

CHAPTER XI--THE WOOD BY SILVERMILLS

I lost no time, but down through the valley and by Stockbridge and Silvermills as hard as I could stave. It was Alan's tryst to be every night between twelve and two "in a bit scrog of wood by east of Silvermills and by south the south mill-lade." This I found easy enough, where it grew on a steep brae, with the mill-lade flowing swift and deep along the foot of it; and here I began to walk slower and to reflect more reasonably on my employment. I saw I had made but a fool's bargain with Catriona. It was not to be supposed that Neil was sent alone upon his errand, but perhaps he was the only man belonging to James More; in which case I should have done all I could to hang Catriona's father, and nothing the least material to help myself. To tell the truth, I fancied

neither one of these ideas. Suppose by holding back Neil, the girl should have helped to hang her father, I thought she would never forgive herself this side of time. And suppose there were others pursuing me that moment, what kind of a gift was I come bringing to Alan? and how would I like that?

I was up with the west end of that wood when these two considerations struck me like a cudgel. My feet stopped of themselves and my heart along with them. "What wild game is this that I have been playing?" thought I; and turned instantly upon my heels to go elsewhere.

This brought my face to Silvermills; the path came past the village with a crook, but all plainly visible; and, Highland or Lowland,

there was nobody stirring. Here was my advantage, here was just such a conjuncture as Stewart had counselled me to profit by, and I ran by the side of the mill-lade, fetched about beyond the east corner of the wood, threaded through the midst of it, and returned to the west selvage, whence I could again command the path, and yet be myself unseen. Again it was all empty, and my heart began to rise.

For more than an hour I sat close in the border of the trees, and no hare or eagle could have kept a more particular watch. When that hour began the sun was already set, but the sky still all golden and the daylight clear; before the hour was done it had fallen to be half mirk, the images and distances of things were mingled, and observation began to be difficult. All that time not

a foot of man had come east from Silvermills, and the few that had gone west were honest countryfolk and their wives upon the road to bed. If I were tracked by the most cunning spies in Europe, I judged it was beyond the course of nature they could have any jealousy of where I was: and going a little further home into the wood I lay down to wait for Alan.

The strain of my attention had been great, for I had watched not the path only, but every bush and field within my vision. That was now at an end. The moon, which was in her first quarter, glinted a little in the wood; all round there was a stillness of the country; and as I lay there on my back, the next three or four hours, I had a fine occasion to review my conduct.

Two things became plain to me first: that I had no right to go that day to Dean, and (having gone there) had now no right to be lying where I was. This (where Alan was to come) was just the one wood in all broad Scotland that was, by every proper feeling, closed against me; I admitted that, and yet stayed on, wondering at myself. I thought of the measure with which I had meted to Catriona that same night; how I had prated of the two lives I carried, and had thus forced her to enjeopardy her father's; and how I was here exposing them again, it seemed in wantonness. A good conscience is eight parts of courage. No sooner had I lost conceit of my behaviour, than I seemed to stand disarmed amidst a throng of terrors. Of a sudden I sat up. How if I went now to Prestongrange, caught him (as I still easily might) before he slept, and made a full submission? Who could blame me? Not

Stewart the Writer; I had but to say that I was followed, despaired of getting clear, and so gave in. Not Catriona: here, too, I had my answer ready; that I could not bear she should expose her father. So, in a moment, I could lay all these troubles by, which were after all and truly none of mine; swim clear of the Appin Murder; get forth out of hand-stroke of all the Stewarts and Campbells, all the Whigs and Tories, in the land; and live henceforth to my own mind, and be able to enjoy and to improve my fortunes, and devote some hours of my youth to courting Catriona, which would be surely a more suitable occupation than to hide and run and be followed like a hunted thief, and begin over again the dreadful miseries of my escape with Alan.

At first I thought no shame of this capitulation; I was only amazed

I had not thought upon the thing and done it earlier; and began to inquire into the causes of the change. These I traced to my lowness of spirits, that back to my late recklessness, and that again to the common, old, public, disconsidered sin of self-indulgence. Instantly the text came in my head, "HOW CAN SATAN CAST OUT SATAN?" What? (I thought) I had, by self-indulgence; and the following of pleasant paths, and the lure of a young maid, cast myself wholly out of conceit with my own character, and jeopardised the lives of James and Alan? And I was to seek the way out by the same road as I had entered in? No; the hurt that had been caused by self-indulgence must be cured by self-denial; the flesh I had pampered must be crucified. I looked about me for that course which I least liked to follow: this was to leave the wood without waiting to see Alan, and go forth again alone, in the dark and in

the midst of my perplexed and dangerous fortunes.

I have been the more careful to narrate this passage of my reflections, because I think it is of some utility, and may serve as an example to young men. But there is reason (they say) in planting kale, and even in ethic and religion, room for common sense. It was already close on Alan's hour, and the moon was down.

If I left (as I could not very decently whistle to my spies to follow me) they might miss me in the dark and tack themselves to Alan by mistake. If I stayed, I could at the least of it set my friend upon his guard which might prove his mere salvation. I had adventured other peoples' safety in a course of self-indulgence; to have endangered them again, and now on a mere design of penance, would have been scarce rational. Accordingly, I had scarce risen

from my place ere I sat down again, but already in a different
frame of spirits, and equally marvelling at my past weakness and
rejoicing in my present composure.

