

CHAPTER X—THE DROVERS

It took me a little effort to come abreast of my new companion; for though he walked with an ugly roll and no great appearance of speed, he could cover the ground at a good rate when he wanted to. Each looked at the other: I with natural curiosity, he with a great appearance of distaste. I have heard since that his heart was entirely set against me; he had seen me kneel to the ladies, and diagnosed me for a ‘gesterin’ eediot.’

‘So, ye’re for England, are ye?’ said he.

I told him yes.

‘Weel, there’s waur places, I believe,’ was his reply; and he relapsed into a silence which was not broken during a quarter of an hour of steady walking.

This interval brought us to the foot of a bare green valley, which wound upwards and backwards among the hills. A little stream came down the midst and made a succession of clear pools; near by the lowest of which I was aware of a drove of shaggy cattle, and a man who seemed the very counterpart of Mr. Sim making a breakfast upon bread and cheese. This second drover (whose name proved to be Candlish) rose on our approach.

‘Here’s a mannie that’s to gang through with us,’ said Sim. ‘It was the auld wife, Gilchrist, wanted it.’

‘Aweel, aweel,’ said the other; and presently, remembering his manners, and looking on me with a solemn grin, ‘A fine day!’ says he.

I agreed with him, and asked him how he did.

‘Brawly,’ was the reply; and without further civilities, the pair proceeded to get the cattle under way. This, as well as almost all the herding, was the work of a pair of comely and intelligent dogs, directed by Sim or Candlish in little more than monosyllables. Presently we were ascending the side of the mountain by a rude green track, whose presence I had not hitherto observed. A continual sound of munching and the crying of a great quantity of moor birds accompanied our progress, which the deliberate pace and perennial appetite of the cattle rendered wearisomely slow. In the midst my two conductors marched in a contented silence that I could not but admire. The more I looked at them, the more I was impressed by their absurd resemblance to each other. They were dressed in the same coarse homespun, carried similar sticks, were equally begrimed about the nose with snuff, and each wound in an identical plaid of what is called the shepherd’s tartan. In a back view they might be described as indistinguishable; and even from the front they were much alike. An incredible coincidence of humours augmented the impression. Thrice and four times I attempted to pave the way for some exchange of thought, sentiment, or—at the least of it—human words. An Ay or an

Nhm was the sole return, and the topic died on the hill-side without echo. I can never deny that I was chagrined; and when, after a little more walking, Sim turned towards me and offered me a ram's horn of snuff, with the question 'Do ye use it?' I answered, with some animation, 'Faith, sir, I would use pepper to introduce a little cordiality.' But even this sally failed to reach, or at least failed to soften, my companions.

At this rate we came to the summit of a ridge, and saw the track descend in front of us abruptly into a desert vale, about a league in length, and closed at the farther end by no less barren hilltops. Upon this point of vantage Sim came to a halt, took off his hat, and mopped his brow.

'Weel,' he said, 'here we're at the top o' Howden.'

'The top o' Howden, sure eneuch,' said Candlish.

'Mr. St. Ivey, are ye dry?' said the first.

'Now, really,' said I, 'is not this Satan reproving sin?'

'What ails ye, man?' said he. 'I'm offerin' ye a dram.'

'Oh, if it be anything to drink,' said I, 'I am as dry as my neighbours.'

Whereupon Sim produced from the corner of his plaid a black bottle, and

we all drank and pledged each other. I found these gentlemen followed upon such occasions an invariable etiquette, which you may be certain I made haste to imitate. Each wiped his mouth with the back of his left hand, held up the bottle in his right, remarked with emphasis, 'Here's to ye!' and swallowed as much of the spirit as his fancy prompted. This little ceremony, which was the nearest thing to manners I could perceive in either of my companions, was repeated at becoming intervals, generally after an ascent. Occasionally we shared a mouthful of ewe-milk cheese and an inglorious form of bread, which I understood (but am far from engaging my honour on the point) to be called 'shearer's bannock.' And that may be said to have concluded our whole active intercourse for the first day.

