer’s way,
Wi’ eldritch croon.”

Burns.

(Croon – low mournful moan.)

Scene: The interior of Nancy Dobbell’s cottage. Nancy and her visitors round the peat fire, the light from which ever and anon brings the features of each out in bold relief, from the Rembrandtine darkness in the background. Nancy is talking, but knitting as well. Click, click, clickety, click, go the wires, sometimes very fast indeed, at other times more slowly, as if keeping time with Nancy’s thoughts and her spoken words.

“And what brings my bairns so late across the muir the nicht?” she asked.

“We knew ye wadna be in bed, Grannie,” said Dugald. “The moon is shinin’ so brichtly, I had expected to meet ye on the muir, gatherin’ herbs by its ghastly licht. We heard the owlet cryin’; had we met you, Grannie, it would have scared our senses awa’.”

“I wouldn’t have been afraid, Grannie,” said Kenneth.

For a moment there was silence, the old woman’s head had drooped on her breast, and the knitting wires clicked more slowly, like a clock before it stops.

But only for a moment; she raised her head again, and click, click, click, went the wires as fast as before, but both Kenneth and his companion noticed that Nancy’s cheeks were wet.

“Nancy’s auld and silly,” she said, “but Nancy was not always so. Heigho!”

“Oh, Grannie!” cried honest Dugald, hastening to atone for the cruelty of his first speech, but, in his very hurry, making a poor job of it. “Oh, Grannie, dinna say you’re silly; really folk say you’re wise and – and – ”

“A witch?” said Nancy, smiling.

“Well, may be so. Who can help what people say? But ’deed there is no’ a poor woman or man either in a’ the glen or parish that hasn’t a good word to say for you. Your simple medicines, Grannie, have brought comfort and joy to mony a hoose, no matter where ye got them or who – goodness be near us – helped you to gather them. When puir Jock Kelpie was drooned, did you no’ bide and comfort the widow, and sing to her and soothe her for weeks thegither? When Menzies’ bairns had the fever, and no’ a soul would gang near the hoose, wha tended them and cured them? Wha but Nancy Dobbell? And there’s no’ a bairn in a’ the clachan that doesn’t run to meet ye, Grannie, whenever ye come o’er the muir.”

The wires clicked very fast.

“And,” continued Dugald, “though you’re maybe no’ very bonnie noo, everybody says, ‘What a pretty woman Nancy must have been in her time!’”

Nancy’s chin fell again, but the wires worked steadily on. Her mind was away back now in the distant past. She was thinking of one summer’s evening by Saint Ronan’s Well, ’neath the old monk’s tree, of a plighted troth and a broken ring, and a lad that went away to sea, and never, never, never came back. A broken ring, and a broken heart, a sorrow that had shadowed her life.

Click, click, click. Ah, well, every life has its romance.

“But Kenneth here has something to tell ye, Grannie.”

Clickety, clickety, clickety, go the wires. Nancy is all interest now, for dearly does she love her boy Kennie.

Then Kenneth told her about the fairy knoll and the strange cave he had found in its interior.

He told her all the story, just as we already know it; and for once only during all that evening, the wires ceased to click, and the old woman’s hands fell on her lap as she listened.

“It was long, long ago,” said Nancy. “Your father, Kennie, was but a boy then, just like you are noo. And his father was but a young man –”

“Ahem!” said the superstitious Highland keeper, giving a hasty half-frightened glance behind him into the darkness. “Ahem! you’ll not mak’ your story *very* fearsome, will ye, Grannie? Dinna forget the lateness o’ the nicht. Mind that we’ve o’er the lonesome muir to gang yet.”

“It was long ago,” said Nancy, addressing herself more particularly to Kenneth. “I lived then down by the kirk in the clachan, and there I was born, and the wee village was quieter far in those days than it is even now. Ye know, Kennie, where the burn joins the river, where the old ruin is among the willow trees?”

“Yes, Grannie.”

“Well, that house was no ruin then. It was deserted, though. It had gotten a bad name. Nobody would take it; and it seemed falling to pieces. The house stood, as you know, about a mile below your fairy knoll, and two miles beyond is the sea.”

