

Munro Neil

The Shoes of Fortune



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CHAPTER I

NARRATES HOW I CAME TO QUIT THE STUDY OF LATIN AND THE LIKE, AND TAKE TO HARD WORK IN A MOORLAND COUNTRY

It is an odd thing, chance – the one element to baffle the logician and make the scheming of the wisest look as foolish in the long run as the sandy citadel a child builds upon the shore without any thought of the incoming tide. A strange thing, chance; and but for chance I might this day be the sheriff of a shire, my head stuffed with the tangled phrase and sentiment of interlocutors, or maybe no more than an advocate overlooked, sitting in John's Coffeehouse in Edinburgh – a moody soured man with a jug of claret, and cursing the inconsistencies of preferment to office. I might have been that, or less, if it had not been for so trifling a circumstance as the burning of an elderly woman's batch of scones. Had Mistress Grant a more attentive eye to her Culross griddle, what time the scones for her lodgers, breakfast were a-baking forty years ago, I would never have fled furth my native land in a mortal terror of the gallows: had her griddle, say, been higher on the swee-chain by a link or two, Paul Greig would never have foregathered with Dan Risk, the blackguard skipper of a notorious craft; nor pined in a foreign jail; nor connived, unwitting, at a prince's murder; nor marched the weary leagues of France and fought there on a beggar's wage. And this is not all that hung that long-gone day upon a woman's stair-head gossip to the neglect of her *cuisine*, for had this woman been more diligent at her baking I had probably never seen my Isobel with a lover's eye.

Well, here's one who can rarely regret the past except that it is gone. It was hard, it was cruel often; dangers the most curious and unexpected beset me, and I got an insight to deep villainies whereof man may be capable; yet on my word, if I had the parcelling out of a second life for myself, I think I would have it not greatly differing from the first, that seems in God's providence like to end in the parish where it started, among kent and friendly folk. I would not swear to it, yet I fancy I would have Lucky Grant again gossiping on her stair-head and her scones burned black, that Mackellar, my fellow-lodger, might make me once more, as he used to do, the instrument of his malcontent.

I mind, as it were yesterday, his gloomy look at the platter that morn's morning. "Here they are again!" cried he, "fired to a cinder; it's always that with the old wife, or else a heart of dough. For a bawbee I would throw them in her face."

"Well, not so much as that," said I, "though it is mighty provoking."

"I'm not thinking of myself," said he, always glooming at the platter with his dark, wild Hielan' eye. "I'm not thinking of myself," said he, "but it's something by way of an insult to you, that had to complain of Sunday's haddocks."

"Oh, as to them," quo' I, "they did brawly for me; 'twas you put your share in your pocket and threw it away on the Green. Besides the scones are not so bad as they look" – I broke one and ate; "they're owre good at least for a hungry man like me to send back where they came from."

His face got red. "What's that rubbish about the haddocks and the Green?" said he. "You left me at my breakfast when you went to the Ram's Horn Kirk."

"And that's true, Jock," said I; "but I think I have made no' so bad a guess. You were feared to affront the landlady by leaving her ancient fish on the ashet, and you egged me on to do the grumbling."

“Well, it’s as sure as death, Paul,” said he shamefacedly, “I hate to vex a woman. And you’re a thought wrong in your guess” – he laughed at his own humour as he said it – “for when you were gone to your kirk I transferred my share of the stinking fish to your empty plate.”

He jouked his head, but scarcely quick enough, for my Sallust caught him on the ear. He replied with a volume of Buchanan the historian, the man I like because he skelped the Lord’s anointed, James the First, and for a time there was war in Lucky Grant’s parlour room, till I threw him into the recess bed snibbed the door, and went abroad into the street leaving my room-fellow for once to utter his own complaints.

I went out with the itch of battle on me, and that was the consequence of a woman’s hawering while scones burned, and likewise my undoing, for the High Street when I came to it was in the yeasty ferment of encountering hosts, their cries calling poor foolish Paul Greig like a trumpet.

It had been a night and morning of snow, though I and Mackellar, so high in Lucky Grant’s chamber in Crombie’s Land, had not suspected it. The dull drab streets, with their crazy, corbelled gable-ends, had been transformed by a silent miracle of heaven into something new and clean; where noisome gutters were wont to brim with slops there was the napkin of the Lord.

For ordinary I hated this town of my banishment; hated its tun-bellied Virginian merchants, so constantly airing themselves upon the Tontine piazza and seeming to suffer from prosperity as from a disease; and felt no great love of its women – always so much the madame to a drab-coated lad from the moorlands; suffered from its greed and stifled with the stinks of it. “Gardyloo! Gardyloo! Gardyloo!” Faith! I hear that evening slogan yet, and see the daunderers on the Rottenrow skurry like rats into the closes to escape the cascades from the attic windows. And while I think I loved learning (when it was not too ill to come by), and was doing not so bad in my Humanities, the carven gateway of the college in my two sessions of a scholar’s fare never but scowled upon me as I entered.

But the snow that morning made of the city a place wherein it was good to be young, warm-clad, and hardy. It silenced the customary traffic of the street, it gave the morning bells a song of fairydom and the valleys of dream; up by-ordinary tall and clean-cut rose the crow-stepped walls, the chimney heads, and steeples, and I clean forgot my constant fancy for the hill of Ballageich and the heather all about it. And war raged. The students faced ‘prentice lads and the journeymen of the crafts with volleys of snowballs; the merchants in the little booths ran out tremulous and vainly cried the watch. Charge was made and counter-charge; the air was thick with missiles, and close at hand the silver bells had their merry sweet chime high over the city of my banishment drowned by the voices taunting and defiant.

Merry was that day, but doleful was the end of it, for in the fight I smote with a snowball one of the bailies of the burgh, who had come waving his three-cocked hat with the pomp and confidence of an elected man and ordering an instant stoppage of our war: he made more ado about the dignity of his office than the breakage of his spectacles, and I was haled before my masters, where I fear I was not so penitent as prudence would advise.

Two days later my father came in upon Dawson’s cart to convoy me home. He saw the Principal, he saw the regents of the college, and up, somewhat clashed and melancholy, he climbed to my lodging. Mackellar fled before his face as it had been the face of the Medusa.

“Well, Paul,” said my father, “it seems we made a mistake about your birthday.”

“Did you?” said I, without meaning, for I knew he was ironical.

“It would seem so, at any rate,” said he, not looking my airt at all, but sideways to the window and a tremor in his voice. “When your mother packed your washing last Wednesday and slipped the sillier I was not supposed to see into a stocking-foot, she said, ‘Now he’s twenty and the worst of it over.’ Poor woman! she was sadly out of her reckoning. I’m thinking I have here but a bairn of ten. You should still be at the dominie’s.”

“I was not altogether to blame, father,” I cried. “The thing was an accident.”

“Of course, of course,” said he soothingly. “Was’t ever otherwise when the devil joggled an elbow? Whatever it was, accident or design, it’s a session lost. Pack up, Paul, my very young boy, and we’ll e’en make our way quietly from this place where they may ken us.”

He paid the landlady her lawing, with sixpence over for her motherliness, whereat she was ready to greet, and he took an end of my blue kist down the stairs with me, and over with it like a common porter to the carrier’s stance.

A raw, raining day, and the rough highways over the hoof with slush of melted snow, we were a chattering pair as we drove under the tilt of the cart that came to the Mearns to meet us, and it was a dumb and solemn home-coming for me.

Not that I cared much myself, for my lawyership thus cracked in the shell, as it were I had been often seized with the notion that six feet of a moor-lander, in a lustre gown and a horse-hair wig and a blue shalloon bag for the fees, was a wastry of good material. But it was the dad and her at home I thought of, and could put my neck below the cartwheel for distressing. I knew what he thought of as he sat in the cart corner, for many a time he had told me his plans; and now they were sadly marred. I was to get as much as I could from the prelections of Professor Reid, work my way through the furrows of Van Eck, Van Muyden, and the Pandects, then go to Utrecht or Groningen for the final baking, and come back to the desk of Coghill and Sproat, Writers to the Signet, in Spreull’s Land of Edinburgh; run errands between that dusty hole and the taverns of Salamander Land, where old Sproat (that was my father’s doer) held long sederunts with his clients, to write a thesis finally, and graduate at the art of making black look – not altogether white perhaps, but a kind of dirty grey. I had been even privileged to try a sampling of the lawyer’s life before I went to college, in the chambers of MacGibbon of Lanark town, where I spent a summer (that had been more profitably passed in my father’s fields), backing letters, fair-copying drafts of lease and process, and indexing the letter-book. The last I hated least of all, for I could have a half-sheet of foolscap between the pages, and under MacGibbon’s very nose try my hand at something sombre in the manner of the old ancient ballads of the Border. Doing that same once, I gave a wild cry and up with my inky hand and shook it. “Eh! eh!” cried MacGibbon, thinking I had gone mad. “What ails ye?” “He struck me with his sword!” said I like a fool, not altogether out of my frenzy; and then the snuffy old body came round the corner of the desk, keeked into the letter-book where I should have been doing his work, and saw that I was wasting good paper with clinking trash. “Oh, sirs! sirs! I never misused a minute of my youth in the like of that!” said he, sneering, and the sneer hurt. “No, I daresay not,” I answered him. “Perhaps ye never had the inclination – nor the art.”

I have gone through the world bound always to say what was in me, and that has been my sore loss more than once; but to speak thus to an old man, who had done me no ill beyond demonstrating the general world’s attitude to poetry and men of sentiment, was the blackest insolence. He was well advised to send me home for a leathering at my father’s hands. And I got the leathering, too, though it was three months after. I had been off in the interim upon a sloop ship out of Ayr.

But here I am havoring, and the tilted cart with my father and me in it toiling on the mucky way through the Meams; and it has escaped coupling into the Earn at the ford, and it has landed us at the gate of home; and in all that weary journey never a word, good or ill, from the man that loved me and my mother before all else in a world he was well content with.

Mother was at the door; that daunted me.

“Ye must be fair starving, Paul,” quoth she softly with her hand on my arm, and I daresay my face was blae with cold and chagrin. But my father was not to let a disgrace well merited blow over just like that.

“Here’s our little Paul, Katrine,” said he, and me towering a head or two above the pair of them and a black down already on my face. “Here’s our little Paul. I hope you have not put by his bibs and daidlies, for the wee man’s not able to sup the good things of this life clean yet.”

And that was the last word of reproof I heard for my folly from my father Quentin Greig.

CHAPTER II

MISS FORTUNE'S TRYST BY WATER OF EARN, AND HOW I MARRED THE SAME UNWITTINGLY

For the most part of a year I toiled and moiled like any crofter's son on my father's poor estate, and dreary was the weird I had to dree, for my being there at all was an advertisement to the countryside of what a fool was young Paul Greig. "The Spoiled Horn" was what they called me in the neighbourhood (I learned it in the taunt of a drunken packman), for I had failed at being the spoon I was once designed for, and there was not a ne'er-do-weel peasant nor a bankrupt portioner came craving some benefit to my father's door but made up for his deference to the laird by his free manner with the laird's son. The extra tenderness of my mother (if that were possible) only served to swell my rebel heart, for I knew she was but seeking to put me in a better conceit of myself, and I found a place whereof I had before been fond exceedingly assume a new complexion. The rain seemed to fall constantly that year, and the earth in spring was sodden and sour. Hazel Den House appeared sunk in the rotten leafage of the winter long after the lambs came home and the snipe went drumming on the marsh, and the rookery in the holm plantation was busy with scolding parents tutoring their young. A solemn house at its best – it is so yet, sometimes I think, when my wife is on a jaunt at her sister's and Walter's bairns are bedded – it was solemn beyond all description that spring, and little the better for the coming of summer weather. For then the trees about it, that gave it over long billows of untimbered countryside an aspect of dark importance, by the same token robbed it (as I thought then) of its few amenities. How it got the name of Hazel Den I cannot tell, for autumn never browned a nut there. It was wych elm and ash that screened Hazel Den House; the elms monstrous and grotesque with knotty growths: when they were in their full leaf behind the house they hid the valley of the Clyde and the Highland hills, that at bleaker seasons gave us a sense of companionship with the wide world beyond our infield of stunted crops. The ash towered to the number of two score and three towards the south, shutting us off from the view there, and working muckle harm to our kitchen-garden. Many a time my father was for cutting them down, but mother forbade it, though her syboes suffered from the shade and her roses grew leggy and unblooming. "That," said she, "is the want of constant love: flowers are like bairns; ye must be aye thinking of them kindly to make them thrive." And indeed there might be something in the notion, for her apple-ringie and Dutch Admiral, jonquils, gillyflowers, and peony-roses throve marvellously, better then they did anywhere in the shire of Renfrew while she lived and tended them and have never been quite the same since she died, even with a paid gardener to look after them.

A winter loud with storm, a spring with rain-rot in the fallen leaf, a summer whose foliage but made our home more solitary than ever, a short autumn of stifling heats – that was the year the Spoiled Horn tasted the bitterness of life, the bitterness that comes from the want of an aim (that is better than the best inheritance in kind) and from a consciousness that the world mistrusts your ability. And to cap all, there was no word about my returning to the prelections of Professor Reid, for a reason which I could only guess at then, but learned later was simply the want of money.

