

CHAPTER XIII--GILLANE SANDS

I did not profit by Alan's pilotage as he had done by his marchings under General Cope; for I can scarce tell what way we went. It is my excuse that we travelled exceeding fast. Some part we ran, some trotted, and the rest walked at a vengeance of a pace. Twice, while we were at top speed, we ran against country-folk; but though we plumped into the first from round a corner, Alan was as ready as a loaded musket.

"Has ye seen my horse?" he gasped.

"Na, man, I haenae seen nae horse the day," replied the countryman.

And Alan spared the time to explain to him that we were travelling

"ride and tie"; that our charger had escaped, and it was feared he

had gone home to Linton. Not only that, but he expended some

breath (of which he had not very much left) to curse his own

misfortune and my stupidity which was said to be its cause.

"Them that cannae tell the truth," he observed to myself as we went

on again, "should be aye mindful to leave an honest, handy lee

behind them. If folk dinnae ken what ye're doing, Davie, they're

terrible taken up with it; but if they think they ken, they care

nae mair for it than what I do for pease porridge."

As we had first made inland, so our road came in the end to lie very near due north; the old Kirk of Aberlady for a landmark on the left; on the right, the top of the Berwick Law; and it was thus we struck the shore again, not far from Dirleton. From north Berwick west to Gillane Ness there runs a string of four small islets, Craiglieth, the Lamb, Fidra, and Eyebrough, notable by their diversity of size and shape. Fidra is the most particular, being a strange grey islet of two humps, made the more conspicuous by a piece of ruin; and I mind that (as we drew closer to it) by some door or window of these ruins the sea peeped through like a man's eye. Under the lee of Fidra there is a good anchorage in westerly winds, and there, from a far way off, we could see the Thistle riding.

The shore in face of these islets is altogether waste. Here is no dwelling of man, and scarce any passage, or at most of vagabond children running at their play. Gillane is a small place on the far side of the Ness, the folk of Dirleton go to their business in the inland fields, and those of North Berwick straight to the sea-fishing from their haven; so that few parts of the coast are lonelier. But I mind, as we crawled upon our bellies into that multiplicity of heights and hollows, keeping a bright eye upon all sides, and our hearts hammering at our ribs, there was such a shining of the sun and the sea, such a stir of the wind in the bent grass, and such a bustle of down-popping rabbits and up-flying gulls, that the desert seemed to me, like a place alive. No doubt it was in all ways well chosen for a secret embarkation, if the secret had been kept; and even now that it was out, and the place

watched, we were able to creep unperceived to the front of the sandhills, where they look down immediately on the beach and sea.

But here Alan came to a full stop.

"Davie," said he, "this is a kittle passage! As long as we lie here we're safe; but I'm nane sae muckle nearer to my ship or the coast of France. And as soon as we stand up and signal the brig, it's another matter. For where will your gentry be, think ye?"

"Maybe they're no come yet," said I. "And even if they are, there's one clear matter in our favour. They'll be all arranged to take us, that's true. But they'll have arranged for our coming from the east and here we are upon their west."

"Ay," says Alan, "I wish we were in some force, and this was a battle, we would have bonnily out-manoeuvred them! But it isnae, Davit; and the way it is, is a wee thing less inspiring to Alan Breck. I swither, Davie."

"Time flies, Alan," said I.

"I ken that," said Alan. "I ken naething else, as the French folk say. But this is a dreidful case of heids or tails. O! if I could but ken where your gentry were!"

"Alan," said I, "this is no like you. It's got to be now or never."

"This is no me, quo' he,"

sang Alan, with a queer face betwixt shame and drollery.

"Neither you nor me, quo' he, neither you nor me.

Wow, na, Johnnie man! neither you nor me."

And then of a sudden he stood straight up where he was, and with a

handkerchief flying in his right hand, marched down upon the beach.

I stood up myself, but lingered behind him, scanning the sand-hills to the east. His appearance was at first unremarked: Scougal not expecting him so early, and MY GENTRY watching on the other side. Then they awoke on board the Thistle, and it seemed they had all in readiness, for there was scarce a second's bustle on the deck before we saw a skiff put round her stern and begin to pull lively for the coast. Almost at the same moment of time, and perhaps half a mile away towards Gillane Ness, the figure of a man appeared for a blink upon a sandhill, waving with his arms; and though he was gone again in the same flash, the gulls in that part continued a little longer to fly wild.

Alan had not seen this, looking straight to seaward at the ship and skiff.

"It maun be as it will!" said he, when I had told him, "Weel may yon boatie row, or my craig'll have to thole a raxing."

That part of the beach was long and flat, and excellent walking when the tide was down; a little cressy burn flowed over it in one place to the sea; and the sandhills ran along the head of it like the rampart of a town. No eye of ours could spy what was passing behind there in the bents, no hurry of ours could mend the speed of the boat's coming: time stood still with us through that uncanny period of waiting.