“You are right, Grannie.”

“Everybody was surprised to find masons and carpenters working at Mill House one morning. It was let. It had been taken by a stranger. Even the laird knew nought about him. Only he paid a year’s rent in advance. That was enough for Laird McGee, who was a grippy auld man, and just as rich as grippy.

“It was an ugly house when they made the best of it, two-storied, with red tiles, blintring, blinking windows, and long uncanny-looking attics. It lay a good way back from the road. You went along through a thicket o’ willows by a little footpath, then across a stagnant ditch, on a rickety bridge, and this took you to the wild weedy lawn in front of the house itself. Even the road that led past the grounds was little frequented, only a bridle path at best, and it ended at last in a turf dyke (low wall), a march between twa lairds’ lands; if you followed this, it took you over the mountains to the seaside village of T – , and the footpath went pretty close to the knoll. A man and woman came to live at Mill House then; they kept a man-servant, and had one child, a pale-faced, old-fashioned-looking hunchback. The man drove a ramshackle trap, so that, taking them altogether, they were no favourites, all the more in that they never put nose beyond the doorstep on the Sabbath day.

“It was always thought, though, that Innkeeper McCaskill, of our clachan, knew more about this family than he cared to tell. Anyhow, he took them all their meat and groceries. And it was noted, too, and remarked upon that he ay took the parcel himsel’, a big one it used to be, and the auld grey mare on which he rode was as sorely laden coming as going to Mill House.

“Sometimes, but no’ very often, the hunchback laddie used to come on an errand down to the clachan; the bairns o’ the village were frightened at him first, frightened even to call him names or throw a sod at him, as bairns will at things that look weird and unco’.

“Corbett was the laddie’s name, but the bairns ay ca’d him Corbie.

“Corbie, though, improved on acquaintance. There seemed no harm in him, though, woe is me, he lookit auld, auld-fashioned.

“I suppose Corbie found it lonesome at the Mill House, for whenever he came down to the clachan he tried to mak’ acquaintance with the children. It wasna easy to do this. He brought them sweets and wild berries, and bit by bit he won their hearts till Corbie was the greatest favourite in a’ the clachan. There was only one house, though, he ever entered, and that was McCaskill’s. But the

bairns would meet him on his return, and he ay turned his steps to the auld kirk-yard, and there, on a flat tombstone, he would sit doon and tell them story after story. And a more attentive audience no minister ever had even in the kirk on Sunday. What did Corbie tell them? Oh! just queer auld-world stories he'd heard tell of, or read in books. Stories about witches and warlocks, brownies, sprites, and spunkies. Ay, and about the good folks, the fairies themselves – ”

“Dinna, dinna,” muttered Dugald. “Think o’ the untimous hour, Grannie.”

“But one day, as poor Corbie was speakin’ and the bairns were listening wi’ round eyes and gaping mouths, who should appear on the scene but Corbie’s father?

“The laddie gave one low scream, like somebody in a nightmare. Then his father seized him, and oh! they say it was dismal to hear the howls of the poor laddie and the sound o’ the fearfu’ blows.

“Corbie didn’t appear again for many a day, but the human heart must have society, and by degrees Corbie commenced story-telling again, but no’ in the kirk-yard, only down in a thicket by the riverside, and always when there, some one was put to watch.

“I often passed that house, even at night, though the name it had now was worse and worse.

“I had used to have business at T – , across the hills.

“But so bad a name did that road get, that even by day the boldest would hardly venture to take the short cut to T – up along the laird’s march dyke. Belated travellers saw lights – dead candles they called them – flitting and flickering around the fairy knoll. Brownies and spunkies, they said, were met on the moor, and down by the riverside Kelpie himsel’ was often visible.”

(Kelpie, in Scotch folklore a kind of bogle, half man, half bat, often seen by midnight near the banks of ugly rivers. He lives in deep, dark pools.)

“A sturdy shepherd that had stayed too long at T – had met Kelpie, so they said; he was found next day cut and bleeding at the water-side, and was a raving maniac for weeks.

“One day I was setting out for the seaside village – I was young then, and strong – when near the clachan I met McCaskill.

