

## CHAPTER XXII - THE SIEGE OF THRUMS

The man in the moon is a native of Thrums, who was put up there for hacking sticks on the Sabbath, and as he sails over the Den his interest in the bit placey is still sufficient to make him bend forward and cry "Boo!" at the lovers. When they jump apart you can see the aged reprobate grinning. Once out of sight of the den, he cares not a boddle how the moon travels, but the masterful crittur enrages him if she is in a hurry here, just as he is cleverly making out whose children's children are courting now. "Slow, there!" he cries to the moon, but she answers placidly that they have the rest of the world to view to-night. "The rest of the world be danged!" roars the man, and he cranes his neck for a last glimpse of the Cuttle Well, until he nearly falls out of the moon.

Never had the man such a trying time as during the year now before him. It was the year when so many scientific magnates sat up half the night in their shirts, spying at him through telescopes. But every effort to discover why he was in such a fidget failed, because the spy-glasses were never levelled at the Thrums den. Through the whole of the incidents now to tell, you may conceive the man (on whom sympathy would be wasted) dagoning horribly, because he was always carried past the den before he could make head or tail of the change that had come over it.

The spot chosen by the ill-fated Stuart and his gallant remnant for their last desperate enterprise was eminently fitted for their purpose. Being round the corner from Thrums, it was commanded by no fortified place save the farm of Nether Drumgley, and on a recent goustie night nearly all the trees had been blown down, making a hundred hiding-places for bold climbers, and transforming the Den into a scene of wild and mournful grandeur. In no bay more suitable than the flooded field called the Silent Pool could the hunted prince have cast anchor, for the Pool is not only sheltered from observation, but so little troubled by gales that it had only one drawback: at some seasons of the year it was not there. This, however, did not vex Stroke, as it is cannier to call him, for he burned his boats on the night he landed (and a dagont, tedious job it was too), and pointed out to his followers that the drouth which kept him in must also keep the enemy out. Part of the way to the lair they usually traversed in the burn, because water leaves no trace, and though they carried turnip lanterns and were armed to the teeth, this was often a

perilous journey owing to the lovers close at hand on the pink path, from which the trees had been cleared, for lads and lasses must walk whate'er betide. Ronny-On's Jean and Peter Scrymgeour, little Lisbeth Doak and long Sam'l from Pyotdykes were pairing that year, and never knew how near they were to being dirked by Corp of Corp, who, lurking in the burn till there were no tibbits in his toes, muttered fiercely, "Cheep one single cheep, and it will be thy hinmost, methinks!" under the impression that Methinks was a Jacobite oath.

For this voluntary service, Stroke clapped Corp of Corp on the shoulder with a naked sword, and said, "Rise, Sir Joseph!" which made Corp more confused than ever, for he was already Corp of Corp, Him of Muckle Kenny, Red McNeil, Andrew Ferrara, and the Master of Inverquharity (Stroke's names), as well as Stab-in-the-Dark, Grind-them-to-Mullins, and Warty Joe (his own), and which he was at any particular moment he never knew, till Stroke told him, and even then he forgot and had to be put in irons.

The other frequenters of the lair on Saturday nights (when alone the rebellion was active) were the proud Lady Grizel and Widow Elspeth. It had been thought best to make Elspeth a widow, because she was so religious.

The lair was on the right bank of the burn, near the waterfall, and you climbed to it by ropes, unless you preferred an easier way. It is now a dripping hollow, down which water dribbles from beneath a sluice, but at that time it was hidden on all sides by trees and the huge clods of sward they had torn from the earth as they fell. Two of these clods were the only walls of the lair, which had at times a ceiling not unlike Aaron Latta's bed coverlets, and the chief furniture was two barrels, marked "Usquebach" and "Powder." When the darkness of Stroke's fortunes sat like a pall upon his brow, as happened sometimes, he sought to drive it away by playing cards on one of these barrels with Sir Joseph, but the approach of the Widow made him pocket them quickly with a warning sign to his trusty knight, who did not understand, and asked what had become of them, whereupon Elspeth cried, in horror:

"Cards! Oh, Tommy, you promised--"

But Stroke rode her down with, "Cards! Wha has been playing cards? You, Muckle Kenny, and you, Sir Joseph, after I forbade it! Hie, there, Inverquharity, all of you, seize those men."