My father comported himself to me as if I were doomed to fall into a decline, as we say, demanding my avoidance of night airs, preaching the Horatian virtues of a calm life in the fields, checking with a reddened face and a half-frightened accent every turn of the conversation that gave any alluring colour to travel or adventure. Notably he was dumb, and so was my mother, upon the history of his family. He had had four brothers: three of them I knew were dead and their tombs not in Mearns kirkyard; one of them, Andrew, the youngest, still lived: I feared it might be in a bedlam, by the avoidance they made of all reference to him. I was fated, then, for Bedlam or a galloping consumption – so I apprehended dolefully from the mystery of my folk; and the notion sent me often

rambling solitary over the autumn moors, cultivating a not unpleasing melancholy and often stringing stanzas of a solemn complexion that I cannot recall nowadays but with a laugh at my folly.

A favourite walk of mine in these moods was along the Water of Earn, where the river chattered and sang over rocks and shallows or plunged thundering in its linn as it did ere I was born and shall do when I and my story are forgotten. A pleasant place, and yet I nearly always had it to myself alone.

I should have had it always to myself but for one person – Isobel Fortune from the Kirkillstane. She seemed as little pleased to meet me there as I was to meet her, though we had been brought up in the same school together; and when I would come suddenly round a bend of the road and she appeared a hundred yards off, I noticed that she half stopped and seemed, as it were, to swither whether she should not turn and avoid me. It would not have surprised me had she done so, for, to tell the truth, I was no very cheery object to contemplate upon a pleasant highway, with the bawbee frown of a poetic gloom upon my countenance and the most curt of salutations as I passed. What she did there all her lone so often mildly puzzled me, till I concluded she was on a tryst with some young gentleman of the neighbourhood; but as I never saw sign of him, I did not think myself so much the marplot as to feel bound to take another road for my rambling. I was all the surer 'twas a lover she was out to meet, because she reddened guiltily each time that we encountered (a fine and sudden charm to a countenance very striking and beautiful, as I could not but observe even then when weightier affairs engaged me); but it seemed I was all in error, for long after she maintained she was, like myself, indulging a sentimental humour that she found go very well in tune with the noise of Earn Water.

As it was her habit to be busily reading when we thus met, I had little doubt as to the ownership of a book that one afternoon I found on the road not long after passing her. It was – of all things in the world! – Hervey's "Meditations."

"It's an odd graveyard taste for a lass of that stamp," thought I, hastening back after her to restore the book, and when I came up to her she was – not red this time, but wan to the very lips, and otherwise in such confusion that she seemed to tremble upon her legs, "I think this is yours, Isobel," says I: we were too well acquaint from childhood for any address more formal.

"Oh, thank you, Paul," said she hastily. "How stupid of me to lose it!" She took it from me; her eye fell (for the first time, I felt sure) upon the title of the volume, and she bit her lip in a vexation. I was all the more convinced that her book was but a blind in her rambles, and that there was a lover somewhere; and I think I must have relaxed my silly black frown a little, and my proud melancholy permitted a faint smile of amusement. The flag came to her face then.

"Thank you," said she very dryly, and she left me in the middle of the road, like a stirk. If it had been no more than that, I should have thought it a girl's tantrum; but the wonder was to come, for before I had taken three steps on my resumed way I heard her run after me. I stopped, and she stopped, and the notion struck me like a rhyme of song that there was something inexpressibly pleasant in her panting breath and her heaving bosom, where a pebble brooch of shining red gleamed like an eye between her breasts.

"I'm not going to tell you a lie about it, Master Paul," she said, almost like to cry; "I let the book fall on purpose."

"Oh, I could have guessed as much as that, Isobel," said I, wondering who in all the world the fellow was. Her sun-bonnet had fallen from her head in her running, and hung at her back on its pink ribbons, and a curl or two of her hair played truant upon her cheek and temple. It seemed to me the young gentleman she was willing to let a book drop for as a signal of her whereabouts was lucky enough.

"Oh! you could have guessed!" she repeated, with a tone in which were dumbfounderment and annoyance; "then I might have saved myself the trouble." And off she went again, leaving me more the stirk than ever and greatly struck at her remorse of conscience over a little sophistry very pardonable in a lass caught gallivanting. When she was gone and her frock was fluttering pink at the

turn of the road, I was seized for the first time with a notion that a girl like that some way set off, as we say, or suited with, a fine landscape.

Not five minutes later I met young David Borland of the Driepps, and there – I told myself – the lover was revealed! He let on he was taking a short cut for Polnoon, so I said neither buff nor sty as to Mistress Isobel.

The cool superiority of the gentleman, who had, to tell the truth, as little in his head as I had in the heel of my shoe, somewhat galled me, for it cried “Spoiled Horn!” as loud as if the taunt were bawled, so my talk with him was short. There was but one topic in it to interest me.

“Has the man with the scarred brow come yet?” he asked curiously.

I did not understand.

“Then he’s not your length yet,” said he, with the manifest gratification of one who has the hanselling of great news. “Oh! I came on him this morning outside a tavern in the Gorbals, bargaining loudly about a saddle horse for Hazel Den. I’ll warrant Hazel Den will get a start when it sees him.”

I did not care to show young Borland much curiosity in his story, and so it was just in the few words he gave it to me that I brought it home to our supper-table.

My father and mother looked at each other as if I had told them a tragedy. The supper ended abruptly. The evening worship passed unusually fast, my father reading the Book as one in a dream, and we went to our beds nigh an hour before the customary time.

CHAPTER III

OF THE COMING OF UNCLE ANDREW WITH A SCARRED FOREHEAD AND A BRASS-BOUND CHEST, AND HOW I TOOK AN INFECTION

It was a night – as often happens in the uplands of our shire in autumn weather – of vast and brooding darkness: the world seemed to swound in a breathless oven, and I had scarcely come to my chamber when thunder broke wild upon the world and torrential rain began to fall. I did not go to bed, but sat with my candle extinguished and watched the lightning show the landscape as if it had been flooded by the gleam of moon and star.

Between the roar of the thunder and the blatter of the rain there were intervals of an astounding stillness of an ominous suspense, and it seemed oddly to me, as I sat in my room, that more than I was awake in Hazel Den House. I felt sure my father and mother sat in their room, still clad and whispering; it was but the illusion of a moment – something felt by the instinct and not by reason – and then a louder, nearer peal of thunder dispelled the notion, and I made to go to bed.

I stopped like one shot, with my waistcoat half undone.

There was a sound of a horse's hoofs coming up the loan, with the beat of them in mire sounding soft enough to make me shiver at the notion of the rider's discomfort in that appalling night, and every now and then the metal click of shoes, showing the animal over-reached himself in the trot.

The rider drew up at the front; a flash of the lightning and the wildest thunder-peal of the night seemed to meet among our outhouses, and when the roll of the thunder ceased I heard a violent rapping at the outer door.

The servants would be long ere they let this late visitor out of the storm, I fancied, and I hurried down; but my father was there in the hall before me, all dressed, as my curious intuition had informed me, and his face strange and inscrutable in the light of a shaded candle. He was making to open the door. My appearance seemed to startle him. He paused, dubious and a trifle confused.

"I thought you had been in bed long ago," said he, "and –"

His sentence was not finished, for the horseman broke in upon it with a masterful rataplan upon the oak, seemingly with a whip-head or a pistol butt, and a cry, new to my ear and uncanny, rose through the beating rain.

With a sigh the most distressing I can mind of, my father seemed to reconcile himself to some fate he would have warded off if he could. He unbolted and threw back the door.

Our visitor threw himself in upon us as if we held the keys of paradise – a man like a rake for lankiness, as was manifest even through the dripping wrap-rascal that he wore; bearded cheek and chin in a fashion that must seem fiendish in our shaven country; with a wild and angry eye, the Greig mole black on his temple, and an old scar livid across his sunburned brow. He threw a three-cocked hat upon the floor with a gesture of indolent possession.

"Well, I'm damned!" cried he, "but this is a black welcome to one's poor brother Andy," and scarcely looked upon my father standing with the shaded candle in the wind. "What's to drink? Drink, do you hear that Quentin? Drink – drink – d-r-i-n-k. A long strong drink too, and that's telling you, and none of the whey that I'm hearing's running through the Greigs now, that once was a reputable family of three bottles and a rummer to top all."

"Whist, whist, man!" pleaded father tremulously, all the man out of him as he stood before this drunken apparition.

“Whist I quo’ he. Well stap me! do you no’ ken the lean pup of the litter?” hiccoughed our visitor, with a sort of sneer that made the blood run to my head, and for the first time I felt the great, the splendid joy of a good cause to fight for.

“You’re Andrew,” said my father simply, putting his hand upon the man’s coat sleeve in a sympathy for his drenchen clothes.

That kindly hand was jerked off rudely, an act as insolent as if he had smitten his host upon the mouth: my heart leaped, and my fingers went at his throat. I could have spread him out against the wall, though I knew him now my uncle; I could have given him the rogue’s quittance with a black face and a protruding tongue. The candle fell from my father’s hand; the glass shade shattered; the hall of Hazel Den House was plunged in darkness, and the rain drave in through the open door upon us three struggling.

“Let him go, Paul,” whispered my father, who I knew was in terror of frightening his wife, and he wrestled mightily with an arm of each of us.

Yet I could not let my uncle go, for with the other arm he held a knife, and he would perhaps have died for it had not another light come on the stair and my mother’s voice risen in a pitiful cry.

We fell asunder on a common impulse, and the drunken wanderer was the first to speak.

“Katrine,” said he; “it’s always the old tale with Andy, you see; they must be misunderstanding me,” and he bowed with a surprising gentlemanliness that could have made me almost think him not the man who had fouled our house with oaths and drawn a knife upon us in the darkness. The blade of the same, by a trick of legerdemain, had gone up the sleeve of his dripping coat. He seemed all at once sobered. He took my good mother by the hand as she stood trembling and never to know clearly upon what elements of murder she had come.

“It is you, Andrew,” said she, bravely smiling. “What a night to come home in after twenty years! I’m wae to see you in such a plight. And your horse?” said she again, lifting her candle and peering into the darkness of the night. “I must cry up Sandy to stable your horse.”

I’ll give my uncle the credit of a confusion at his own forgetfulness.

“Good Lord! Katrine,” said he, “if I did not clean forget the brute, a fiddle-faced, spavined, spatter-dasher of a Gorbals mare, no’ worth her corn; but there’s my bit kistie on her hump.”

The servant was round soon at the stabling of the mare, and my mother was brewing something of what the gentleman had had too much already, though she could not guess that; and out of the dripping night he dragged in none of a rider’s customary holsters but a little brass-bound chest.

“Yon night I set out for my fortune, Quentin,” said he, “I did not think I would come back with it a bulk so small as this; did you? It was the sight of the quiet house and the thought of all it contained that made me act like an idiot as I came in. Still, we must just take the world as we get it, Quentin; and I knew I was sure of a warm welcome in the old house, from one side of it if not from the other, for the sake of lang syne. And this is your son, is it?” he went on, looking at my six feet of indignation not yet dead “Split me if there’s whey in that piece! You near jammed my hawze that time! Your Uncle Andrew’s hawze, boy. Are you not ashamed of yourself?”

“Not a bit,” said I between my teeth; “I leave that to you.”

He smiled till his teeth shone white in his black beard, and “Lord!” cried he, “I’m that glad I came. It was but the toss of a bawbee, when I came to Leith last week, whether I should have a try at the old doocot, or up Blue Peter again and off to the Indies. I hate ceiled rooms – they mind me of the tomb; I’m out of practice at sitting doing nothing in a parlour and saying grace before meat, and – I give you warning, Quentin – I’ll be damned if I drink milk for supper. It was the notion of milk for supper and all that means that kept me from calling on Katrine – and you – any sooner. But I’m glad I came to meet a lad of spirit like young Andy here.”

“Not Andy,” said my father. “Paul is his name.”

My uncle laughed.

“That was ill done of you, Quentin,” said he; “I think it was as little as Katrine and you could do to have kept up the family name. I suppose you reckoned to change the family fate when you made him Paul. H’m! You must have forgotten that Paul the Apostle wandered most, and many ways fared worst of all the rest. I haven’t forgotten my Bible, you see, Quentin.”

We were now in the parlour room; a servant lass was puffing up a new-lighted fire; my uncle, with his head in the shade, had his greatcoat off, and stood revealed in shabby garments that had once been most genteel; and his brass-bound fortune, that he seemed averse from parting with a moment, was at his feet. Getting no answer to what he had said of the disciples, he looked from one to the other of us and laughed slyly.

“Take off your boots, Andy,” said my father.

“And where have you been since – since – the Plantations?”

“Stow that, Quentin!” cried my uncle, with an oath and his eye on me. “What Plantations are you blethering about? And where have I been? Ask me rather where have I not been. It makes me dizzy even to think of it: with rotten Jesuits and Pagan gentlemen; with France and Spain, and with filthy Lascars, lying Greeks, Eboe slaves, stinking niggers, and slit-eyed Chinese! Oh! I tell you I’ve seen things in twenty years. And places, too: this Scotland, with its infernal rain and its grey fields and its rags, looks like a nightmare to me yet. You may be sure I’ll be out of it pretty fast again.”

“Poor Scotland!” said father ambiguously.