“‘Can I trust ye,’ he said, ‘to deliver a letter at the Mill House?’

“I was feared to offend by refusing, so I took it. But lo! I forgot it a’thegither till I was coming hame. It was night, too, but deliver it I must.

“I took the road along the auld march dyke across the hills. The moon was shining, but no’ very brightly, givin’ a feeble yellow kind o’ a licht through a haze o’ drivin’ clouds.

“Well, I was just near the dreariest part o’ the upper glen, and no’ far from the fairy knoll. I was wishing I were well past it, and away down to the clachan, where I could see the lights blinking cheerily from the houses among the trees.

“I was hurrying on, when suddenly, with an eldritch scream, something in white sprang from behind an etnach,” (juniper) “bush.

“I was a bold lass. Some would have fainted. My heart was in my mouth, but I felt impelled to throw myself at the thing, whatever it was. I rushed forward with a frightened shriek and grasped it. I wheeled its face towards the moon, and what think you saw I?”

“A brownie!” said Dugald. “Oh, Grannie, I’m all of a quiver.”

“He was no brownie. Only the auld, auld-fashioned face o’ little Corbie.”

“‘Let me go, Nancy. Let me go,’ he pleaded. ‘My father would kill me if he knew I was found out.’

“He wriggled out o’ my hands and fled, and I hardly felt the ground beneath my feet till I reached the low end o’ the glen and found myself opposite the gate o’ Mill House.

“Then I remembered the letter.

“Dare I deliver it?

“Dare I refuse? That would be worse. I took the road down through the willow thicket, and crossed the rickety auld plank bridge, and in two minutes I was in front of the house. There were sounds of singing and revelry from the inside; I knocked, but wasn’t heard. Knocked louder, and in a

moment everything was dark and silent. The door opened. I was seized and dragged in. What I saw and heard at Mill House that night I was put on oath not to tell till all were dead or gone. I may tell you now – they were smugglers.”

“Thank goodness!” said Dugald, greatly relieved it was no worse. “Oh! Grannie, but you have a fearsome way o’ tellin’ a story.”

“For twa lang years they occupied that house, but during that time something happened that caused grief among the village bairns. Corbie was missed. Weeks flew by, and he never came back. Then one day a thinly-attended funeral came winding towards the kirk-yard, carrying a wee bit coffin.

“The coffin was Corbie’s, and there were many tears and mickle sorrow among the poor hunchback’s acquaintances, I can tell ye. His friends went awa’, and left poor Corbie in the mools, but the bairnies ne’er forgot the grave, and mony a bonnie wreath o’ buttercups and gowans did they string and put on it in the sweet summer-time.

“Well, laddies, the Mill House was found deserted one day. The smugglers had gone as quietly as they had come. But the house kept its bad name, and so did the hills above it; and so my story ends.”

“Not quite,” said Dugald. “Did the brownie never come again, or the kelpie? Were the dead candles seen nae mair?”

“No,” said Kenneth; “don’t you understand? The brownie was the poor boy, Corbie; the kelpie was a smuggler; and the dead candles the lights seen at night near the cave in the fairy knoll. That was the place where they carried on their sinfu’ trade.”

“I see things clearly enough noo,” said Dugald; “and I’ll no’ be feared to cross the muir. Ah, well, Grannie, you have relieved my mind.”

“I’m glad o’ it, laddie. Now will Grannie take down the good Book and read a bit?”

Grannie did.

The talk now took a cheerier turn. Old Nancy, knowing how painfully superstitious Dugald was, refrained from introducing anything more in the shape of either brownie or spunkie. And so a pleasant hour was spent, till the old “wag-at-the-wa” pointed to the hour of twelve, and warned Kenneth and his friend it was high time to commence retracing their steps across the moor.

Chapter Four

Gloaming in the Glen – Kennie’s Cave

“Gloaming o’er the glen is falling;
Little birds have ceased to sing,
Flowerets now their petals faulding
As night descends on dewy wing.”

Anon.

Scene: Half-way down the glen, where heather and patches of tilled land end, and woodland commences. Where the stream goes wimpling and swirling round the boulders, underneath the rustic bridge.