"There is one thing I would like to ken," say Alan. "I would like to ken these gentry's orders. We're worth four hunner pound the

pair of us: how if they took the guns to us, Davie! They would
get a bonny shot from the top of that lang sandy bank."

"Morally impossible," said I. "The point is that they can have no
guns. This thing has been gone about too secret; pistols they may
have, but never guns."

"I believe ye'll be in the right," says Alan. "For all which I am
wearing a good deal for yon boat."

And he snapped his fingers and whistled to it like a dog.

It was now perhaps a third of the way in, and we ourselves already
hard on the margin of the sea, so that the soft sand rose over my

shoes. There was no more to do whatever but to wait, to look as much as we were able at the creeping nearer of the boat, and as little as we could manage at the long impenetrable front of the sandhills, over which the gulls twinkled and behind which our enemies were doubtless marshalling.

"This is a fine, bright, caller place to get shot in," says Alan suddenly; "and, man, I wish that I had your courage!"

"Alan!" I cried, "what kind of talk is this of it! You're just made of courage; it's the character of the man, as I could prove myself if there was nobody else."

"And you would be the more mistaken," said he. "What makes the

differ with me is just my great penetration and knowledge of
affairs. But for auld, cauld, dour, deadly courage, I am not fit
to hold a candle to yourself. Look at us two here upon the sands.
Here am I, fair hotching to be off; here's you (for all that I ken)
in two minds of it whether you'll no stop. Do you think that I
could do that, or would? No me! Firstly, because I havenae got
the courage and wouldnae daur; and secondly, because I am a man of
so much penetration and would see ye damned first."

"It's there ye're coming, is it?" I cried. "Ah, man Alan, you can
wile your old wives, but you never can wile me."

Remembrance of my temptation in the wood made me strong as iron.

"I have a tryst to keep," I continued. "I am trysted with your cousin Charlie; I have passed my word."

"Braw trysts that you'll can keep," said Alan. "Ye'll just mistryst aince and for a' with the gentry in the bents. And what for?" he went on with an extreme threatening gravity. "Just tell me that, my mannie! Are ye to be speerited away like Lady Grange? Are they to drive a dirk in your inside and bury ye in the bents? Or is it to be the other way, and are they to bring ye in with James? Are they folk to be trustit? Would ye stick your head in the mouth of Sim Fraser and the ither Whigs?" he added with extraordinary bitterness.

"Alan," cried I, "they're all rogues and liars, and I'm with ye

there. The more reason there should be one decent man in such a
land of thieves! My word in passed, and I'll stick to it. I said
long syne to your kinswoman that I would stumble at no risk. Do ye
mind of that?--the night Red Colin fell, it was. No more I will,
then. Here I stop. Prestongrange promised me my life: if he's to
be mansworn, here I'll have to die."

"Aweel aweel," said Alan.

All this time we had seen or heard no more of our pursuers. In
truth we had caught them unawares; their whole party (as I was to
learn afterwards) had not yet reached the scene; what there was of
them was spread among the bents towards Gillane. It was quite an
affair to call them in and bring them over, and the boat was making

speed. They were besides but cowardly fellows: a mere leash of Highland cattle-thieves, of several clans, no gentleman there to be the captain and the more they looked at Alan and me upon the beach, the less (I must suppose) they liked the look of us.

Whoever had betrayed Alan it was not the captain: he was in the skiff himself, steering and stirring up his oarsmen, like a man with his heart in his employ. Already he was near in, and the boat securing--already Alan's face had flamed crimson with the excitement of his deliverance, when our friends in the bents, either in their despair to see their prey escape them or with some hope of scaring Andie, raised suddenly a shrill cry of several voices.

This sound, arising from what appeared to be a quite deserted coast, was really very daunting, and the men in the boat held water instantly.

"What's this of it?" sings out the captain, for he was come within an easy hail.

"Freens o'mine," says Alan, and began immediately to wade forth in the shallow water towards the boat. "Davie," he said, pausing,

"Davie, are ye no coming? I am swier to leave ye."

"Not a hair of me," said I.

"He stood part of a second where he was to his knees in the salt

water, hesitating.

"He that will to Cupar, maun to Cupar," said he, and swashing in

deeper than his waist, was hauled into the skiff, which was

immediately directed for the ship.

I stood where he had left me, with my hands behind my back; Alan

sat with his head turned watching me; and the boat drew smoothly

away. Of a sudden I came the nearest hand to shedding tears, and

seemed to myself the most deserted solitary lad in Scotland. With

that I turned my back upon the sea and faced the sandhills. There

was no sight or sound of man; the sun shone on the wet sand and the

dry, the wind blew in the bents, the gulls made a dreary piping.

As I passed higher up the beach, the sand-lice were hopping nimbly

about the stranded tangles. The devil any other sight or sound in that unchancy place. And yet I knew there were folk there, observing me, upon some secret purpose. They were no soldiers, or they would have fallen on and taken us ere now; doubtless they were some common rogues hired for my undoing, perhaps to kidnap, perhaps to murder me outright. From the position of those engaged, the first was the more likely; from what I knew of their character and ardency in this business, I thought the second very possible; and the blood ran cold about my heart.