There must be people in the world who are oddly affected by the names of places, peoples, things that have never come within their own experience. Till this day the name of Barbadoes influences me like a story of adventure; and when my Uncle Andrew – lank, bearded, drenched with storm, stood in our parlour glibly hinting at illimitable travel, I lost my anger with the tipsy wretch and felt a curious glow go through my being.

CHAPTER IV

I COME UPON THE RED SHOES

Uncle Andrew settled for the remainder of his time into our domestic world at Hazel Den as if his place had been kept warm for him since ever he went away. For the remainder of his time, I say, because he was to be in the clods of Mearns kirkyard before the hips and haws were off the hedges; and I think I somehow saw his doom in his ghastly countenance the first morning he sat at our breakfast table, contrite over his folly of the night before, as you could see, but carrying off the situation with worldly *sang froid*, and even showing signs of some affection for my father.

His character may be put in two words – he was a lovable rogue; his tipsy bitterness to the goodman his brother may be explained almost as briefly: he had had a notion of Katrine Oliver, and had courted her before ever she met my father, and he had lost her affection through his own folly. Judging from what I would have felt myself in the like circumstances, his bitterest punishment for a life ill spent must have been to see Katrine Oliver's pitying kindness to him now, and the sight of that douce and loving couple finding their happiness in each other must have been a constant sermon to him upon repentance.

Yet, to tell the truth, I fear my Uncle Andrew was not constituted for repentance or remorse. He had slain a man honestly once, and had suffered the Plantations, but beyond that (and even that included, as he must ever insist) he had been guilty of no mean act in all his roving career. Follies – vices – extremes – ay, a thousand of them; but for most his conscience never pricked him. On the contrary, he would narrate with gusto the manifold jeopardies his own follies brought him into; his wan face, nigh the colour of a shroud, would flush, and his eyes dance humorously as he shocked the table when we sat at meals, our spoons suspended in the agitation created by his wonderful histories.

Kept to a moderation with the bottle, and with the constant influence of my mother, who used to feed the rogue on vegetables and, unknown to him, load his broth with simples as a cure for his craving, Uncle Andrew was, all things considered, an acquisition to Hazel Den House. Speaking for myself, he brought the element of the unusual and the unexpected to a place where routine had made me sick of my own society; and though the man in his sober senses knew he was dying on his feet, he was the cheeriest person of our company sequestered so remote in the moors. It was a lesson in resignation to see yon merry eyes loweing like lamps over his tombstone cheeks, and hear him crack a joke in the flushed and heaving interludes of his cough.

It was to me he ever directed the most sensational of his extraordinary memorials. My father did not like it; I saw it in his eye. It was apparent to me that a remonstrance often hung on the tip of his tongue. He would invent ridiculous and unnecessary tasks to keep me out of reach of that alluring *raconteur*, and nobody saw it plainer than Uncle Andrew, who but laughed with the mischievousness of a boy.

Well, the long and short of it was just what Quentin Greig feared – the Spoiled Horn finally smit with a hunger for the road of the Greigs. For three hundred years – we could go no further back, because of a bend sinister – nine out of ten of that family had travelled that road, that leads so often to a kistful of sailor's shells and a death with boots on. It was a fate in the blood, like the black hair of us, the mole on the temple, and the trick of irony. It was that ailment my father had feared for me; it was that kept the household silent upon missing brothers (they were dead, my uncle told me, in Trincomalee, and in Jamaica, and a yard in the Borough of London); it was that inspired the notion of a lawyer's life for Paul Greig.

Just when I was in the deepest confidence of Uncle Andrew, who was by then confined to his bed and suffering the treatment of Doctor Clews, his stories stopped abruptly and he began to lament the wastry of his life. If the thing had been better acted I might have been impressed, for our follies

never look just like what they are till we are finally on the broad of our backs and the Fell Sergeant's step is at the door. But it was not well acted; and when the wicked Uncle Andrew groaned over the very ploys he had a week ago exulted in, I recognised some of my mother's commonest sentiments in his sideways sermon. She had got her quondam Andy, for lang syne's sake, to help her keep her son at home; and he was doing his best, poor man, but a trifle late in the day.

"Uncle Andrew," said I, never heeding his homily, "tell me what came of the pock-marked tobacco planter when you and the negro lay in the swamp for him?"

He groaned hopelessly.

"A rotten tale, Paul, my lad," said he, never looking me in the face; "I rue the day I was mixed up in that affair."

"But it was a good story so far as it went, no further gone than Wednesday last," I protested.

He laughed at that, and for half an hour he put off the new man of my mother's bidding, and we were on the old naughty footing again. He concluded by bequeathing to me for the twentieth time the brass-bound chest, and its contents that we had never seen nor could guess the nature of. But now for the first time he let me know what I might expect there.

"It's not what Quentin might consider much," said he, "for there's not a guelder of money in it, no, nor so little as a groat, for as the world's divided ye can't have both the money and the dance, and I was aye the fellow for the dance. There's scarcely anything in it, Paul, but the trash – ahem! – that is the very fitting reward of a life like mine."

"And still and on, uncle," said I, "it is a very good tale about the pock-marked man."

"Ah! You're there, Greig!" cried the rogue, laughing till his hoast came to nigh choke him. "Well, the kist's yours, anyway, such as it is; and there's but one thing in it – to be strict, a pair – that I set any store by as worth leaving to my nephew."

"It ought to be spurs," said I, "to drive me out of this lamentable countryside and to where a fellow might be doing something worth while."

"Eh!" he cried, "you're no' so far off it, for it's a pair of shoes."

"A pair of shoes!" I repeated, half inclined to think that Uncle Andrew was doited at last.

"A pair of shoes, and perhaps in some need of the cobbler, for I have worn them a good deal since I got them in Madras. They were not new when I got them, but by the look of them they're not a day older now. They have got me out of some unco' plights in different parts of the world, for all that the man who sold them to me at a bonny penny called them the Shoes of Sorrow; and so far as I ken, the virtue's in them yet."

"A doomed man's whim," thought I, and professed myself vastly gratified by his gift.

He died next morning. It was Candlemas Day. He went out at last like a crusie wanting oil. In the morning he had sat up in bed to sup porridge that, following a practice I had made before his reminiscences concluded, I had taken in to him myself. Tremendous long and lean the upper part of him looked, and the cicatrice upon his brow made his ghastliness the more appalling. When he sat against the bolsters he could see through the window into the holm field, and, as it happened, what was there but a wild young roe-deer driven down from some higher part of the country by stress of winter weather, and a couple of mongrel dogs keeping him at bay in an angle of the fail dyke.

I have seldom seen a man more vastly moved than Uncle Andrew looking upon this tragedy of the wilds. He gasped as though his chest would crack, a sweat burst on his face.

"That's – that's the end o't, Paul, my lad!" said he. "Yonder's your roving uncle, and the tykes have got him cornered at last. No more the heather and the brae; no more – no more – no more –"

Such a change came on him that I ran and cried my mother ben, and she and father were soon at his bedside.

It was to her he turned his eyes, that had seen so much of the spacious world of men and women and all their multifarious interests, great and little. They shone with a light of memory and affection,

so that I got there and then a glimpse of the Uncle Andrew of innocence and the Uncle Andrew who might have been if fate had had it otherwise.

He put out his hand and took hers, and said goodbye.

“The hounds have me, Katrine,” said he. “I’m at the fail dyke corner.”

“I’ll go out and whistle them off, uncle,” said I, fancying it all a doited man’s illusion, though the look of death was on him; but I stood rebuked in the frank gaze he gave me of a fuller comprehension than mine, though he answered me not.

And then he took my father’s hand in his other, and to him too he said farewell.

“You’re there, Quentin!” said he; “and Katrine – Katrine – Katrine chose by far the better man. God be merciful to poor Andy Greig, a sinner.” And these were his last words.

CHAPTER V

A SPOILED TRYST, AND OTHER THINGS THAT FOLLOWED ON THE OPENING OF THE CHEST

The funeral was over before I cared to examine my bequest, and then I went to it with some reluctance, for if a pair of shoes was the chief contents of the brass-bound chest, there was like to be little else except the melancholy relics of a botched life. It lay where he left it on the night he came – under the foot of his bed – and when I lifted the lid I felt as if I was spying upon a man through a keyhole. Yet, when I came more minutely to examine the contents, I was disappointed that at the first reflection nothing was there half so pregnant as his own most casual tale to rouse in me the pleasant excitement of romance.

A bairn's caul – that sailor's trophy that has kept many a mariner from drowning only that he might die a less pleasant death; a broken handcuff, whose meaning I cared not to guess at; a pop or pistol; a chap-book of country ballads, that possibly solaced his exile from the land they were mostly written about; the batters of a Bible, with nothing between them but his name in his mother's hand on the inside of the board; a traveller's log or itinerary, covering a period of fifteen years, extremely minute in its detail and well written; a broken sixpence and the pair of shoes.

The broken sixpence moved my mother to tears, for she had had the other half twenty years ago, before Andrew Greig grew ne'er-do-weel; the shoes failed to rouse in her or in my father any interest whatever. If they could have guessed it, they would have taken them there and then and sunk them in the deepest linn of Earn.

There was little kenspeckle about them saving their colour, which was a dull dark red. They were of the most excellent material, with a great deal of fine sewing thrown away upon them in parts where it seems to me their endurance was in no wise benefited, and an odd pair of silver buckles gave at your second glance a foreign look to them.

I put them on at the first opportunity: they fitted me as if my feet had been moulded to them, and I sat down to the study of the log-book. The afternoon passed, the dusk came. I lit a candle, and at midnight, when I reached the year of my uncle's escape from the Jesuits of Spain, I came to myself gasping, to find the house in an alarm, and that lanthorns were out about Earn Water looking for me, while all the time I was *perdu* in the dead uncle's chamber in the baron's wing, as we called it, of Hazel Den House. I pretended I had fallen asleep; it was the first and the last time I lied to my mother, and something told me she knew I was deceiving her. She looked at the red shoes on my feet.

"Ugly brogues!" said she; "it's a wonder to me you would put them on your feet. You don't know who has worn them."

"They were Uncle Andy's," said I, complacently looking at them, for they fitted like a glove; the colour was hardly noticeable in the evening, and the buckles were most becoming.

"Ay! and many a one before him, I'm sure," said she, with distaste in her tone, "I don't think them nice at all, Paul," and she shuddered a little.

"That's but a freit," said I; "but it's not likely I'll wear much of such a legacy." I went up and left them in the chest, and took the diary into my own room and read Uncle Andrew's marvellous adventures in the trade of rover till it was broad daylight.

When I had come to the conclusion it seemed as if I had been in the delirium of a fever, so tempestuous and unreal was that memoir of a wild loose life. The sea was there, buffeting among the pages in rollers and breakers; there were the chronicles of a hundred ports, with boozing kens and raving lazarettos in them; far out isles and cays in nameless oceans, and dozing lagoons below tropic skies; a great clash of weapons and a bewildering deal of political intrigue in every part of the Continent from Calais to Constantinople. My uncle's narrative in life had not hinted at one half

the marvel of his career, and I read his pages with a rapture, as one hears a noble piece of music, fascinated to the uttermost, and finding no moral at the end beyond that the world we most of us live in with innocence and ignorance is a crust over tremendous depths. And then I burned the book. It went up in a grey smoke on the top of the fire that I had kept going all night for its perusal; and the thing was no sooner done than I regretted it, though the act was dictated by the seemly enough idea that its contents would only distress my parents if they came to their knowledge.

For days – for weeks – for a season – I went about, my head humming with Uncle Andy’s voice recounting the most stirring of his adventures as narrated in the log-book. I had been infected by almost his first words the night he came to Hazel Den House, and made a magic chant of the mere names of foreign peoples; now I was fevered indeed; and when I put on the red shoes (as I did of an evening, impelled by some dandyism foreign to my nature hitherto), they were like the seven-league boots for magic, as they set my imagination into every harbour Uncle Andy had frequented and made me a guest at every inn where he had met his boon companions.

I was wearing them the next time I went on my excursion to Earn side and there met Isobel Fortune, who had kept away from the place since I had smiled at my discovery of her tryst with Hervey’s “Meditations.” She came upon me unexpectedly, when the gentility of my shoes and the recollection of all that they had borne of manliness was making me walk along the road with a very high head and an unusually jaunty step.

She seemed struck as she came near, with her face displaying her confusion, and it seemed to me she was a new woman altogether – at least, not the Isobel I had been at school with and seen with an indifferent eye grow up like myself from pinafores. It seemed suddenly scandalous that the like of her should have any correspondence with so ill-suited a lover as David Borland of the Dreipps.

For the first time (except for the unhappy introduction of Hervey’s “Meditations”) we stopped to speak to each other. She was the most bewitching mixture of smiles and blushes, and stammering now and then, and vastly eager to be pleasant to me, and thinks I, “My lass, you’re keen on trysting when it’s with Borland.”

The very thought of the fellow in that connection made me angry in her interest; and with a mischievous intention of spoiling his sport if he hovered, as I fancied, in the neighbourhood, or at least of delaying his happiness as long as I could, I kept the conversation going very blithe indeed.

She had a laugh, low and brief, and above all sincere, which is the great thing in laughter, that was more pleasant to hear than the sound of Earn in its tinkling hollow among the ferns: it surprised me that she should favour my studied and stupid jocosities with it so frequently. Here was appreciation! I took, in twenty minutes, a better conceit of myself, than the folks at home could have given me in the twelve months since I left the college, and I’ll swear to this date ‘twas the consciousness of my fancy shoes that put me in such good key.