At the corner, where, after crossing the bridge, the road takes a bend, and is soon lost in the gloom of overhanging foliage, Kenneth is seated on a stone.

At his feet lies Kooran, looking very knowing, because he has got his ears pricked up, and his eyes very wide open, and his head thoughtfully turned a little on one side.

Kooran knows that his master has come there to meet his friend the Highland keeper, and that the retriever Shot will be with him, but the keeper may come down from the brae-land on the right, or up the road from the wood, or he may suddenly appear on the cliff top, after fording the stream and climbing the rocks.

No need for Kenneth to listen; he has only to watch Kooran.

No sound can deceive Kooran. He will not move from that position till the right moment.

Not far from Kooran’s extended tail, a field-mouse begins to sing a little song. She is hidden in under the dry moss, through which she has driven all sorts of smooth round tunnels, for quite an engineer is the field-mouse, and the only wonder is she ever finds her way back again to her nest, through such a labyrinthic network of half-lighted lanes.

“Beet-ee-beet-ee-beet-ee-ee-beet-ee.” So goes her song.

Kooran never moves his head; all he does is to turn one ear back towards his tail for a moment, but *only* one ear.

“I hear you,” he seems to say. “Sing away, my pretty one you know I’m busy, but wait a wee till Shot comes. Shot and I will soon have you out of there. My eyes! won’t we make the turf fly!”

A great bird flies right over a tree, but turns sharply in the air and flies back affrightedly. It was a moor-cock, but he didn’t know any one was there. He has to take another road home.

A twig snaps; Kenneth looks in that direction. The dog never moves. He knows it is only the polecat trying to reach out to a branch where a thrush has gone to sleep.

The stream makes music in drowsy monotone, but hark! there is a splash. It is an otter. Kooran knows it, and does not move. Then presently there are close beside them apparently, two sharp dull thuds. It is only mother rabbit beating her heels on the ground to drive her over-bold little ones back into their holes, and to warn every rabbit within hearing that danger is near, and that there are a live dog and a live boy not far off, who can’t be after any good.

Sometimes the distant bleating of sheep or the pleasant lowing of kine falls on Kenneth’s ear, and anon, far up among the mountains, there is a strange shout, half whoop, half whistle, prolonged and mournful. At first it is repeated about every two seconds; then Quicker and quicker it comes, and wilder and wilder, till it ends in one long quavering scream.

“Whoo-oop, whoo-oop, whoo-oop, whoop, whoop-oop-oop-oop-oo-oo-oo!”

It is the shriek of the curlew as he sails round and round in the air.

“Why, Kooran,” says the boy at last, “what can be keeping them?”

Kooran beats his tail twice on the ground, but does not move his body.

“I hope they won’t be long, dear doggie.”

Kooran beats his tail once against the ground.

This means, “Have patience, master.”

The sun goes down behind the hills.

Then comes still Evening on.

In the bonnie Scottish Highlands, reader, in sweet summer-time, or in riper autumn, we cannot say with truth that night falls; no, rather “Evening steals down.”

Oh! how gently she is stealing down now on the peaceful scene around Kenneth and Kooran. Far down the glen yonder, where the river broadens out in the valley, there lie long clouds of grey mist, with the tall spruce pines glimmering green and ghost-like through them. They are the trailing garments of Evening. Gradually they change to crimson as the sun’s parting rays fall on them.

But day lingers long on the hill-tops, among the steel-grey rocks, among boulders that stand boldly out from the dark background like blocks of snow, and among patches of purple heather. Evening sees that day must go at last, so she hies away to put the flowers to sleep.

“Sleep, sleep, my gentle flowers,” she says, “for the day is dying fast, and the dews will fall and blight you.”

She whispers to the gowans (mountain daisies) first, and the “wee modest crimson-tippèd flowers” fold their petals like sea-anemones, and go softly to sleep. She lightly touches the pimpernels, the crimson and the pink-eyed, and they curl their flower-leaves and sink to rest. She breathes upon the wild convolvulus that trails among the grass, and it twists up its silken blossoms till they look like little wisps of calico, pink and white. Even the hardy heather bells creep closer together, and the star-like blossoms of the bramble that clothe the banks shrink smaller as she brushes them with her wings.