Presently after came a crackling in the thicket. Putting my mouth
near down to the ground, I whistled a note or two, of Alan's air;
an answer came in the like guarded tone, and soon we had knocked
together in the dark.

"Is this you at last, Davie?" he whispered.

"Just myself," said I.

"God, man, but I've been wearying to see ye!" says he. "I've had

the longest kind of a time. A' day, I've had my dwelling into the
inside of a stack of hay, where I couldnae see the nebs of my ten
fingers; and then two hours of it waiting here for you, and you
never coming! Dod, and ye're none too soon the way it is, with me
to sail the morn! The morn? what am I saying?--the day, I mean."

"Ay, Alan, man, the day, sure enough," said I. "It's past twelve
now, surely, and ye sail the day. This'll be a long road you have
before you."

"We'll have a long crack of it first," said he.

"Well, indeed, and I have a good deal it will be telling you to
hear," said I.

And I told him what behooved, making rather a jumble of it, but clear enough when done. He heard me out with very few questions, laughing here and there like a man delighted: and the sound of his laughing (above all there, in the dark, where neither one of us could see the other) was extraordinary friendly to my heart.

"Ay, Davie, ye're a queer character," says he, when I had done: "a queer bitch after a', and I have no mind of meeting with the like of ye. As for your story, Prestongrange is a Whig like yoursel', so I'll say the less of him; and, dod! I believe he was the best friend ye had, if ye could only trust him. But Simon Fraser and James More are my ain kind of cattle, and I'll give them the name that they deserve. The muckle black deil was father to the

Frasers, a'body kens that; and as for the Gregara, I never could
abye the reek of them since I could stotter on two feet. I
bloodied the nose of one, I mind, when I was still so wambly on my
legs that I cowped upon the top of him. A proud man was my father
that day, God rest him! and I think he had the cause. I'll never
can deny but what Robin was something of a piper," he added; "but
as for James More, the deil guide him for me!"

"One thing we have to consider," said I. "Was Charles Stewart
right or wrong? Is it only me they're after, or the pair of us?"

"And what's your ain opinion, you that's a man of so much
experience?" said he.

"It passes me," said I.

"And me too," says Alan. "Do ye think this lass would keep her word to ye?" he asked.

"I do that," said I.

"Well, there's nae telling," said he. "And anyway, that's over and done: he'll be joined to the rest of them lang syne."

"How many would ye think there would be of them?" I asked.

"That depends," said Alan. "If it was only you, they would likely send two-three lively, brisk young birkies, and if they thought

that I was to appear in the employ, I daresay ten or twelve," said

he.

It was no use, I gave a little crack of laughter.

"And I think your own two eyes will have seen me drive that number,

or the double of it, nearer hand!" cries he.

"It matters the less," said I, "because I am well rid of them for

this time."

"Nae doubt that's your opinion," said he; "but I wouldnae be the

least surprised if they were hunkering this wood. Ye see, David

man; they'll be Hieland folk. There'll be some Frasers, I'm

thinking, and some of the Gregara; and I would never deny but what the both of them, and the Gregara in especial, were clever experienced persons. A man kens little till he's driven a spreagh of neat cattle (say) ten miles through a throng lowland country and the black soldiers maybe at his tail. It's there that I learned a great part of my penetration. And ye need nae tell me: it's better than war; which is the next best, however, though generally rather a bauchle of a business. Now the Gregara have had grand practice."

"No doubt that's a branch of education that was left out with me," said I.

"And I can see the marks of it upon ye constantly," said Alan.

"But that's the strange thing about you folk of the college learning: ye're ignorat, and ye cannae see 't. Wae's me for my Greek and Hebrew; but, man, I ken that I dinnae ken them--there's the differ of it. Now, here's you. Ye lie on your wame a bittie in the bield of this wood, and ye tell me that ye've cuist off these Frasers and Macgregors. Why? BECAUSE I COULDNAE SEE THEM, says you. Ye blockhead, that's their livelihood."

"Take the worst of it," said I, "and what are we to do?"

"I am thinking of that same," said he. "We might twine. It wouldnae be greatly to my taste; and forbye that, I see reasons against it. First, it's now unco dark, and it's just humanly possible we might give them the clean slip. If we keep together,

we make but the ae line of it; if we gang separate, we make twae of them: the more likelihood to stave in upon some of these gentry of yours. And then, second, if they keep the track of us, it may come to a fecht for it yet, Davie; and then, I'll confess I would be blythe to have you at my oxter, and I think you would be none the worse of having me at yours. So, by my way of it, we should creep out of this wood no further gone than just the inside of next minute, and hold away east for Gillane, where I'm to find my ship. It'll be like old days while it lasts, Davie; and (come the time) we'll have to think what you should be doing. I'm wae to leave ye here, wanting me."

"Have with ye, then!" says I. "Do ye gang back where you were stopping?"

"Deil a fear!" said Alan. "They were good folks to me, but I think they would be a good deal disappointed if they saw my bonny face again. For (the way times go) I amnae just what ye could call a Walcome Guest. Which makes me the keener for your company, Mr. David Balfour of the Shaws, and set ye up! For, leave aside twa cracks here in the wood with Charlie Stewart, I have scarce said black or white since the day we parted at Corstorphine."

With which he rose from his place, and we began to move quietly eastward through the wood.