Then Corp blinked, came to his senses and marched himself off to the prison on the lonely promontory called the Queen's Bower, saying ferociously, "Jouk, Sir Joseph, and I'll blow you into posterity."

It is sable night when Stroke and Sir Joseph reach a point in the Den whence the glimmering lights of the town are distinctly visible. Neither speaks. Presently the distant eight-o'clock bell rings, and then Sir Joseph looks anxiously at his warts, for this is the signal to begin, and as usual he has forgotten the words.

"Go on," says someone in a whisper. It cannot be Stroke, for his head is brooding on his breast. This mysterious voice haunted all the doings in the Den, and had better be confined in brackets.

("Go on.")

"Methinks," says Sir Joseph, "methinks the borers--"

("Burghers.")

"Methinks the burghers now cease from their labors."

"Ay," replied Stroke, "'tis so, would that they ceased from them forever!"

"Methinks the time is at hand."

"Ha!" exclaims Stroke, looking at his lieutenant curiously, "what makest thou say so? For three weeks these fortifications have defied my cannon, there is scarce a breach yet in the walls of yonder town."

"Methinks thou wilt find a way."

"It may be so, my good Sir Joseph, it may be so, and yet, even when I am most hopeful of success, my schemes go a gley."

"Methinks thy dark--"

("Dinna say Methinks so often.")

("Tommy, I maun. If I dinna get that to start me off, I go through other.")

("Go on.")

"Methinks thy dark spirit lies on thee to-night."

"Ay, 'tis too true. But canst thou blame me if I grow sad? The town still in the enemy's hands, and so much brave blood already spilt in vain. Knowest thou that the brave Kinnordy fell last night? My noble Kinnordy!"

Here Stroke covers his face with his hands, weeping silently, and--and there is an awkward pause.

("Go on--'Still have me.'")

("So it is.") "Weep not, my royal scone--"

("Scion.")

"Weep not, my royal scion, havest thou not still me?"

"Well said, Sir Joseph," cries Stroke, dashing the sign of weakness from his face. "I still have many brave fellows, and with their help I shall be master of this proud town."

"And then ghost we to fair Edinburgh?"

"Ay, 'tis so, but, Sir Joseph, thinkest thou these burghers love the Stuart not?"

"Nay, methinks they are true to thee, but their starch commander--(give me my time, this is a lang ane,) but their arch commander is thy bitterest foe. Vile spoon that he is! (It's no spoon, it's spawn.)"

"Thou meanest the craven Cathro?"

"Methinks ay. (I like thae short anes.)"

"'Tis well!" says Stroke, sternly. "That man hath ever slipped between me and my right. His time will come."

"He floppeth thee--he flouteth thee from the battlements."

"Ha, 'tis well!"

("You've said that already.")

("I say it twice.")

("That's what aye puts me wrang.) Ghost thou to meet the proud Lady Grizel to-night?"

"Ay."

"Ghost thou alone?"

"Ay."

("What easy anes you have!) I fear it is not chancey for thee to go."

"I must dree my dreed."

"These women is kittle cattle."

"The Stuart hath ever a soft side for them. Ah, my trusty foster-brother, knowest thou not what it is to love?"

"Alas, I too have had my fling. (Does Grizel kiss your hand yet?)"

"(No, she winna, the limmer.) Sir Joseph, I go to her."

"Methinks she is a haughty onion. I prithee go not to-night."

"I have given my word."

"Thy word is a band."

"Adieu, my friend."

"Methinks thou ghost to thy damn. (Did we no promise Elspeth there should be no swearing?)"