Then Evening speaks to the west wind.

“Blow softly, gentle west wind,” she says; “blow softly through the feathery larches and the needled pines; make the leaves of the russet oaks and the silvery drooping birches sing soft lullabies, that my children the flowers may sleep.”

And the west wind obeys her, and goes sighing through the trees, and all the flowerets nod and sleep.

The linnet has long gone to bed, close hidden under the whin bush. The tom-tit creeps closer against a patch of lichen that grows on the stem of an old ash tree. The cushat in the thicket of spruce hears the west wind’s lullaby, and ceases to croodle. The blackbird and thrush hide themselves in the hawthorn tree; only the robin still sings on the top rail of the old bridge.

“I will sing all night,” the robin says. “I will sing with the trees and the west wind till the sun returns.”

“Twhoo-hoo-hoo!” shrieks the owl, and Robin flies away.

Then Evening goes to the hedgehog, to the fox, to the fougart, the whitterit, the bat, and the vole.

“Come out now, come out now,” she cries to these, “for the moon is coming, and danger has fled with the daylight far over the hills.”

But the lithe green snake, and the deadly adder, and the toad have heard the invitation too, and lie closer under cover or creep into their holes, for enemies are abroad.

Then slowly and solemnly over the distant hills uprises the moon.

And so gloaming gives place to night.

Something black came feathering along at last, and next moment Shot, with his jacket quite wet, and very much out of breath with running, was kissing his friend the collie.

Very soon after Dugald and Kenneth were shaking hands.

“You thought I wasn’t coming?” said Dugald.

“Indeed, you’re right, but I had almost fallen asleep.”

“I’ve had such a chase after a couple of poachers. Didn’t you hear me firing? No? But troth, I did have a rap at one of them. Didn’t kill him? Man, no, and more’s the pity. Troth, Kennie, lad, there are too many about. But come along, till we see the fairy’s knoll. Man, it’s a whole week since I’ve seen you. How’s the sheep?”

“Doing well. No more late lambs. No more feeble dying ones.”

The keeper shouldered his gun; the two dogs speedily tore up the grass where the field-mouse had been singing. They destroyed all her tunnels and mossy lanes, but they hadn’t time to unearth the mouse herself.

Away up over the hills went the friends. Up, and up, and up. When on the brow of the mountain they were to cross they must have been fifteen hundred feet above the sea level. Down beneath them the rolling country was slumbering in the misty moonlight, only the river meandered through it all and sparkled like a thread of silver.

It was a near cut they had taken; they had now only to descend a little way, and, behold, they were at the cave.

And soon in it.

“I’ll light the lamp,” said Kenneth, and in a moment more the interior was illuminated.

“Well, I do declare this is grand! Never in this world before had shepherd such a shelter, surely!”

So he well might say. Kenneth had cleaned the cave out, bedded the floor with a carpet of withered brackens, hung a huge oil lamp in it, which gave light and warmth both, built rude seats round it, made a rude table, and conveyed hither his books, his fishing-gear, and even his flute.

“Isn’t it delightful!” cried Kenneth, laughing till his eyes danced and sparkled in the moonlight.

“Oh! it is grand!” said Dugald, sitting down all the better to view the place.

“I can eat my dinner here, you know,” said Kenneth, “and read my books, and study at night.”

“At night!” exclaimed honest Dugald. “Wad ye no’ be feared, man?” he added solemnly. “Are there no bogles about? Losh! there might be even ghosts. Or, man! just fancy a wee fairy body coming in through the door when you were a’ by yoursel’!”

“Oh!” cried the boy, “that is too good ever to be true. I should rejoice to see a fairy.”

“Well, man, rather you than me. But tak’ your flute and play a tune, to banish eerie thoughts.”

Kenneth put his instrument together and commenced.

Shot sat down on the brackens and commenced too.

Dugald turned Shot out of the cave, but Kooran had better manners and was allowed to stay. It was the “Flowers o’ the Forest” that Kenneth played, and to this sweetly mournful air Dugald listened entranced.

“Silly Dugald!” some would say, for his very eyes were moist.