She saw my glance to them at last complacently, and pretended herself to notice them for the first time.

She smiled – little hollows came near the corners of her lips; of a sudden I minded having once kissed Mistress Grant’s niece in a stair-head frolic in Glasgow High Street, and the experience had been pleasant enough.

“They’re very nice,” said Isobel.

“They’re all that,” said I, gazing boldly at her dimples. She flushed and drew in her lips.

“No, no!” I cried, “’twas not them I was thinking of; but their neighbours. I never saw you had dimples before.”

At that she was redder than ever.

“I could not help that, Paul,” said she; “they have been always there, and you are getting very audacious. I was thinking of your new shoes.”

“How do you know they’re new?”

“I could tell,” said she, “by the sound of your footstep before you came in sight.”

“It might not have been my footstep,” said I, and at that she was taken back.

“That is true,” said she, hasty to correct herself. “I only thought it might be your footstep, as you are often this way.”

“It might as readily have been David Borland’s. I have seen him about here.” I watched her as closely as I dared: had her face changed, I would have felt it like a blow.

“Anyway, they’re very nice, your new shoes,” said she, with a marvellous composure that betrayed nothing.

“They were uncle’s legacy,” I explained, “and had travelled far in many ways about the world; far – and fast.”

“And still they don’t seem to be in such a hurry as your old ones,” said she, with a mischievous air. Then she hastened to cover what might seem a rudeness. “Indeed, they’re very handsome, Paul, and become you very much, and – and – and – ”

“They’re called the Shoes of Sorrow; that’s the name my uncle had for them,” said I, to help her to her own relief.

“Indeed, and I hope it may be no more than a by-name,” she said gravely.

The day had the first rumour of spring: green shoots thrust among the bare bushes on the river side, and the smell of new turned soil came from a field where a plough had been feiring; above us the sky was blue, in the north the land was pleasantly curved against silver clouds.

And one small bird began to pipe in a clump of willows, that showered a dust of gold upon us when the little breeze came among the branches. I looked at all and I looked at Isobel Fortune, so trim and bonny, and it seemed there and then good to be a man and my fortunes all to try.

“Sorrow here or sorrow there, Isobel,” I said, “they are the shoes to take me away sooner or later from Hazel Den.”

She caught my meaning with astounding quickness.

“Are you in earnest?” she asked soberly, and I thought she could not have been more vexed had it been David Borland.

“Another year of this,” said I, looking at the vacant land, “would break my heart.”

“Indeed, Paul, and I thought Earn-side was never so sweet as now,” said she, vexed like, as if she was defending a companion.

“That is true, too,” said I, smiling into the very depths of her large dark eyes, where I saw a pair of Spoiled Horns as plainly as if I looked in sunny weather into Linn of Earn. “That is true, too. I have never been better pleased with it than to-day. But what in the world’s to keep me? It’s all bye with the college – at which I’m but middling well pleased; it’s all bye with the law – for which thanks to Heaven! and, though they seem to think otherwise at Hazel Den House, I don’t believe I’ve the cut of a man to spend his life among rowting cattle and dour clay land.”

“I daresay not; it’s true,” said she stammeringly, with one fast glance that saw me from the buckles of my red shoes to the underlids of my eyes. For some reason or other she refused to look higher, and the distant landscape seemed to have charmed her after that. She drummed with a toe upon the path; she bit her nether lip; upon my word, the lass had tears at her eyes! I had, plainly, kept her long enough from her lover. “Well, it’s a fine evening; I must be going,” said I stupidly, making a show at parting, and an ugly sense of annoyance with David Borland stirring in my heart. “But it will rain before morning,” said she, making to go too, but always looking to the hump of Dungoyne that bars the way to the Hielands. “I think, after all, Master Paul, I liked the old shoon better than the new ones.”

“Do you say so?” I asked, astonished at the irrelevance that came rapidly from her lips, as if she must cry it out or choke. “And how comes that?”

“Just because – ” said she, and never a word more, like a woman, nor fair good-e’en nor fair good-day to ye, but off she went, and I was the stirk again.

I looked after her till she went out of sight, wondering what had been the cause of her tirror. She fair ran at the last, as if eager to get out of my sight; and when she disappeared over the brae that rose from the river-side there was a sense of deprivation within me. I was clean gone in love and over the lugs in it with Isobel Fortune.

CHAPTER VI

MY DEED ON THE MOOR OF MEARNES

Next day I shot David Borland of the Driepps.

It was the seventh of March, the first day I heard the laverock that season, and it sang like to burst its heart above the spot where the lad fell with a cry among the rushes. It rose from somewhere in our neighbourhood, aspiring to the heavens, but chained to earth by its own song; and even yet I can recall the eerie influence of that strange conjunction of sin and song as I stood knee-deep in the tangle of the moor with the pistol smoking in my hand.

To go up to the victim of my jealousy as he lay ungainly on the ground, his writhing over, was an ordeal I could not face.

“Davie, Davie!” I cried to him over the thirty paces; but I got no reply from yon among the rushes. I tried to wet my cracking lips with a tongue like a cork, and “Davie, oh, Davie, are ye badly hurt?” I cried, in a voice I must have borrowed from ancient time when my forefathers fought with the forest terrors.

I listened and I better listened, but Borland still lay there at last, a thing insensate like a gangrel’s pack, and in all the dreary land there was nothing living but the laverock and me.

The bird was high – a spot upon the blue; his song, I am sure, was the song of his kind, that has charmed lovers in summer fields from old time – a melody rapturous, a message like the message of the evening star that God no more fondly loves than that small warbler in desert places – and yet there and then it deaved me like a cry from hell. No heavenly message had the lark for me: he flew aloft there into the invisible, to tell of this deed of mine among the rushes. Not God alone would hear him tell his story: they might hear it, I knew, in shepherds’ cots; they might hear it in an old house bowered dark among trees; the solitary witness of my crime might spread the hue and cry about the shire; already the law might be on the road for young Paul Greig.

I seemed to listen a thousand years to that telltale in the air; for a thousand years I scanned the blue for him in vain, yet when I looked at my pistol again the barrel was still warm.

It was the first time I had handled such a weapon.

A senseless tool it seemed, and yet the crooking of a finger made it the confederate of hate; though it, with its duty done, relapsed into a heedless silence, I, that owned it for my instrument, must be wailing in my breast, torn head to foot with thunders of remorse.

I raised the hammer, ran a thumb along the flint, seeing something fiendish in the jaws that held it; I lifted up the prime-cap, and it seemed some miracle of Satan that the dust I had put there in the peace of my room that morning in Hazel Den should have disappeared. “Truefitt” on the lock; a silver shield and an initial graven on it; a butt with a dragon’s grin that had seemed ridiculous before, and now seemed to cry “Cain!” Lord! that an instrument like this in an unpractised hand should cut off all young Borland’s earthly task, end his toil with plough and harrow, his laugh and story.

I looked again at the shapeless thing at thirty paces. “It cannot be,” I told myself; and I cried again, in the Scots that must make him cease his joke, “I ken ye’re only lettin’ on, Davie. Get up oot o’ that and we’ll cry quits.”

But there was no movement; there was no sound; the tell-tale had the heavens to himself.

All the poltroon in me came a-top and dragged my better man round about, let fall the pistol from my nerveless fingers and drove me away from that place. It was not the gallows I thought of (though that too was sometimes in my mind), but of the frightful responsibility I had made my burden, to send a human man before his Maker without a preparation, and my bullet hole upon his brow or breast, to tell for ever through the roaring ring of all eternity that this was the work of Paul Greig. The rushes of the moor hissed me as I ran blindly through them; the tufts of heather over Whiggie Knowe

caught at me to stop me; the laverock seemed to follow overhead, a sergeant of provost determined on his victim.

My feet took me, not home to the home that was mine no more, but to Earn-side, where I felt the water crying in its linn would drown the sound of the noisy laverock; and the familiar scene would blot for a space the ugly sight from my eyes. I leant at the side to lave my brow, and could scarce believe that this haggard countenance I saw look up at me from the innocent waters was the Spoiled Horn who had been reflected in Isobel's eyes. Over and over again I wet my lips and bathed my temples; I washed my hands, and there was on the right forefinger a mark I bear to this day where the trigger guard of the pistol in the moments of my agony had cut me to the bone without my knowing it.

When my face looked less like clay and my plans were clear, I rose and went home.

My father and mother were just sitting to supper, and I joined them. They talked of a cousin to be married in Drymen at Michaelmas, of an income in the leg of our mare, of Sabbath's sermon, of things that were as far from me as I from heaven, and I heard them as one in a dream, far-off. What I was hearing most of the time was the laverock setting the hue and cry of Paul Greig's crime around the world and up to the Throne itself, and what I was seeing was the vacant moor, now in the dusk, and a lad's remains awaiting their discovery. The victuals choked me as I pretended to eat; my father noticed nothing, my mother gave a glance, and a fright was in her face.

I went up to my room and searched a desk for some verses that had been gathering there in my twelve months' degradation, and particularly for one no more than a day old with Isobel Fortune for its theme. It was all bye with that! I was bound to be glancing at some of the lines as I furiously tore them up and threw them out of the window into the bleaching-green; and oh! but the black sorrows and glooms that were there recorded seemed a mockery in the light of this my terrible experience. They went by the window, every scrap: then I felt cut off from every innocent day of my youth, the past clean gone from me for ever.

The evening worship came.

"If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost ends of the sea."

My father, peering close at the Book through his spectacles, gave out the words as if he stood upon a pulpit, deliberate – too deliberate for Cain his son, that sat with his back to the window shading his face from a mother's eyes. They were always on me, her eyes, throughout that last service; they searched me like a torch in a pit, and wae, wae was her face!

When we came to pray and knelt upon the floor, I felt as through my shut eyes that hers were on me even then, exceeding sad and troubled. They followed me like that when I went up, as they were to think, to my bed, and I was sitting at my window in the dark half an hour later when she came up after me. She had never done the like before since I was a child.

"Are ye bedded, Paul?" she whispered in the dark.

I could not answer her in words, but I stood to my feet and lit a candle, and she saw that I was dressed.

"What ails ye to-night?" she asked trembling. "I'm going away, mother," I answered. "There's something wrong?" she queried in great distress.

"There's all that!" I confessed. "It'll be time for you to ken about that in the morning, but I must be off this night."

"Oh, Paul, Paul!" she cried, "I did not like to see you going out in these shoes this afternoon, and I ken't that something ailed ye."

"The road to hell suits one shoe as well's another," said I bitterly; "where the sorrow lies is that ye never saw me go out with a different heart. Mother, mother, the worst ye can guess is no' so bad as the worst ye've yet to hear of your son."

I was in a storm of roaring emotions, yet her next words startled me.

"It's Isobel Fortune of the Kirkillstane," she said, trying hard to smile with a wan face in the candle light.

“It *was*— poor dear! Am I not in torment when I think that she must know it?”

“I thought it was that that ailed ye, Paul,” said she, as if she were relieved. “Look; I got this a little ago on the bleaching-green – this scrap of paper in your write and her name upon it. Maybe I should not have read it.” And she handed me part of that ardent ballad I had torn less than an hour ago.

I held it in the flame of her candle till it was gone, our hands all trembling, and “That’s the end appointed for Paul Greig,” said I.

“Oh, Paul, Paul, it cannot be so unco’!” she cried in terror, and clutched me at the arm.

“It is – it is the worst.”

“And yet – and yet – you’re my son, Paul. Tell me.”

She looked so like a reed in the winter wind, so frail and little and shivering in my room, that I dared not tell her there and then. I said it was better that both father and she should hear my tale together, and we went into the room where already he was bedded but not asleep. He sat up staring at our entry, a night-cowl tassel dangling on his brow.

“There’s a man dead – ” I began, when he checked me with a shout.

“Stop, stop!” he cried, and put my mother in a chair. “I have heard the tale before with my brother Andy, and the end was not for women’s ears.”

“I must know, Quentin,” said his wife, blanched to the lip but determined, and then he put his arm about her waist. It seemed like a second murder to wrench those tender hearts that loved me, but the thing was bound to do.

I poured out my tale at one breath and in one sentence, and when it ended my mother was in her swoond.

“Oh, Paul!” cried the poor man, his face like a clout; “black was the day she gave you birth!”

CHAPTER VII

QUENTIN GREIG LOSES A SON, AND I SET OUT WITH A HORSE AS ALL MY FORTUNE

He pushed me from the chamber as I had been a stranger intruding, and I went to the trance door and looked out at the stretching moorlands lit by an enormous moon that rose over Cathkin Braes, and an immensity of stars. For the first time in all my life I realised the heedlessness of nature in human affairs the most momentous. For the moon swung up serene beyond expression; the stars winked merrily: a late bird glid among the bushes and perched momentarily on a bough of ash to pipe briefly almost with the passion of the spring. But not the heedlessness of nature influenced me so much as the barren prospect of the world that the moon and stars revealed. There was no one out there in those deep spaces of darkness I could claim as friend or familiar. Where was I to go? What was I to do? Only the beginnings of schemes came to me – schemes of concealment and disguise, of surrender even – but the last to be dismissed as soon as it occurred to me, for how could I leave this house the bitter bequest of a memory of the gallows-tree?