I had the more occasion to remark the extraordinarily desolate nature of that country, through which the drove road continued, hour after hour and even day after day, to wind. A continual succession of insignificant shaggy hills, divided by the course of ten thousand brooks, through which we had to wade, or by the side of which we encamped at night; infinite perspectives of heather, infinite quantities of moorfowl; here and there, by a stream side, small and pretty clumps of willows or the silver birch; here and there, the ruins of ancient and inconsiderable fortresses—made the unchanging characters of the scene. Occasionally, but only in the distance, we could perceive the smoke of a small town or of an isolated farmhouse or cottage on the moors; more often, a flock of sheep and its attendant shepherd, or a rude field of agriculture perhaps not yet harvested. With these alleviations, we might almost be said to pass

through an unbroken desert—sure, one of the most impoverished in Europe; and when I recalled to mind that we were yet but a few leagues from the chief city (where the law courts sat every day with a press of business, soldiers garrisoned the castle, and men of admitted parts were carrying on the practice of letters and the investigations of science), it gave me a singular view of that poor, barren, and yet illustrious country through which I travelled. Still more, perhaps, did it commend the wisdom of Miss Gilchrist in sending me with these uncouth companions and by this unfrequented path.

My itinerary is by no means clear to me; the names and distances I never clearly knew, and have now wholly forgotten; and this is the more to be regretted as there is no doubt that, in the course of those days, I must have passed and camped among sites which have been rendered illustrious by the pen of Walter Scott. Nay, more, I am of opinion that I was still more favoured by fortune, and have actually met and spoken with that inimitable author. Our encounter was of a tall, stoutish, elderly gentleman, a little grizzled, and of a rugged but cheerful and engaging countenance. He sat on a hill pony, wrapped in a plaid over his green coat, and was accompanied by a horse-woman, his daughter, a young lady of the most charming appearance. They overtook us on a stretch of heath, reined up as they came alongside, and accompanied us for perhaps a quarter of an hour before they galloped off again across the hillsides to our left. Great was my amazement to find the unconquerable Mr. Sim thaw immediately on the accost of this strange gentleman, who hailed him with

a ready familiarity, proceeded at once to discuss with him the trade of droving and the prices of cattle, and did not disdain to take a pinch from the inevitable ram's horn. Presently I was aware that the stranger's eye was directed on myself; and there ensued a conversation, some of which I could not help overhearing at the time, and the rest have pieced together more or less plausibly from the report of Sim.

'Surely that must be an amateur drover ye have gotten there?' the gentleman seems to have asked.

Sim replied, I was a young gentleman that had a reason of his own to travel privately.

'Well, well, ye must tell me nothing of that. I am in the law, you know, and tace is the Latin for a candle,' answered the gentleman. 'But I hope it's nothing bad.'

Sim told him it was no more than debt.

'Oh, Lord, if that be all!' cried the gentleman; and turning to myself, 'Well, sir,' he added, 'I understand you are taking a tramp through our forest here for the pleasure of the thing?'

'Why, yes, sir,' said I; 'and I must say I am very well entertained.'

'I envy you,' said he. 'I have jogged many miles of it myself when I was

younger. My youth lies buried about here under every heather-bush, like the soul of the licentiate Lucius. But you should have a guide. The pleasure of this country is much in the legends, which grow as plentiful as blackberries.' And directing my attention to a little fragment of a broken wall no greater than a tombstone, he told me for an example a story of its earlier inhabitants. Years after it chanced that I was one day diverting myself with a Waverley Novel, when what should I come upon but the identical narrative of my green-coated gentleman upon the moors! In a moment the scene, the tones of his voice, his northern accent, and the very aspect of the earth and sky and temperature of the weather, flashed back into my mind with the reality of dreams. The unknown in the green-coat had been the Great Unknown! I had met Scott; I had heard a story from his lips; I should have been able to write, to claim acquaintance, to tell him that his legend still tingled in my ears. But the discovery came too late, and the great man had already succumbed under the load of his honours and misfortunes.