“Ah! Kennie, man,” he said at last, “I hope you may never live to play that dear auld lilt in a foreign land with the tears rinnin’ o’er your face.”

“What mean ye, Dugald?” Kenneth said.

“Mean?” cried Dugald almost fiercely. “Why, this, lad: that news came to-day to the clachan that our auld laird, that has ever been sae kind to us, is bankrupt, and has sold his fine estate to an American – to a foreigner, Kennie.”

“Don’t say so?”

“But I do say so, and I fear it’s an owertrue tale, lad. The place that knows us noo may soon know us no more. For they tell me he is going to evict the tenants, pull the clachan down, and turn our bonnie glen into a forest for deer, knock doon the dear auld kirk, Kennie, that you and I were christened in, and have sung psalms in Sunday after Sunday, knock doon our kirk, give our roofs to the flames, – ay, Kennie, and level the graves o’ those we hold dear!”

“I really cannot believe all this, Dugald. Oh! it would kill my mother.”

“Poor laddie!” said Dugald, laying his hand kindly on Kenneth’s shoulder. “Poor laddie! Grief has been your share in the world of late. Two or three years ago, when your father lived, what a merry boy you were! But your father, once a thrifty crofter, had been reduced to a humble shepherd, and when that broke his heart, and the Lord took him, his brave boy Kennie left school and tended the sheep, and his industry supports a widowed mother. Ay, lad, Kennie, it will gang hard on you and hard on your mother to leave Glen Alva.”

Kenneth looked the picture of despair. His flute had fallen from his hand, and lay unheeded among the brackens.

“To leave my mother,” he muttered, speaking apparently to himself, “to go into a foreign land, that were bad, but to know that the very glen itself was altered, the old kirk roofless, the houses heaps of ruins, to have nothing to look back to, nothing at home to love – oh! Duncan, Duncan, that wouldn’t be absence from home; it would be banishment, Duncan, banishment and exile.”

“Let us try no’ to think about it, Kennie. Dinna look so woe-begone, man, or you’ll mak’ me sorry that I’ve told you.”

The boy turned quickly round.

“Oh! but say you’ve been but joking. Say it is not true, Duncan.”

“Oh hey!” was Duncan’s answer – a big sigh, that was all.

“But you know,” said Duncan, after a pause, “nobody is sure yet of anything.”

The boy laughed now.

“Ha! ha! yes,” he cried, tearing himself away from gloomy thoughts. “We’ll have hope. We won’t think about it, will we? Ha! ha! no, we won’t think about it. And I’ll never say a single word to my mother about the matter. It *may* pass, you know.

“And so,” he continued, “you really like my cave. Well, little Archie, your son, will often be here with me. And you must come too, and we’ll have such fun. I wonder if the ptarmigans will build next year in the same place as they did last. Mind when the snow falls you’ll take me for a day’s white hare hunting, won’t you? It is such grand sport, and you promised, you know. What tune did you say I was to play? Something merry. Oh! yes, I know – ”

Kenneth recovered his flute from among the brackens as he spoke, and rattled off into as merry a reel as ever witches danced to in “Alloway’s auld haunted kirk.”

“First-rate!” cried Duncan, clapping his hands, while even Kooran barked for joy, and Shot’s voice gave gladsome echo at the cave’s mouth. “First-rate! man; that’s the kind o’ music to banish the bogies. Losh! Kennie, music like that would have made Methuselah himsel’ grow young again. That it would.”

It was late that evening ere the two friends found themselves down the glen again, but when they bade each other good-night and walked briskly homewards there was not a thought in their hearts of evil to come; they were each as happy as the lark that carols o’er spring corn.

Chapter Five

A Day in the Wilds

“My heather land, my heather land,
Though fairer lands there be,
Thy gowany braes in early days
Were gowden ways to me.”

Thom.

Scene: The fairy’s glen high up among the mountains. Kenneth seated, book in hand, on the top of the fairy knoll, which stands out strangely green against the purples and browns which surround it. Kenneth is alone. Kooran is away down beneath, minding the sheep. The shepherd-boy lays down the book at last, or rather he drops it down the chimney of his cave, and it falls on the carpet of brackens beneath. Then he takes his crook, and goes slowly down the strath.