Only the beginnings, I say, for every scheme ran tilt against the obvious truth that I was not only without affection or regard out there, but without as much as a crown of money to purchase the semblance of either.

I could not have stood very long there when my father came out, his face like clay, and aged miraculously, and beckoned me to the parlour.

“Your mother – my wife,” said he, “is very ill, and I am sending for the doctor. The horse is yoking. There is another woman in Driepps who – God help her! – will be no better this night, but I wish in truth her case was ours, and that it was you who lay among the heather.”

He began pacing up and down the floor, his eyes bent, his hands continually wringing, his heart bursting, as it were, with sighs and the dry sobs of the utmost wretchedness. As for me, I must have been clean gyte (as the saying goes), for my attention was mostly taken up with the tassel of his nightcap that bobbed grotesquely on his brow. I had not seen it since, as a child, I used to share his room.

“What! what!” he cried at last piteously, “have ye never a word to say? Are ye dumb?” He ran at me and caught me by the collar of the coat and tried to shake me in an anger, but I felt it no more than I had been a stone.

“What did ye do it for? What in heaven’s name did ye quarrel on?”

“It was – it was about a girl,” I said, reddening even at that momentous hour to speak of such a thing to him.

“A girl!” he repeated, tossing up his hands. “Keep us! Hoo lang are ye oot o’ daidlies? Well! well!” he went on, subduing himself and prepared to listen. I wished the tassel had been any other colour than crimson, and hung fairer on the middle of his forehead; it seemed to fascinate me. And he, belike, forgot that I was there, for he thought, I knew, continually of his wife, and he would stop his feverish pacing on the floor, and hearken for a sound from the room where she was quartered with the maid. I made no answer.

“Well, well!” he cried again fiercely, turning upon me. “Out with it; out with the whole hellish transaction, man!”

And then I told him in detail what before my mother I had told in a brief abstract.

How that I had met young Borland coming down the breast of the brae at Kirkillstane last night and —

“Last night!” he cried. “Are ye hawering? I saw ye go to your bed at ten, and your boots were in the kitchen.”

It was so, I confessed. I had gone to my room but not to bed, and had slipped out by the window when the house was still, with Uncle Andrew's shoes.

"Oh, lad!" he cried, "it's Andy's shoes you stand in sure enough, for I have seen him twenty years syne in the plight that you are in this night. Merciful heaven! what dark blotch is in the history of this family of ours that it must ever be embroiled in crimes of passion and come continually to broken ends of fortune? I have lived stark honest and humble, fearing the Lord; the covenants have I kept, and still and on it seems I must beget a child of the Evil One!"

And how, going out thus under cover of night, I had meant to indulge a boyish fancy by seeing the light of Isobel Fortune's window. And how, coming to the Kirkillstane, I met David Borland leaving the house, whistling cheerfully.

"Oh, Paul, Paul!" cried my father, "I mind of you an infant on her knees that's ben there, and it might have been but yesterday your greeting in the night wakened me to mourn and ponder on your fate." And how Borland, divining my object there, and himself new out triumphant from that cheerful house of many daughters, made his contempt for the Spoiled Horn too apparent.

"You walked to the trough-stane when you were a twelvemonth old," said my father with the irrelevance of great grief, as if he recalled a dead son's infancy.

And how, maddened by some irony of mine, he had struck a blow upon my chest, and so brought my challenge to something more serious and gentlemanly than a squalid brawl with fists upon the highway.

I stopped my story; it seemed useless to be telling it to one so much preoccupied with the thought of the woman he loved. His lips were open, his eyes were constant on the door.

But "Well! Well!" he cried again eagerly, and I resumed.

Of how I had come home, and crept into my guilty chamber and lay the long night through, torn by grief and anger, jealousy and distress. And how evading the others of the household as best I could that day, I had in the afternoon at the hour appointed gone out with Uncle Andrew's pistol.

My father moaned – a waefu' sound!

And found young Borland up on the moor before me with such another weapon, his face red byordinary, his hands and voice trembling with passion.

"Poor lad, poor lad!" my father cried blurting the sentiment as he had been a bairn.

How we tossed a coin to decide which should be the first to fire, and Borland had won the toss, and gone to the other end of our twenty paces with vulgar menaces and "Spoiled Horn" the sweetest of his epithets.

"Poor lad! he but tried to bluster down the inward voice that told him the folly o't," said father.

And how Borland had fired first. The air was damp. The sound was like a slamming door.

"The door of hope shut up for him, poor dear," cried father.

And how he missed me in his trepidation that made his hand that held the pistol so tremble that I saw the muzzle quiver even at twenty paces.

"And then you shot him deliberately I M cried my father.

"No, no," I cried at that, indignant. "I aimed without a glance along the barrel: the flint flashed; the prime missed fire, and I was not sorry, but Borland cried 'Spoiled Horn' braggingly, and I cocked again as fast as I could, and blindly jerked the trigger. I never thought of striking him. He fell with one loud cry among the rushes."

"Murder, by God!" cried my father, and he relapsed into a chair, his body all convulsed with horror.

I had told him all this as if I had been in a delirium, or as if it were a tale out of a book, and it was only when I saw him writhing in his chair and the tassel shaking over his eyes, I minded that the murderer was me. I made for the door; up rose my father quickly and asked me what I meant to do.

I confessed I neither knew nor cared.

“You must thole your assize,” said he, and just as he said it the clatter of the mare’s hoofs sounded on the causey of the yard, and he must have minded suddenly for what object she was saddled there.

“No, no,” said he, “you must flee the country. What right have you to make it any worse for her?”

“I have not a crown in my pocket,” said I.

“And I have less,” he answered quickly. “Where are you going? No, no, don’t tell me that; I’m not to know. There’s the mare saddled, I meant Sandy to send the doctor from the Mearns, but you can do that. Bid him come here as fast as he can.”

“And must I come back with the mare?” I asked, reckless what he might say to that, though my life depended on it.

“For the sake of your mother,” he answered, “I would rather never set eyes on you or the beast again; she’s the last transaction between us, Paul Greig.” And then he burst in tears, with his arms about my neck.

Ten minutes later I was on the mare, and galloping, for all her ailing leg, from Hazel Den as if it were my own loweing conscience. I roused Dr. Clews at the Mearns, and gave him my father’s message. “Man,” said he, holding his chamber light up to my face, “man, ye’re as gash as a ghaist yersel’.”

“I may well be that,” said I, and off I set, with some of Uncle Andy’s old experience in my mind, upon a ride across broad Scotland.

CHAPTER VIII

I RIDE BY NIGHT ACROSS SCOTLAND, AND MEET A MARINER WITH A GLEED EYE

That night was like the day, with a full moon shining. The next afternoon I rode into Borrowstounness, my horse done out and myself sore from head to heel; and never in all my life have I seen a place with a more unwelcome aspect, for the streets were over the hoof in mud; the natives directed me in an accent like a tinker's whine; the Firth of Forth was wrapped in a haar or fog that too closely put me in mind of my prospects. But I had no right to be too particular, and in the course of an hour I had sold the mare for five pounds to a man of much Christian profession, who would not give a farthing more on the plea that she was likely stolen.

The five pounds and the clothes I stood in were my fortune: it did not seem very much, if it was to take me out of the reach of the long arm of the doomster; and thinking of the doomster I minded of the mole upon my brow, that was the most kenspeckle thing about me in the event of a description going about the country, so the first thing I bought with my fortune was a pair of scissors. Going into a pend close in one of the vennels beside the quay, I clipped off the hair upon the mole and felt a little safer. I was coming out of the close, pouching the scissors, when a man of sea-going aspect, with high boots and a tarpaulin hat, stumbled against me and damned my awkwardness.

"You filthy hog," said I, exasperated at such manners, for he was himself to blame for the encounter; "how dare you speak to me like that?" He was a man of the middle height, sturdy on his bowed legs in spite of the drink obvious in his face and speech, and he had a roving gleed black eye. I had never clapped gaze on him in all my life before.

"Is that the way ye speak to Dan Risk, ye swab?" said he, ludicrously affecting a dignity that ill suited with his hiccough. "What's the good of me being a skipper if every linen-draper out of Fife can cut into my quarter on my own deck?"

"This is no' your quarter-deck, man, if ye were sober enough to ken it," said I; "and I'm no linen-draper from Fife or anywhere else."

And then the brute, with his hands thrust to the depth of his pockets, staggered me as if he had done it with a blow of his fist.

"No," said he, with a very cunning tone, "ye're no linen-draper perhaps, but – ye're maybe no sae decent a man, young Greig."

It was impossible for me to conceal even from this tipsy rogue my astonishment and alarm at this. It seemed to me the devil himself must be leagued against me in the cause of justice. A cold sweat came on my face and the palms of my hands. I opened my mouth and meant to give him the lie but I found I dare not do so in the presence of what seemed a miracle of heaven.

"How do you ken my name's Greig?" I asked at the last.

"Fine that," he made answer, with a grin; "and there's mony an odd thing else I ken."

"Well, it's no matter," said I, preparing to quit him, but in great fear of what the upshot might be; "I'm for off, anyway."

By this time it was obvious that he was not so drunk as I thought him at first, and that in temper and tact he was my match even with the glass in him. "Do ye ken what I would be doing if I was you?" said he seemingly determined not to let me depart like that, for he took a step or two after me.

I made no reply, but quickened my pace and after me he came, lurching and catching at my arm; and I mind to this day the roll of him gave me the impression of a crab.

"If it's money ye want-" I said at the end of my patience.

"Curse your money!" he cried, pretending to spit the insult from his mouth. "Curse your money; but if I was you, and a weel-kent skipper like Dan Risk – like Dan Risk of the *Seven Sisters*– made

up to me out of a redeeculous good nature and nothing else, I would gladly go and splice the rope with him in the nearest ken.”

“Go and drink with yourself, man,” I cried; “there’s the money for a chappin of ate, and I’ll forego my share of it.”

I could have done nothing better calculated to infuriate him. As I held out the coin on the palm of my hand he struck it up with an oath and it rolled into the syver. His face flamed till the neck of him seemed a round of seasoned beef.

“By the Rock o’ Bass!” he roared, “I would clap ye in jyle for less than your lousy groat.”

Ah, then, it was in vain I had put the breadth of Scotland between me and that corpse among the rushes: my heart struggled a moment, and sank as if it had been drowned in bilge. I turned on the man what must have been a gallows face, and he laughed, and, gaining his drunken good nature again he hooked me by the arm, and before my senses were my own again he was leading me down the street and to the harbour. I had never a word to say.

The port, as I tell, was swathed in the haar of the east, out of which tall masts rose dim like phantom spears; the clumsy tarred bulwarks loomed like walls along the quay, and the neighbourhood was noisy with voices that seemed unnatural coming out of the haze. Mariners were hanging about the sheds, and a low tavern belched others out to keep them company. Risk made for the tavern, and at that I baulked.

“Oh, come on!” said he. “If I’m no’ mistaken Dan Risk’s the very man ye’re in the need of. You’re wanting out of Scotland, are ye no’?”

“More than that; I’m wanting out of myself,” said I, but that seemed beyond him.

“Come in anyway, and we’ll talk it over.”

That he might help me out of the country seemed possible if he was not, as I feared at first, some agent of the law and merely playing with me, so I entered the tavern with him.

“Two gills to the coffin-room, Mrs. Clerihew,” he cried to the woman in the kitchen. “And slippy about it, if ye please, for my mate here’s been drinking buttermilk all his life, and ye can tell’t in his face.”

“I would rather have some meat,” said I.

“Humph!” quo’ he, looking at my breeches. “A lang ride!” He ordered the food at my mentioning, and made no fuss about drinking my share of the spirits as well as his own, while I ate with a hunger that was soon appeased, for my eye, as the saying goes, was iller to satisfy than my appetite.

He sat on the other side of the table in the little room that doubtless fairly deserved the name it got of coffin, for many a man, I’m thinking, was buried there in his evil habits; and I wondered what was to be next.

“To come to the bit,” said the at last, looking hard into the bottom of his tankard in a way that was a plain invitation to buy more for him. “To come to the bit, you’re wanting out of the country?”

“It’s true,” said I; “but how do you know? And how do you know my name, for I never saw you to my knowledge in all my life before?”

“So much the worse for you; I’m rale weel liked by them that kens me. What would ye give for a passage to Nova Scotia?”

“It’s a long way,” said I, beginning to see a little clearer.

“Ay,” said he, “but I’ve seen a gey lang rope too, and a man danglin’ at the end of it.”

Again my face betrayed me. I made no answer.

“I ken all about it,” he went on. “Your name’s Greig; ye’re from a place called the Hazel Den at the other side o’ the country; ye’ve been sailing wi’ a stiff breeze on the quarter all night, and the clime o’ auld Scotland’s one that doesna suit your health, eh? What’s the amount?” said he, and he looked towards my pocket “Could we no’ mak’ it halfers?”

“Five pounds,” said I, and at that he looked strangely dashed.

“Five pounds,” he repeated incredulously. “It seems to have been hardly worth the while.” And then his face changed, as if a new thought had struck him. He leaned over the table and whispered with the infernal tone of a confederate, “Doused his glim, eh?” winking with his hale eye, so that I could not but shiver at him, as at the touch of slime.

“I don’t understand,” said I.