The raft Vick Lan Vohr is dragged to the shore, and Stroke steps on board, a proud solitary figure. "Farewell!" he cries hoarsely, as he seizes the oar.

"Farewell, my leech," answers Corp, and then helps him to disembark. Their hands chance to meet, and Stroke's is so hot that Corp quails.

"Tommy," he says, with a shudder, "do you--you dinna think it's a' true, do you?" But the ill-fated prince only gives him a warning look and plunges into the mazes of the forest. For a long time silence reigns over the Den. Lights glint fitfully, a human voice imitates the plaintive cry of the peewit, cautious whistling follows, comes next the clash of arms, and the scream of one in the death-throes, and again silence falls. Stroke emerges near the Reekie Broth Pot, wiping his sword and muttering, "Faugh! it drippeth!" At the same moment the air is filled with music of more than mortal--well, the air is filled with music. It seems to come

from but a few yards away, and pressing his hand to his throbbing brow the Chevalier presses forward till, pushing aside the branches of a fallen fir, he comes suddenly upon a scene of such romantic beauty that he stands rooted to the ground. Before him, softly lit by a half-moon (the man in it perspiring with curiosity), is a miniature dell, behind which rise threatening rocks, overgrown here and there by grass, heath, and bracken, while in the centre of the dell is a bubbling spring called the Cuttle Well, whose water, as it overflows a natural basin, soaks into the surrounding ground and so finds a way into the picturesque stream below. But it is not the loveliness of the spot which fascinates the prince; rather is it the exquisite creature who sits by the bubbling spring, a reed from a hand-loom in her hands, from which she strikes mournful sounds, the while she raises her voice in song. A pink scarf and a blue ribbon are crossed upon her breast, her dark tresses kiss her lovely neck, and as she sits on the only dry stone, her face raised as if in wrapt communion with the heavens, and her feet tucked beneath her to avoid the mud, she seems not a human being, but the very spirit of the place and hour. The royal wanderer remains spellbound, while she strikes her lyre and sings (with but one trivial alteration) the song of MacMurrough:-

-

Awake on your hills, on your islands awake, Brave sons of the mountains, the frith and the lake! 'Tis the bugle--but not for the chase is the call; 'Tis the pibroch's shrill summons--but not to the hall.

'Tis the summons of heroes for conquest or death, When the banners are blazing on mountain and heath; They call to the dirk, the claymore and the targe, To the march and the muster, the line and the charge.

Be the brand of each Chieftain like Stroke's in his ire! May the blood through his veins flow like currents of fire! Burst the base foreign yoke as your sires did of yore, Or die like your sires, and endure it no more.

As the fair singer concluded, Stroke, who had been deeply moved, heaved a great sigh, and immediately, as if in echo of it, came a sigh from the opposite side of the dell. In a second of time three people had learned that a certain lady had two lovers. She starts to her feet, still carefully avoiding the puddles, but it is not she who speaks.

("Did you hear me?")

("Ay.")

("You're ready?")

("Ca' awa'.")

Stroke dashes to the girl's side, just in time to pluck her from the arms of a masked man. The villain raises his mask and reveals the face of--it looks like Corp, but the disguise is thrown away on Stroke.

"Ha, Cathro," he exclaims joyfully, "so at last we meet on equal terms!"

"Back, Stroke, and let me pass."

"Nay, we fight for the wench."

"So be it. The prideful onion is his who wins her."

"Have at thee, caitiff!"

A terrible conflict ensues. Cathro draws first blood. 'Tis but a scratch. Ha! well thrust, Stroke. In vain Cathro girms his teeth. Inch by inch he is driven back, he slips, he recovers, he pants, he is apparently about to fling himself down the steep bank and so find safety in flight, but he comes on again.

("What are you doing? You run now.")

("I ken, but I'm sweer!")

("Off you go.")