This was a Saturday forenoon, and Kenneth and his little friend Archie McCrane were going on a long round of pleasure.

Ha! yonder comes Archie. Or rather, yonder suddenly doth he appear. He comes straight up out of the centre of a bush of furze, in quite a startling kind of way.

Archie is eleven years of age, though very tiny, but very strong, and as hard as an Arab. No fat about Archie. His face and bare neck and breast and thorn-scratched knees are as red as if recently rubbed with brick-dust. There isn’t a rent or hole in either his jacket or kilt, but woe is me, it is pretty nearly all patches; it is mother’s work every night to mend the rents Archie makes in his clothes. Archie is, of course, his mother’s darling. She even takes pains to make him pretty. She prides herself even in his beautiful hair. His hair is one of Archie’s strong points. Mind, he wears no bonnet (cap), never did and never would. He owns one, but always forgets to put it on. So his soft golden hair is cut across above the brows, and hangs in wavy luxuriance over his shoulders. I said golden, but it is more straw colour, and bleached on the top almost white.

He is a singular lad, Archie, has a half-wild, half-frightened look in his face; in fact, take him all in all, he is quite in keeping with the romantic surroundings.

“I’ve got him,” Archie said.

“What is it?”

“A little black rabbit.”

“Strange,” said Kenneth; “put him down. He must be half tame, I should think.”

Archie put it down, and the two boys knelt beside it among the heather. It was a half-grown one, so mild, so gentle-looking. Butter, you would have said, wouldn’t melt in that wee rabbit’s mouth. And it crouched down low and held its ears flat against its back, and never moved an eye or winked, but allowed the lads to smooth it with their fore-fingers.

But all at once, pop! it was off like an eel.

“Oh?” said Archie, with such a disappointed look, “and I meant to take it hame wi’ me.”

Kenneth laughed, and off the two scampered, as wild as any rabbits.

“Shot is here,” said Archie.

“Where?”

“Down with Kooran.”

“Then you must whistle him up; Kooran will look after the sheep by himself, but Shot will lead him into temptation. Besides, the sheep don’t know Shot. Whistle, Archie, whistle, man.”

Archie put four fingers in his mouth and emitted a scream as shrill as the scream of the great whaup. (The curlew.) In a moment more Shot was coming tearing along through the heather.

And with him was Kooran.

“What do you want, Kooran?”

Kooran threw himself in a pleading attitude at his master’s feet, looked up with brown, melting, pleading eyes, and wagged his tail.

“Oh! I know, dear doggie,” said Kenneth; “you want your dinner, because you know we’ll be away all day.”

Kooran jumped and capered and danced and barked, and Kenneth rolled a piece of cake and a bit of cheese in a morsel of paper and handed it to the dog.

“Keep the koorichan,” (sheep) “well together, doggie,” he said; “and don’t take your dinner for an hour yet.”

Kooran gave his tail a few farewell wags and galloped off, but as soon as he was in sight of the flock and out of sight of his master, he lay down and ate his dinner right up at once. He ate the cheese first, because it smelt so nice, and then he ate the cake.

Away went Archie and Kenneth and Shot. It didn’t take them long to gallop through the heather and furze. Of course the furze made their bare knees bleed, but they did not mind that.

They reached the road in twenty minutes, and went straight away to the clachan to report themselves at the manse, or minister’s house.

It wasn’t much of a manse, only an ordinary-looking, blue-slatted house of two stories, but it had a nice lawn in front and gardens round it, where ash trees, limes, planes, and elms grew almost in too great abundance. The windows were large, and one was a French one, and opened under a verandah on to the lawn. This was the Rev. David Grant’s study.

Before they came round the hedgerow, both boys stopped, dipped their handkerchiefs in the running brook, and polished their faces; then they warned Shot to be on his best behaviour, and looking as sedate and solemn as they could, they opened the gate, and made their way to the hall door. And Shot tried to look as old as he could, and followed behind with his nose pretty near the ground, and his tail almost between his heels.

But Mr Grant himself saw them, opened the casement window, and cried, —

“Come this way, boys.”