I had a mad idea to loosen my sword in the scabbard; for though I was very unfit to stand up like a gentleman blade to blade, I thought I could do some scathe in a random combat. But I perceived in time the folly of resistance. This was no doubt the joint

"expedient" on which Prestongrange and Fraser were agreed. The first, I was very sure, had done something to secure my life; the second was pretty likely to have slipped in some contrary hints into the ears of Neil and his companions; and if I were to show bare steel I might play straight into the hands of my worst enemy and seal my own doom.

These thoughts brought me to the head of the beach. I cast a look behind, the boat was nearing the brig, and Alan flew his handkerchief for a farewell, which I replied to with the waving of my hand. But Alan himself was shrunk to a small thing in my view, alongside of this pass that lay in front of me. I set my hat hard on my head, clenched my teeth, and went right before me up the face of the sand-wreath. It made a hard climb, being steep, and the

sand like water underfoot. But I caught hold at last by the long

bent-grass on the brae-top, and pulled myself to a good footing.

The same moment men stirred and stood up here and there, six or

seven of them, ragged-like knaves, each with a dagger in his hand.

The fair truth is, I shut my eyes and prayed. When I opened them

again, the rogues were crept the least thing nearer without speech

or hurry. Every eye was upon mine, which struck me with a strange

sensation of their brightness, and of the fear with which they

continued to approach me. I held out my hands empty; whereupon one

asked, with a strong Highland brogue, if I surrendered.

"Under protest," said I, "if ye ken what that means, which I

misdoubt."

At that word, they came all in upon me like a flight of birds upon a carrion, seized me, took my sword, and all the money from my pockets, bound me hand and foot with some strong line, and cast me on a tussock of bent. There they sat about their captive in a part of a circle and gazed upon him silently like something dangerous, perhaps a lion or a tiger on the spring. Presently this attention was relaxed. They drew nearer together, fell to speech in the Gaelic, and very cynically divided my property before my eyes. It was my diversion in this time that I could watch from my place the progress of my friend's escape. I saw the boat come to the brig and be hoisted in, the sails fill, and the ship pass out seaward behind the isles and by North Berwick.

In the course of two hours or so, more and more ragged Highlandmen

kept collecting. Neil among the first, until the party must have numbered near a score. With each new arrival there was a fresh bout of talk, that sounded like complaints and explanations; but I observed one thing, none of those who came late had any share in the division of my spoils. The last discussion was very violent and eager, so that once I thought they would have quarrelled; on the heels of which their company parted, the bulk of them returning westward in a troop, and only three, Neil and two others, remaining sentries on the prisoner.

"I could name one who would be very ill pleased with your day's work, Neil Duncanson," said I, when the rest had moved away.

He assured me in answer I should be tenderly used, for he knew he

was "acquaint wi' the leddy."

This was all our talk, nor did any other son of man appear upon

that portion of the coast until the sun had gone down among the

Highland mountains, and the gloaming was beginning to grow dark.

At which hour I was aware of a long, lean, bony-like Lothian man of

a very swarthy countenance, that came towards us among the bents on

a farm horse.

"Lads," cried he, "has ye a paper like this?" and held up one in

his hand. Neil produced a second, which the newcomer studied

through a pair of horn spectacles, and saying all was right and we

were the folk he was seeking, immediately dismounted. I was then

set in his place, my feet tied under the horse's belly, and we set

forth under the guidance of the Lowlander. His path must have been very well chosen, for we met but one pair--a pair of lovers--the whole way, and these, perhaps taking us to be free-traders, fled on our approach. We were at one time close at the foot of Berwick Law on the south side; at another, as we passed over some open hills, I spied the lights of a clachan and the old tower of a church among some trees not far off, but too far to cry for help, if I had dreamed of it. At last we came again within sound of the sea.

There was moonlight, though not much; and by this I could see the three huge towers and broken battlements of Tantallon, that old chief place of the Red Douglases. The horse was picketed in the bottom of the ditch to graze, and I was led within, and forth into the court, and thence into the tumble-down stone hall. Here my conductors built a brisk fire in the midst of the pavement, for

there was a chill in the night. My hands were loosed, I was set by the wall in the inner end, and (the Lowlander having produced provisions) I was given oatmeal bread and a pitcher of French brandy. This done, I was left once more alone with my three Highlandmen. They sat close by the fire drinking and talking; the wind blew in by the breaches, cast about the smoke and flames, and sang in the tops of the towers; I could hear the sea under the cliffs, and, my mind being reassured as to my life, and my body and spirits wearied with the day's employment, I turned upon one side and slumbered.

I had no means of guessing at what hour I was wakened, only the moon was down and the fire was low. My feet were now loosed, and I was carried through the ruins and down the cliff-side by a

precipitous path to where I found a fisher's boat in a haven of the
rocks. This I was had on board of, and we began to put forth from
the shore in a fine starlight