Even as Stroke is about to press home, the cowardly foe flings himself down the steep bank and rolls out of sight. He will give no more trouble to-night; and the victor turns to the Lady Grizel, who had been repinning the silk scarf across her breast, while the issue of the combat was still in doubt.

("Now, then, Grizel, you kiss my hand.")

("I tell you I won't.")

("Well, then, go on your knees to me.")

("You needn't think it.")

("Dagon you! Then ca' awa' standing.")

"My liege, thou hast saved me from the wretch Cathro."

"May I always be near to defend thee in time of danger, my pretty chick."

("Tommy, you promised not to call me by those silly names.")

("They slip out, I tell you. That was aye the way wi' the Stuarts.")

("Well, you must say 'Lady Grizel.') Good, my prince, how can I thank thee?"

"By being my wife. (Not a word of this to Elspeth.)"

"Nay, I summoned thee here to tell thee that can never be. The Grizels of Grizel are of ancient lineage, but they mate not with monarchs. My sire, the nunnery gates will soon close on me forever."

"Then at least say thou lovest me."

"Alas, I love thee not."

("What haver is this? I telled you to say 'Charles, would that I loved thee less.'")

("And I told you I would not.")

("Well, then, where are we now?")

("We miss out all that about my wearing your portrait next my heart, and put in the rich apparel bit, the same as last week.")

("Oh! Then I go on?) Bethink thee, fair jade--"

("Lady.")

"Bethink thee, fair lady, Stuart is not so poor but that, if thou come with him to his lowly lair, he can deck thee with rich apparel and ribbons rare."

"I spurn thy gifts, unhappy man, but if there are holes in--"

("Miss that common bit out. I canna thole it.")

("I like it.) If there are holes in the garments of thy loyal followers, I will come and mend them, and have a needle and thread in my pocket.

(Tommy, there is another button off your shirt! Have you got the button?")

"(It's down my breeks.) So be it, proud girl, come!"

It was Grizel who made masks out of tin rags, picked up where tinkers had passed the night, and musical instruments out of broken reeds that smelled of caddis and Jacobite head-gear out of weaver's night-caps; and she kept the lair so clean and tidy as to raise a fear that intruders might mistake its character. Elspeth had to mind the pot, which Aaron Latta never missed, and Corp was supposed to light the fire by striking sparks from his knife, a trick which Tommy considered so easy that he refused to show how it was done. Many strange sauces were boiled in that pot, a sort of potato-turnip pudding often coming out even when not expected, but there was an occasional rabbit that had been bowled over by Corp's unerring hand, and once Tommy shot a--a haunch of venison, having first, with Corp's help, howked it out of Ronny-On's swine, then suspended head downward, and open like a book at the page of contents, steaming, dripping, a tub beneath, boys with bladders in the distance. When they had supped they gathered round the fire, Grizel knitting a shawl for they knew whom, but the name was never mentioned, and Tommy told the story of his life at the French court, and how he fought in the '45 and afterward hid in caves, and so did he shudder, as he described the cold of his bracken beds, and so glowed his face, for it was all real to him, that Grizel let the wool drop on her knee, and Corp whispered to Elspeth, "Dinna be fleid for him; I'se uphaud he found a wy." Those quiet evenings were not the least pleasant spent in the Den.

But sometimes they were interrupted by a fierce endeavor to carry the lair, when boys from Cathro's climbed to it up each other's backs, the rope, of course, having been pulled into safety at the first sound, and then that end of the Den rang with shouts, and deeds of valor on both sides were as common as pine needles, and once Tommy and Corp were only saved from captors who had them down, by Grizel rushing into the midst of things with two flaring torches, and another time bold Birkie, most daring of the storming party, was seized with two others and made to walk the plank. The plank had been part of a gate, and was suspended over the bank of the Silent Pool, so that, as you approached the farther end, down you went. It was not a Jacobite method, but Tommy feared that rows of bodies, hanging from the trees still standing in the Den, might attract attention.