Mr Grant was the clergyman of the village. The living was a poor one, and as he had seven grown-up daughters, he was obliged to turn sheep farmer. It was his sheep that Kenneth herded, and that his father had herded before him, after “the bad years” had ruined the poor man.

“Miss Grant will soon be here,” he said. “And how have you left the sheep, Kenneth?”

“They are all nicely, thank you, sir,” replied Kenneth.

“All healthy and thriving, I hope?”

“Oh, yes, sir, we won’t have any more trouble, and Kooran is minding them. He will take capital care of them, sir. And Duncan McCrane, Archie’s father, is going up himself to see them.”

“That’s right,” said Mr Grant.

The Misses Grant were the mothers of the clachan. I haven’t space to tell you half of the good they did, so I shall not attempt it, but they taught in school and Sunday-school, they knew all the deserving poor, and attended them when sick, and advised them, and prayed with them, and read to them, and never went empty-handed to see them. Why, they even begged for them. And they knew the undeserving poor, and did good to them also. Even Gillespie, the most dreaded poacher and wildest man in the clachan, was softened in tone and like a child when talking to the “good Miss Grants,” as they were always called.

Well, every one loved these homely sisterly lassies of the parson’s.

“By-the-bye, Kennie,” said Mr Grant, “I hear the glen is going to be evicted.”

“Surely, sir, that isn’t true?” replied Kenneth.

Miss Grant the elder was Kenneth's teacher, one of them, old Nancy Dobbell was another, and Nature was a third.

"Did you come for a lesson to-day?" said Miss Grant, entering.

"No, thank you. Miss Grant."

"Well, I'm glad, because I was going out. Little Miss Redmond is here with her governess. They have the pony trap, and I am going to their glen with them to lunch. Come to the drawing-room; they are there."

Miss Redmond was the only daughter of an Englishman of wealth, who had bought land in an adjoining glen. Mr Redmond himself was seldom at home – if, indeed, Scotland could be called his home – and his wife was an invalid.

But there was nothing of the invalid about little Jessie, the daughter. Quite a child she was, hardly more than eight, but with all the quiet dignity and easy affability that is only to be found among children of the *bon ton*.

Archie was simply afraid of her. Kenneth got on better, however. He answered all her innocent but pointed questions, as if he were talking to his grandmother. But Jessie was really asking for information, and Kenneth knew it, so the two had quite a serious old-fashioned conversation.

Well, Kenneth seemed a gentleman born. He sat easily in his chair, he held his cap easily, and behaved himself with polite *sang froid*. Miss Grant was proud of Kenneth.

But poor Archie looked ill at ease.

Kenneth told Jessie the story of the little black rabbit, and Jessie was much interested.

"What did it look like?" she asked.

Kenneth glanced towards Archie.

"He just looked," he answered, "as Archie is looking now, as if waiting a chance to bolt."

This was a very mischievous speech, but Kenneth could not refrain from saying what he thought.

"Poor boy?" said Jessie, as if she had been Archie's mother; "he appears to be very frightened. What beautiful hair he has! It is just like mine."

This was true, only Jessie's was longer and not bleached. Kenneth sat looking half wonderingly at Jessie, longer than politeness would dictate.

"What are you thinking about?" said Jessie.

"I was thinking," said Kenneth, candidly, "I'd give all the world to be able to talk English in the pretty way you do."

"Some day," Jessie said to her governess, "we will go and see the sheep, Miss Gale. Remember that place. Put it down in your notes. We are to see a fairy knoll and a smugglers' cave. It will be so delightful."

"We go to London soon for the winter," said Miss Gale, "but will come and see you, Kenneth, in spring or summer."

"Miss Gale," insisted the imperious Jessie, "I haven't seen you use your tablets."

So Miss Gale smilingly took her tablets out and noted the engagement to visit the sheep and see the fairy knoll.

"He has a flute," said Archie, with sudden determination not to sit mute all the time; "make him play."

And Kenneth had to play, just the same old melodies that the Scotch so dearly love; but as he played there came so sweet and sad an expression into English Jessie's face, that Kenneth would have played for hours to please her.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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