“Do ye no’?” said he, with a sneer; “for a Greig ye’re mighty slow in the uptak’. The plain English o’ that, then, is that ye’ve killed a man. A trifle like that ance happened to a Greig afore.”

“What’s your name?” I demanded.

“Am I no tellin’ ye?” said he shortly. “It’s just Daniel Risk; and where could you get a better? Perhaps ye were thinkin’ aboot swappin’ names wi’ me; and by the Bass, it’s Dan’s family name would suit very weel your present position,” and the scoundrel laughed at his own humour.

“I asked because I was frightened it might be Mahoun,” said I. “It seems gey hard to have ridden through mire for a night and a day, and land where ye started from at the beginning. And how do ye ken all that?”

“Oh!” he said, “kennin’s my trade, if ye want to know. And whatever way I ken, ye needna think I’m the fellow to make much of a sang aboot it. Still and on, the thing’s frowned doon on in this country, though in places I’ve been it would be coonted to your credit. I’ll take anither gill; and if ye ask me, I would drench the butter-milk wi’ something o’ the same, for the look o’ ye sittin’ there’s enough to gie me the waterbrash. Mrs. Clerihew – here!” He rapped loudly on the table, and the drink coming in I was compelled again to see him soak himself at my expense. He reverted to my passage from the country, and “Five pounds is little enough for it,” said he; “but ye might be eking it oot by partly working your passage.”

“I didn’t say I was going either to Nova Scotia or with you,” said I, “and I think I could make a better bargain elsewhere.”

“So could I, maybe,” said he, fuming of spirits till I felt sick. “And it’s time I was doin’ something for the good of my country.” With that he rose to his feet with a look of great moral resolution, and made as if for the door, but by this time I understood him better.

“Sit down, ye muckle hash!” said I, and I stood over him with a most threatening aspect.

“By the Lord!” said he, “that’s a Greig anyway!”

“Ay!” said I. “ye seem to ken the breed. Can I get another vessel abroad besides yours?”

“Ye can not,” said he, with a promptness I expected, “unless ye wait on the *Sea Pyat*. She leaves for Jamaica next Thursday; and there’s no’ a spark of the Christian in the skipper o’ her, one Macallum from Greenock.”

For the space of ten minutes I pondered over the situation. Undoubtedly I was in a hole. This brute had me in his power so long as my feet were on Scottish land, and he knew it. At sea he might have me in his power too, but against that there was one precaution I could take, and I made up my mind.

“I’ll give you four pounds – half at leaving the quay and the other half when ye land me.”

“My conscience wadna’ alloo me,” protested the rogue; but the greed was in his face, and at last he struck my thumb on the bargain, and when he did that I think I felt as much remorse at the transaction as at the crime from whose punishment I fled.

“Now,” said I, “tell me how you knew me and heard about – about – ”

“About what?” said he, with an affected surprise. “Let me tell ye this, Mr. Greig, or whatever your name may be, that Dan Risk is too much of the gentleman to have any recollection of any unpleasantness ye may mention, now that he has made the bargain wi’ ye. I ken naethin’ aboot ye, if ye please: whether your name’s Greig or Mackay or Habbie Henderson, it’s new to me, only ye’re a likely lad for a purser’s berth in the *Seven Sisters*.” And refusing to say another word on the topic that so interested me, he took me down to the ship’s side, where I found the *Seven Sisters* was a brigantine

out of Hull, sadly in the want of tar upon her timbers and her mainmast so decayed and worm-eaten that it sounded boss when I struck it with my knuckles in the by-going.

Risk saw me doing it. He gave an ugly smile.

“What do ye think o’ her?” said he, showing me down the companion.

“Mighty little,” I told him straight. “I’m from the moors,” said I, “but I’ve had my feet on a sloop of Ayr before now; and by the look of this craft I would say she has been beeking in the sun idle till she rotted down to the garboard strake.”

He gave his gleed eye a turn and vented some appalling oaths, and wound up with the insult I might expect – namely, that drowning was not my portion.

“There was some brag a little ago of your being a gentleman,” said I, convinced that this blackguard was to be treated to his own fare if he was to be got on with at all. “There’s not much of a gentleman in the like of that.”

At this he was taken aback. “Well,” said he, “don’t you cross my temper; if my temper’s crossed it’s gey hard to keep up gentility. The ship’s sound enough, or she wouldn’t be half a dizen times round the Horn and as weel kent in Halifax as one o’ their ain dories. She’s guid enough for your – for our business, if ye please, Mr. Greig; and here’s my mate Murchison.”

Another tarry-breeks of no more attractive aspect came down the companion.

“Here’s a new hand for ye,” said the skipper humorously.

The mate looked me up and down with some contempt from his own height of little more than five feet four, and peeled an oilskin coat off him. I was clad myself in a good green coat and breeches with fine wool rig-and-fur hose, and the buckled red shoon and the cock of my hat I daresay gave me the look of some importance in tarry-breeks’ eyes. At any rate, he did not take Risk’s word for my identity, but at last touched his hat with awkward fingers after relinquishing his look of contempt.

“Mr. Jamieson?” said he questioningly, and the skipper by this time was searching in a locker for a bottle of rum he said he had there for the signing of agreements. “Mr. Jamieson,” said the mate, “I’m glad to see ye. The money’s no; enough for the job, and that’s letting ye know. It’s all right for Dan here wi’ neither wife nor family, but – ”

“What’s that, ye idiot?” cried Risk turning about in alarm. “Do ye tak’ this callan for the owner? I tell’t ye he was a new hand.”

“A hand!” repeated Murchison, aback and dubious.

“Jist that; he’s the purser.”

Murchison laughed. “That’s a new ornament on the auld randy; he’ll be to keep his keekers on the manifest, like?” said he as one who cracks a good joke. But still and on he scanned me with a suspicious eye, and it was not till Risk had taken him aside later in the day and seemingly explained, that he was ready to meet me with equanimity. By that time I had paid the skipper his two guineas, for the last of his crew was on board, every man Jack of them as full as the Baltic, and staggering at the coamings of the hatches not yet down, until I thought half of them would finally land in the hold.

CHAPTER IX

WHEREIN THE “SEVEN SISTERS” ACTS STRANGELY, AND I SIT WAITING FOR THE MANACLES

An air of westerly wind had risen after meridian and the haar was gone, so that when I stood at the break of the poop as the brigantine crept into the channel and flung out billows of canvas while her drunken seamen quarrelled and bawled high on the spars, I saw, as I imagined, the last of Scotland in a pleasant evening glow. My heart sank. It was not a departure like this I had many a time anticipated when I listened to Uncle Andys tales; here was I with blood on my hands and a guinea to start my life in a foreign country; that was not the worst of it either, for far more distress was in my mind at the reflection that I travelled with a man who was in my secret. At first I was afraid to go near him once our ropes were off the pawls, and I, as it were, was altogether his, but to my surprise there could be no pleasanter man than Risk when he had the wash of water under his rotten barque. He was not only a better-mannered man to myself, but he became, in half an hour of the Firth breeze, as sober as a judge. But for the roving gleed eye, and what I had seen of him on shore, Captain Dan Risk might have passed for a model of all the virtues. He called me Mr. Greig and once or twice (but I stopped that) Young Hazel Den, with no irony in the appellation, and he was at pains to make his mate see that I was one to be treated with some respect, proffering me at our first meal together (for I was to eat in the cuddy,) the first of everything on the table, and even making some excuses for the roughness of the viands. And I could see that whatever his qualities of heart might be, he was a good seaman, a thing to be told in ten minutes by a skipper's step on a deck and his grip of the rail, and his word of command. Those drunken barnacles of his seemed to be men with the stuff of manly deeds in them, when at his word they dashed aloft among the canvas canopy to fist the bulging sail and haul on clew or gasket, or when they clung on greasy ropes and at a gesture of his hand heaved cheerily with that “yo-ho” that is the chant of all the oceans where keels run.

Murchison was a saturnine, silent man, from whom little was to be got of edification. The crew numbered eight men, one of them a black deaf mute, with the name of Antonio Ferdinando, who cooked in a galley little larger than the Hazel Den kennel. It was apparent that no two of them had ever met before, such a career of flux and change is the seaman's, and except one of them, a fellow Horn, who was foremast man, a more villainous gang I never set eyes on before or since. If Risk had raked the ports of Scotland with a fine bone comb for vermin, he could not have brought together a more unpleasant-looking crew. No more than two of them brought a bag on board, and so ragged was their appearance that I felt ashamed to air my own good clothes on the same deck with them.

Fortunately it seemed I had nothing to do with them nor they with me; all that was ordered for the eking out of my passage, as Risk had said, was to copy the manifest, and I had no sooner set to that than I discerned it was a gowk's job just given me to keep me in employ in the cabin. Whatever his reason, the man did not want me about his deck. I saw that in an interlude in my writing, when I came up from his airless den to learn what progress old rotten-beams made under all her canvas.

It had declined to a mere handful of wind, and the vessel scarcely moved, seemed indeed steadfast among the sea-birds that swooped and wheeled and cried around her. I saw the sun just drop among blood-red clouds over Stirling, and on the shore of Fife its pleasant glow. The sea swung flat and oily, running to its ebb, and lapping discernibly upon a recluse promontory of land with a stronghold on it.

“What do you call yon, Horn?” I said to the seaman I have before mentioned, who leaned upon the taffrail and watched the vessel's greasy wake, and I pointed to the gloomy buildings on the shore.

“Blackness Castle,” said he, and he had time to tell no more, for the skipper bawled upon him for a shirking dog, and ordered the flemishing of some ropes loose upon the forward deck. Nor was

I exempt from his zeal for the industry of other folks for he came up to me with a suspicious look, as if he feared I had been hearing news from his foremast man, and “How goes the manifest, Mr. Greig?” says he.

“Oh, brawly, brawly!” said I, determined to begin with Captain Daniel Risk as I meant to end.

He grew purple, but restrained himself with an effort. “This is not an Ayr sloop, Mr. Greig,” said he; “and when orders go on the *Seven Sisters* I like to see them implemented. You must understand that there’s a pressing need for your clerking, or I would not be so soon putting you at it.”

“At this rate of sailing,” says I, “I’ll have time to copy some hundred manifests between here and Nova Scotia.”

“Perhaps you’ll permit me to be the best judge of that,” he replied in the English he ever assumed with his dignity, and seeing there was no more for it, I went back to my quill.

It was little wonder, in all the circumstances, that I fell asleep over my task with my head upon the cabin table whereon I wrote, and it was still early in the night when I crawled into the narrow bunk that the skipper had earlier indicated as mine.

Weariness mastered my body, but my mind still roamed; the bunk became a coffin quicklived, and the murderer of David Borland lying in it; the laverock cried across Earn Water and the moors of Renfrew with the voice of Daniel Risk. And yet the strange thing was that I knew I slept and dreamed, and more than once I made effort, and dragged myself into wakefulness from the horrors of my nightmare. At these times there was nothing to hear but the plop of little waves against the side of the ship, a tread on deck, and the call of the watch.

I had fallen into a sleep more profound than any that had yet blessed my hard couch, when I was suddenly wakened by a busy clatter on the deck, the shriek of ill-greased davits, the squeak of blocks, and the fall of a small-boat into the water. Another odd sound puzzled me: but for the probability that we were out over Bass I could have sworn it was the murmur of a stream running upon a gravelled shore. A stream – heavens! There could be no doubt about it now; we were somewhere close in shore, and the *Seven Sisters* was lying to. The brigantine stopped in her voyage where no stoppage should be; a small boat plying to land in the middle of the night; come! here was something out of the ordinary, surely, on a vessel seaward bound. I had dreamt of the gallows and of Dan Risk as an informer. Was it a wonder that there should flash into my mind the conviction of my betrayal? What was more likely than that the skipper, secure of my brace of guineas, was selling me to the garrison of Blackness?

I clad myself hurriedly and crept cautiously up the companion ladder, and found myself in overwhelming darkness, only made the more appalling and strange because the vessel’s lights were all extinguished. Silence large and brooding lay upon the *Seven Sisters* as she lay in that obscuring haer that had fallen again; she might be Charon’s craft pausing mid-way on the cursed stream, and waiting for the ferry cry upon the shore of Time. We were still in the estuary or firth, to judge by the bickering burn and the odors off-shore, above all the odour of rotting brake; and we rode at anchor, for her bows were up-water to the wind and tide, and above me, in the darkness, I could hear the idle sails faintly flapping in the breeze and the reef-points all tap-tapping. I seemed to have the deck alone, but for one figure at the stern; I went back, and found that it was Horn.

“Where are we?” I asked, relieved to find there the only man I could trust on board the ship.

“A little below Blackness,” said he shortly with a dissatisfied tone.

“I did not know we were to stop here,” said I, wondering if he knew that I was doomed.

“Neither did I,” said he, peering into the void of night. “And whit’s mair, I wish I could guess the reason o’ oor stopping. The skipper’s been ashore mair nor ance wi’ the lang-boat forward there, and I’m sent back here to keep an e’e on lord kens what except it be yersel’.”

“Are ye indeed?” said I, exceedingly vexed. “Then I ken too well, Horn, the reason for the stoppage. You are to keep your eye on a man who’s being bargained for with the hangman.”

“I would rather ken naithin’ about that,” said he, “and onyway I think ye’re mistaken. Here they’re comin’ back again.”