Presently, after giving us a cigar apiece, Scott bade us farewell and disappeared with his daughter over the hills. And when I applied to Sim for information, his answer of 'The Shirra, man! A'body kens the Shirra!' told me, unfortunately, nothing.

A more considerable adventure falls to be related. We were now near the border. We had travelled for long upon the track beaten and browsed by a million herds, our predecessors, and had seen no vestige of that traffic which had created it. It was early in the morning when we at last

perceived, drawing near to the drove road, but still at a distance of about half a league, a second caravan, similar to but larger than our own. The liveliest excitement was at once exhibited by both my comrades. They climbed hillocks, they studied the approaching drove from under their hand, they consulted each other with an appearance of alarm that seemed to me extraordinary. I had learned by this time that their stand-off manners implied, at least, no active enmity; and I made bold to ask them what was wrong.

‘Bad yins,’ was Sim’s emphatic answer.

All day the dogs were kept unsparingly on the alert, and the drove pushed forward at a very unusual and seemingly unwelcome speed. All day Sim and

Candlish, with a more than ordinary expenditure both of snuff and of words, continued to debate the position. It seems that they had recognised two of our neighbours on the road—one Faa, and another by the name of Gillies. Whether there was an old feud between them still unsettled I could never learn; but Sim and Candlish were prepared for every degree of fraud or violence at their hands. Candlish repeatedly congratulated himself on having left ‘the watch at home with the mistress’; and Sim perpetually brandished his cudgel, and cursed his ill-fortune that it should be sprung.

‘I willna care a damn to gie the daashed scoon’rel a fair clout wi’ it,’ he said. ‘The daashed thing nicht come sindry in ma hand.’

‘Well, gentlemen,’ said I, ‘suppose they do come on, I think we can give a very good account of them.’ And I made my piece of holly, Ronald’s gift, the value of which I now appreciated, sing about my head.

‘Ay, man? Are ye stench?’ inquired Sim, with a gleam of approval in his wooden countenance.

The same evening, somewhat wearied with our day-long expedition, we encamped on a little verdant mound, from the midst of which there welled a spring of clear water scarce great enough to wash the hands in. We had made our meal and lain down, but were not yet asleep, when a growl from one of the collies set us on the alert. All three sat up, and on a second impulse all lay down again, but now with our cudgels ready. A man must be an alien and an outlaw, an old soldier and a young man in the bargain, to take adventure easily. With no idea as to the rights of the quarrel or the probable consequences of the encounter, I was as ready to take part with my two drovers, as ever to fall in line on the morning of a battle. Presently there leaped three men out of the heather; we had scarce time to get to our feet before we were assailed; and in a moment each one of us was engaged with an adversary whom the deepening twilight scarce permitted him to see. How the battle sped in other quarters I am in no position to describe. The rogue that fell to my share was exceedingly agile and expert with his weapon; had and held me at a disadvantage from the first assault; forced me to give ground continually, and at last, in mere self-defence, to let him have the

point. It struck him in the throat, and he went down like a ninepin and moved no more.

It seemed this was the signal for the engagement to be discontinued. The other combatants separated at once; our foes were suffered, without molestation, to lift up and bear away their fallen comrade; so that I perceived this sort of war to be not wholly without laws of chivalry, and perhaps rather to partake of the character of a tournament than of a battle à outrance. There was no doubt, at least, that I was supposed to have pushed the affair too seriously. Our friends the enemy removed their wounded companion with undisguised consternation; and they were no sooner over the top of the brae, than Sim and Candlish roused up their wearied drove and set forth on a night march.

'I'm thinking Faa's unco bad,' said the one.