Two or three small boats were coming down on us out of the darkness; not that I could see them, but that I heard their oars in muffled rowlocks.

“If they want me,” said I sorrowfully, “they can find me down below,” and back I went and sat me in the cabin, prepared for the manacles.

CHAPTER X

THE STRUGGLE IN THE CABIN, AND AN EERIE SOUND OF RUNNING WATER

The place stank with bilge and the odour of an ill-trimmed lamp smoking from a beam; the fragments of the skipper's supper were on the table, with a broken quadrant; rats scurried and squealed in the bulkheads, and one stared at me from an open locker, where lay a rum-bottle, while beetles and slaters travelled along the timbers. But these things compelled my attention less than the skylights that were masked internally by pieces of canvas nailed roughly on them. They were not so earlier in the evening; it must have been done after I had gone to sleep, and what could be the object? That puzzled me extremely, for it must have been the same hand that had extinguished all the deck and mast lights, and though black was my crime darkness was unnecessary to my betrayal.

I waited with a heart like lead.

I heard the boats swung up on the davits, the squeak of the falls, the tread of the seamen, the voice of Risk in an unusually low tone. In the bows in a little I heard the windlass click and the chains rasp in the hawse-holes; we were lifting the anchor.

For a moment hope possessed me. If we were weighing anchor then my arrest was not imminent at least; but that consolation lasted briefly when I thought of the numerous alternatives to imprisonment in Blackness.

We were under weigh again; there was a heel to port, and a more rapid plop of the waters along the carvel planks. And then Risk and his mate came down.

I have seldom seen a man more dashed than the skipper when he saw me sitting waiting on him, clothed and silent. His face grew livid; round he turned to Murchison and hurried him with oaths to come and clap eyes on this sea-clerk. I looked for the officer behind them, but they were alone, and at that I thought more cheerfully I might have been mistaken about the night's curious proceedings.

"Anything wrang?" said Risk, affecting nonchalance now that his spate of oaths was by, and he pulled the rum out of the locker and helped himself and his mate to a swingeing caulker.

"Oh, nothing at all," said I, "at least nothing that I know of, Captain Risk. And are we – are we – at Halifax already?"

"What do you mean?" said he. And then he looked at me closely, put out the hand unoccupied by his glass and ran an insolent dirty finger over my new-clipped mole. "Greig, Greig," said he, "Greig to a hair! I would have the wee shears to that again, for its growin'."

"You're a very noticing man," said I, striking down his hand no way gently, and remembering that he had seen my scissors when I emerged from the Borrowstouness close after my own barbering.

"I'm all that," he replied, with a laugh, and all the time Murchison, the mate, sat mopping his greasy face with a rag, as one after hard work, and looked on us with wonder at what we meant. "I'm all that," he replied, "the hair aff the mole and the horse-hair on your creased breeches wad hae tauld ony ane that ye had ridden in a hurry and clipped in a fricht o' discovery."

"Oh, oh!" I cried, "and that's what goes to the makin' o' a Mahoun!"

"Jist that," said he, throwing himself on a seat with an easy indifference meant to conceal his vanity. "Jist observation and a knack o' puttin' twa and twa thegither. Did ye think the skipper o' the *Seven Sisters* was fleein' over Scotland at the tail o' your horse?"

"The Greig mole's weel kent, surely," said I, astonished and chagrined. "I jalouse it's notorious through my Uncle Andy?"

Risk laughed at that. "Oh, ay!" said he, "when Andy Greig girmed at ye it was ill to miss seein' his mole. Man, ye might as well wear your name on the front o' your hat as gae aboot wi' a mole like that – and – and that pair o' shoes."

The blood ran to my face at this further revelation of his astuteness. It seemed, then, I carried my identity head and foot, and it was no wonder a halfeyed man like Risk should so easily discover me. I looked down at my feet, and sure enough, when I thought of it now, it would have been a stupid man who, having seen these kenspeckle shoes once, would ever forget them.

“My uncle seems to have given me good introductions,” said I. “They struck mysel’ as rather dandy for a ship,” broke in the mate, at last coming on something he could understand.

“And did *you* know Andy Greig, too?” said I. “Andy Greig,” he replied. “Not me!”

“Then, by God, ye hinna sailed muckle aboot the warld!” said the skipper. “I hae seen thae shoes in the four quarters and aye in a good companionship.”

“They appear yet to retain that virtue,” said I, unable to resist the irony. “And, by the way, Captain Risk, now that we have discussed the shoes and my mole, what have we been waiting for at Blackness?”

His face grew black with annoyance.

“What’s that to you?” he cried.

“Oh, I don’t know,” I answered indifferently. “I thought that now ye had got the best part o’ your passage money ye might hae been thinking to do something for your country again. They tell me it’s a jail in there, and it might suggest itself to you as providing a good opportunity for getting rid of a very indifferent purser.”

It is one thing I can remember to the man’s credit that this innuendo of treachery seemed to make him frantic. He dashed the rum-glass at his feet and struck at me with a fist like a jigot of mutton, and I had barely time to step back and counter. He threw himself at me as he had been a cat; I closed and flung my arms about him with a wrestler’s grip, and bent him back upon the table edge, where I might have broken his spine but for Murchison’s interference. The mate called loudly for assistance; footsteps pounded on the cuddy-stair, and down came Horn. Between them they drew us apart, and while Murchison clung to his captain, and plied him into quietness with a fresh glass of grog, Horn thrust me not unkindly out into the night, and with no unwillingness on my part.

It was the hour of dawn, and the haar was gone.

There was something in that chill grey monotone of sky and sea that filled me with a very passion of melancholy. The wind had risen, and the billows ran frothing from the east; enormous clouds hung over the land behind us, so that it seemed to roll with smoke from the eternal fires. Out from that reeking pit of my remorse – that lost Scotland where now perhaps there still lay lying among the rushes, with the pees-weep’s cry above it, the thing from which I flew, our ship went fast, blown upon the frothy billows, like a ponderous bird, leaving a wake of hissing bubbling brine, flying, as it seemed, to a world of less imminent danger, yet unalluring still.

I looked aloft at the straining spars; they seemed to prick the clouds between the swelling sails; the ropes and shrouds stretched infinitely into a region very grey and chill. Oh, the pallor! oh, the cold and heartless spirit of the sea in that first dawning morn!

“It’s like to be a good day,” said Horn, breaking in upon my silence, and turning to him I saw his face exceeding hollow and wan. The watch lay forward, all but a lad who seemed half-dozing at the helm; Risk and his mate had lapsed to silence in the cuddy.

“You’re no frien’, seemingly, o’ the pair below!” said Horn again, whispering, and with a glance across his shoulder at the helm.

“It did not look as if I were, a minute or two ago,” said I. “Yon’s a scoundrel, and yet I did him an injustice when I thought he meant to sell me.”

“I never sailed with a more cheat-the-widdy crew since I followed the sea,” said Horn, “and whether it’s the one way or the other, sold ye are.”

“Eh?” said I, uncomprehending.

He looked again at the helm, and moved over to a water-breaker further forward, obviously meaning that I should follow. He drew a drink of water for himself, drank slowly, but seemed not to be much in the need for it from the little he took, but he had got out of ear-shot of the man steering.

"You and me's the gulls this time, Mr. Greig," said he, whispering. "This is a doomed ship."

"I thought as much from her rotten spars," I answered. "So long as she takes me to Nova Scotia I care little what happens to her."

"It's a long way to Halifax," said he. "I wish I could be sure we were likely even to have Land's End on our starboard before waur happens. Will ye step this way, Mr. Greig?" and he cautiously led the way forward. There was a look-out humming a stave of song somewhere in the bows, and two men stretched among the chains, otherwise that part of the ship was all our own. We went down the fo'c'sle scuttle quietly, and I found myself among the carpenter's stores, in darkness, divided by a bulkhead door from the quarters of the sleeping men. Rats were scurrying among the timbers and squealing till Horn stamped lightly with his feet and secured stillness.

"Listen!" said he.

I could hear nothing but the heavy breathing of a seaman within, and the wash of water against the ship's sides.

"Well?" I queried, wondering.

"Put your lug here," said he, indicating a beam that was dimly revealed by the light from the lamp swinging in the fo'c'sle. I did so, and heard water running as from a pipe somewhere in the bowels of the vessel.

"What's that?" I asked.

"That's all," said he and led me aft again.

The dawn by now had spread over half the heavens; behind us the mouth of the Firth gulped enormous clouds, and the fringe of Fife was as flat as a bannock; before us the sea spread chill, leaden, all unlovely. "My sorrow!" says I, "if this is travelling, give me the high-roads and the hot noon."

Horn's face seemed more hollow and dark than ever in the wan morning. I waited his explanation. "I think ye said Halifax, Mr. Greig?" said he. "I signed on, mysel', for the same port, but you and me's perhaps the only ones on this ship that ever hoped to get there. God give me grace to get foot on shore and Dan Risk will swing for this!"

Somebody sneezed behind us as Horn thus rashly expressed himself; we both turned suddenly on the rail we had been leaning against, expecting that this was the skipper, and though it was not Risk, it was one whose black visage and gleaming teeth and rolling eyes gave me momentarily something of a turn.

It was the cook Ferdinando. He had come up behind on his bare feet, and out upon the sea he gazed with that odd eerie look of the deaf and dumb, heedless of us, it seemed, as we had been dead portions of the ship's fabric, seeing but the salt wave, the rim of rising sun, blood-red upon the horizon, communing with an old familiar.

"A cauld momin', cook," said Horn, like one who tests a humbug pretending to be dumb, but Ferdinando heard him not.

"It might have been a man wi' all his faculties," said the seaman whispering, "and it's time we werena seen thegether. I'll tell ye later on."

With that we separated, he to some trivial duty of his office, I, with a mind all disturbed, back to my berth to lie awake, tossing and speculating on the meaning of Horn's mystery.

CHAPTER XI

THE SCUTTLED SHIP

When I went on deck next morning there was something great ado. We were out of sight of land, sailing large, as the old phrase went, on a brisk quarter breeze with top-sails atrip, and the sky a vast fine open blue. The crew were gathered at the poop, the pump was clanking in the midst of them, and I saw they were taking spells at the cruellest labour a seaman knows.

At first I was noway troubled at the spectacle; a leak was to be expected in old rotten-beams, and I went forward with the heart of me not a pulse the faster.

Risk was leaning over the poop-rail, humped up and his beard on his hands; Murchison, a little apart, swept the horizon with a prospect-glass, and the pump sent a great spate of bilge-water upon the deck. But for a man at the tiller who kept the ship from yawing in the swell that swung below her counter the *Seven Sisters* sailed at her sweet will; all the interest of her company was in this stream of stinking water that she retched into the scuppers. And yet I could not but be struck by the half-hearted manner in which the seamen wrought; they were visibly shirking; I saw it in the slack muscles, in the heedless eyes.

Risk rose and looked sourly at me as I went up. "Are ye for a job?" said he. "It's more in your line perhaps than clerkin'."

"What, at the pumps? Is the old randy geyzing already?"

"Like a washing-boyne," said he. "Bear a hand like a good lad! we maun keep her afloat at least till some other vessel heaves in sight."

In the tone and look of the man there was something extraordinary. His words were meant to suggest imminent peril, and yet his voice was shallow as that of a burgh bellman crying an auction sale, and his eyes had more interest in the horizon than his mate still searched with the prospect-glass than in the spate of bilge that gulped upon the deck.

Bilge did I say? Heavens! it was bilge no more, but the pure sea-green that answered to the clanking pump. It was no time for idle wonder at the complacency of the skipper; I flew to the break and threw my strength into the seaman's task. "Clank-click, clank-click" – the instrument worked reluctantly as if the sucker moved in slime, and in a little the sweat poured from me.

"How is she now, Campbell?" asked Risk, as the carpenter came on deck.

"Three feet in the hold," said Campbell airily, like one that had an easy conscience.

"Good lord, a foot already!" cried Risk, and then in a tone of sarcasm, "Hearty, lads, hearty there! A little more Renfrewshire beef into it, Mr. Greig, if you please."

At that I ceased my exertion, stood back straight and looked at the faces about me. There was only one man in the company who did not seem to be amused at me, and that was Horn, who stood with folded arms, moodily eying the open sea.

"You seem mighty joco about it," I said to Risk, and I wonder to this day at my blindness that never read the whole tale in these hurried events.

"I can afford to be," he said quickly; "if I gang I gang wi' clean hands," and he spat into the seawater streaming from the pump where the port-watch now were working with as much listlessness as the men they superseded.

To the taunt I made no reply, but moved after Horn who had gone forward with his hands in his pockets.

"What does this mean, Horn?" I asked him. "Is the vessel in great danger?"

"I suppose she is," said he bitterly, "but I have had nae experience o' scuttled ships afore."

"Scuttled!" cried I, astounded, only half grasping his meaning.

“Jist that,” said he. “The job’s begun. It began last night in the run of the vessel as I showed ye when ye put your ear to the beam. After I left ye, I foun’ half a dozen cords fastened to the pump stanchels; ane of them I pulled and got a plug at the end of it; the ithers hae been comin’ oot since as it suited Dan Risk best, and the *Seven Sisters* is doomed to die o’ a dropsy this very day. Wasn’t I the cursed idiot that ever lipped drink in Clerihew’s coffin-room!”

“If it was that,” said I, “why did you not cut the cords and spoil the plot?”

“Cut the cords! Ye mean cut my ain throat; that’s what wad happen if the skipper guessed my knowledge o’ his deevilry. And dae ye think a gallows job o’ this kind depends a’thegither on twa or three bits o’ twine? Na, na, this is a very business-like transaction, Mr. Greig, and I’ll warrant there has been naethin’ left to chance. I wondered at them bein’ sae pernicketty about the sma’ boats afore we sailed when the timbers o’ the ship hersel’ were fair ganting. That big new boat and sails frae Kirkcaldy was a gey odd thing in itsel’ if I had been sober enough to think o’t. I suppose ye paid your passage, Mr. Greig? I can fancy a purser on the *Seven Sisters* upon nae ither footin’ and that made me dubious o’ ye when I first learned o’ this hell’s caper for Jamieson o’ the Grange. If ye hadna fought wi’ the skipper I would hae coonted ye in wi’ the rest.”

“He has two pounds of my money,” I answered; “at least I’ve saved the other two if we fail to reach Halifax.”

At that he laughed softly again.

“It might be as well wi’ Risk as wi’ the conger,” said he, meaningly. “I’m no’ sae sure that you and me’s meant to come oot o’ this; that’s what I might tak’ frae their leaving only the twa o’ us aft when they were puttin’ the cargo aff there back at Blackness.”

“The cargo!” I repeated.

“Of course,” said Horn. “Ye fancied they were goin’ to get rid o’ ye there, did ye? I’ll alloo I thought that but a pretence on your pairt, and no’ very neatly done at that. Well, the smallest pairt but the maist valuable o’ the cargo shipped at Borrowstouness is still in Scotland; and the underwriters ‘ll be to pay through the nose for what has never run sea risks.”

At that a great light came to me. This was the reason for the masked cuddy skylights, the utter darkness of the *Seven Sisters* while her boats were plying to the shore; for this was I so closely kept at her ridiculous manifest; the lists of lace and plate I had been fatuously copying were lists of stuff no longer on the ship at all, but back in the possession of the owner of the brigantine.

“You are an experienced seaman – ?”

“I have had a vessel of my own,” broke in Horn, some vanity as well as shame upon his countenance.

“Well, you are the more likely to know the best way out of this trap we are in,” I went on. “For a certain reason I am not at all keen on it to go back to Scotland, but I would sooner risk that than run in leash with a scoundrel like this who’s sinking his command, not to speak of hazarding my unworthy life with a villainous gang. Is there any way out of it, Horn?”

The seaman pondered, a dark frown upon his tanned forehead, where the veins stood out in knots, betraying his perturbation. The wind whistled faintly in the tops, the *Seven Sisters* plainly went by the head; she had a slow response to her helm, and moved sluggishly. Still the pump was clanking and we could hear the water streaming through the scupper holes. Risk had joined his mate and was casting anxious eyes over the waters.

“If we play the safty here, Mr. Greig,” said Horn, “there’s a chance o’ a thwart for us when the *Seven Sisters* comes to her labour. That’s oor only prospect. At least they daurna murder us.”

“And what about the crew?” I asked. “Do you tell me there is not enough honesty among them all to prevent a blackguardly scheme like this?”

“We’re the only twa on this ship this morning wi’ oor necks ootside tow, for they’re all men o’ the free trade, and broken men at that,” said Horn resolutely, and even in the midst of this looming disaster my private horror rose within me.

“Ah!” said I, helpless to check the revelation, “speak for yourself, Mr. Horn; it’s the hangman I’m here fleeing from.”

He looked at me with quite a new countenance, clearly losing relish for his company.

“Anything by-ordinar dirty?” he asked, and in my humility I did not have the spirit to resent what that tone and query implied.

“Dirty enough,” said I, “the man’s dead,” and Horn’s face cleared.

“Oh, faith! is that all?” quo’ he, “I was thinkin’ it might be coinin’ – beggin’ your pardon, Mr. Greig, or somethin’ in the fancy way. But a gentleman’s quarrel ower the cartes or a wench – that’s a different tale. I hate homicide mysel’ to tell the truth, but whiles I’ve had it in my heart, and in a way o’ speakin* Dan Risk this meenute has my gully-knife in his ribs.”

As he spoke the vessel, mishandled, or a traitor to her helm, now that she was all awash internally with water, yawed and staggered in the wind. The sails shivered, the yards swung violently, appalling noises came from the hold. At once the pumping ceased, and Risk’s voice roared in the confusion, ordering the launch of the Kirkcaldy boat.

CHAPTER XII

MAKES PLAIN THE DEEPEST VILLAINY OF RISK AND SETS ME ON A FRENCHMAN

When I come to write these affairs down after the lapse of years, I find my memory but poorly retains the details of that terrific period between the cry of Risk and the moment when Horn and I, abandoned on the doomed vessel, watched the evening fall upon the long Kirkcaldy boat, her mast stepped, but her sails down, hovering near us for the guarantee of our eternal silence regarding the crime the men on her were there and then committing. There is a space – it must have been brief, but I lived a lifetime in it – whose impressions rest with me, blurred, but with the general hue of agony. I can see the sun again sailing overhead in the arching sky of blue; the enormous ocean, cruel, cold, spread out to the line of the horizon; the flapping sails and drumming reef-points, the streaming halliards and clew-garnets, the spray buffeting upon our hull and spitting in our faces like an enemy; I hear the tumult of the seamen hurrying vulgarly to save their wretched lives, the gluck of waters in the bowels of the ship, the thud of cargo loose and drifting under decks.

But I see and hear it all as in a dream or play, and myself somehow standing only a spectator.

It seemed that Risk and his men put all their dependence on the long-boat out of Kirkcaldy. She was partly decked at the bows like a Ballantrae herring-skiff, beamy and commodious. They clustered round her like ants; swung her out, and over she went, and the whole hellish plot lay revealed in the fact that she was all found with equipment and provisions.

Horn and I made an effort to assist at her preparation; we were shoved aside with frantic curses; we were beaten back by her oars when we sought to enter her, and when she pushed off from the side of the *Seven Sisters*, Dan Risk was so much the monster that he could jeer at our perplexity. He sat at the tiller of her without a hat, his long hair, that was turning lyart, blown by the wind about his black and mocking eyes.

“Head her for Halifax, Horn,” said he, “and ye’ll get there by-and-by.”

“Did I ever do ye any harm, skipper?” cried the poor seaman, standing on the gunwale, hanging to the shrouds, and his aspect hungry for life.

“Ye never got the chance, Port Glesca,” cried back Risk, hugging the tiller of the Kirkcaldy boat under his arm. “I’ll gie ye a guess —

Come-a-riddle, come-a-riddle, come-a-rote-tote-tote —

Oh to bleezes! I canna put a rhyme till’t, but this is the sense o’t – a darkie’s never deaf and dumb till he’s deid. Eh! Antonio, ye rascal!”

He looked forward as he spoke and exchanged a villainous laugh with the cook, his instrument, who had overheard us and betrayed.

“Ye would mak’ me swing for it, would ye, John Horn, when ye get ashore? That’s what I would expect frae a keelie oot o’ Clyde.”

It is hard to credit that man could be so vile as this, but of such stuff was Daniel Risk. He was a fiend in the glory of his revenge upon the seaman who had threatened him with the gallows; uplifted like a madman’s, his face, that was naturally sallow, burned lamp-red at his high cheek-bones, his hale eye gloated, his free hand flourished as in an exultation. His mate sat silent beside him on the stern-thwart, clearing the sheets: the crew, who had out the sweeps to keep the boat’s bows in the wind, made an effort to laugh at his jocosities, but clearly longed to be away from this tragedy. And all the time, I think, I stood beside the weather bulwark, surrendered to the certainty of a speedy death, with the lines of a ballad coming back again and again to my mind:

An’ he shall lie in fathoms deep,

The star-fish ower his een shall creep.

An' an auld grey wife shall sit an' weep
In the hall o' Monaltrie.

I thrust that ungodly rhyme from me each time that it arose, but in spite of me at last it kept time to the lap of a wave of encroaching sea that beat about my feet.

My silence – my seeming indifference – would seem to have touched the heart that could not be affected by the entreaties of the seaman Horn. At least Risk ceased his taunts at last, and cast a more friendly eye on me.

“I’m saying, Greig,” he cried, “noo that I think o’t, your Uncle Andy was no bad hand at makin’ a story. Ye’ve an ill tongue, but I’ll thole that – astern, lads, and tak’ the purser aboard.”

The seamen set the boat about willingly enough, and she crept in to pick me off the doomed ship.

At that my senses cleared like hill-well water. It was for but a second – praise God! my instincts joyed in my reprieve; my hand never released the cleat by which I steadied myself. I looked at Horn still upon the lower shrouds and saw hope upon his countenance.

“Of course this man comes with me, Captain Risk?” said I.

“Not if he offered a thousand pounds,” cried Risk, “in ye come!” and Murchison clawed at the shrouds with a boat-hook. Horn made to jump among them and, with an oath, the mate thrust at him with the hook as with a spear, striking him under the chin. He fell back upon the deck, bleeding profusely and half insensible.

“You are a foul dog!” I cried to his assailant. “And I’ll settle with you for that!”

“Jump, ye fool, ye, jump!” cried Risk impatient.

“Let us look oot for oorselves, that’s whit I say,” cried Murchison angry at my threat, and prepared cheerfully to see me perish. “What for should we risk oor necks with either o’ them?” and he pushed off slightly with his boat-hook.

The skipper turned, struck down the hook, and snarled upon him. “Shut up, Murchison!” he cried. “I’m still the captain, if ye please, and I ken as much about the clerk here as will keep his gab shut on any trifle we hae dune.”

I looked upon the clean sea, and then at that huddle of scoundrels in the Kirkcaldy boat, and then upon the seaman Horn coming back again to the full consciousness of his impending fate. He gazed upon me with eyes alarmed and pitiful, and at that I formed my resolution.

“I stick by Horn,” said I. “If he gets too, I’ll go; if not I’ll bide and be drowned with an honest man.”

“Bide and be damned then! Ye’ve had your chance,” shouted Risk, letting his boat fall off. “It’s time we werena here.” And the halliards of his main-sail were running in the blocks as soon as he said it. The boat swept away rapidly, but not before I gave him a final touch of my irony. From my pocket I took out my purse and threw it upon his lap.

“There’s the ither twa, Risk,” I cried; “it’s no’ like the thing at all to murder a harmless lad for less than what ye bargained for.”

He bawled back some reply I could not hear, and I turned about, to see Horn making for the small boat on the starboard chocks. I followed with a hope again awakened, only to share his lamentation when he found that two of her planks had been wantonly sprung from their clinkers, rendering her utterly useless. The two other boats were in a similar condition; Risk and his confederates had been determined that no chance should be left of our escape from the *Seven Sisters*.

It was late in the afternoon. The wind had softened somewhat; in the west there were rising billowy clouds of silver and red, and half a mile away the Kirkcaldy boat, impatient doubtless for the end of us, that final assurance of safety, plied to windward with only her foresail set. We had gone below in a despairing mind on the chance that the leakage might be checked, but the holes were under water in the after peak, and in other parts we could not come near. An inch-and-a-half auger, and a

large bung-borer, a gouge and chisel in the captain's private locker, told us how the crime had been committed whereof we were the victims.

We had come on deck again, the pair of us, without the vaguest notion of what was next to do, and – speaking for myself – convinced that nothing could avert our hurrying fate. Horn told me later that he proposed full half a score of plans for at least a prolongation of our time, but that I paid no heed to them. That may be, for I know the ballad stanza went in my head like a dirge, as I sat on a hatch with the last few days of my history rolling out before my eyes. The dusk began to fall like a veil, the wind declined still further. Horn feverishly hammered and caulked at the largest of the boats, now and then throwing the tools from him as in momentary realisations of the hopelessness of his toil that finally left him in despair.

"It's no use, Mr. Greig," he cried then, "they did the job ower weel," and he shook his fist at the Kirkcaldy boat. He checked the gesture suddenly and gave an astonished cry.

"They're gone, Greig," said he, now frantic. "They're gone. O God! they're gone! I was sure they couldna hae the heart to leave us at the last," and as he spoke I chanced to look astern, and behold! a ship with all her canvas full was swiftly bearing down the wind upon us. We had been so intent upon our fate that we had never seen her!

I clambered up the shrouds of the main-mast, and cried upon the coming vessel with some mad notion that she might fancy the *Seven Sisters* derelict. But indeed that was not necessary. In a little she went round into the wind, a long-boat filled with men came towards us, and twenty minutes later we were on the deck of the *Roi Rouge*.

CHAPTER XIII

WHEREIN APPEARS A GENTLEMANLY CORSAIR AND A FRENCH-IRISH LORD

While it may be that the actual crisis of my manhood came to me on the day I first put on my Uncle Andrew's shoes, the sense of it was mine only when I met with Captain Thurot. I had put the past for ever behind me (as I fancied) when I tore the verses of a moon-struck boy and cast them out upon the washing-green at Hazel Den, but I was bound to foregather with men like Thurot and his friends ere the scope and fashion of a man's world were apparent to me. Whether his influence on my destiny in the long run was good or bad I would be the last to say; he brought me into danger, but – in a manner – he brought me good, though that perhaps was never in his mind.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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