'Ay,' said the other, 'he lookit dooms gash.'

'He did that,' said the first.

And their weary silence fell upon them again.

Presently Sim turned to me. 'Ye're unco ready with the stick,' said he.

'Too ready, I'm afraid,' said I. 'I am afraid Mr. Faa (if that be his name) has got his gruel.'

‘Weel, I wouldnae wonder,’ replied Sim.

‘And what is likely to happen?’ I inquired.

‘Aweel,’ said Sim, snuffing profoundly, ‘if I were to offer an opeenion, it would not be conscientious. For the plain fac’ is, Mr. St. Ivy, that I div not ken. We have had crackit heids—and rowth of them—ere now; and we have had a broken leg or maybe twa; and the like of that we drover bodies make a kind of a practice like to keep among oursel’s. But a corp we have none of us ever had to deal with, and I could set nae leemit to what Gillies might consider proper in the affair. Forbye that, he would be in raither a hobble himsel’, if he was to gang hame wantin’ Faa. Folk are awfu’ throng with their questions, and parteecularly when they’re no wantit.’

‘That’s a fac’,’ said Candlish.

I considered this prospect ruefully; and then making the best of it, ‘Upon all which accounts,’ said I, ‘the best will be to get across the border and there separate. If you are troubled, you can very truly put the blame upon your late companion; and if I am pursued, I must just try to keep out of the way.’

‘Mr. St. Ivy,’ said Sim, with something resembling enthusiasm, ‘no’ a word mair! I have met in wi’ mony kinds o’ gentry ere now; I hae seen o’

them that was the tae thing, and I hae seen o' them that was the tither; but the wale of a gentleman like you I have no sae very frequently seen the bate of.'

Our night march was accordingly pursued with unremitting diligence. The stars paled, the east whitened, and we were still, both dogs and men, toiling after the wearied cattle. Again and again Sim and Candlish lamented the necessity: it was 'fair ruin on the bestial,' they declared; but the thought of a judge and a scaffold hunted them ever forward. I myself was not so much to be pitied. All that night, and during the whole of the little that remained before us of our conjunct journey, I enjoyed a new pleasure, the reward of my prowess, in the now loosened tongue of Mr. Sim. Candlish was still obdurately taciturn: it was the man's nature; but Sim, having finally appraised and approved me, displayed without reticence a rather garrulous habit of mind and a pretty talent for narration. The pair were old and close companions, co-existing in these endless moors in a brotherhood of silence such as I have heard attributed to the trappers of the west. It seems absurd to mention love in connection with so ugly and snuffy a couple; at least, their trust was absolute; and they entertained a surprising admiration for each other's qualities; Candlish exclaiming that Sim was 'grand company!' and Sim frequently assuring me in an aside that for 'a rale, auld, stench bitch, there was nae the bate of Candlish in braid Scotland.' The two dogs appeared to be entirely included in this family compact, and I remarked that their exploits and traits of character were constantly and minutely observed by the two masters. Dog stories

particularly abounded with them; and not only the dogs of the present but those of the past contributed their quota. 'But that was naething,' Sim would begin: 'there was a herd in Manar, they ca'd him Tweedie—ye'll mind Tweedie, Can'lish?' 'Fine, that!' said Candlish. 'Aweel, Tweedie had a dog—' The story I have forgotten; I dare say it was dull, and I suspect it was not true; but indeed, my travels with the drove rendered me indulgent, and perhaps even credulous, in the matter of dog stories. Beautiful, indefatigable beings! as I saw them at the end of a long day's journey frisking, barking, bounding, striking attitudes, slanting a bushy tail, manifestly playing to the spectator's eye, manifestly rejoicing in their grace and beauty—and turned to observe Sim and Candlish unornamentally plodding in the rear with the plaids about their bowed shoulders and the drop at their snuffy nose—I thought I would rather claim kinship with the dogs than with the men! My sympathy was unreturned; in their eyes I was a creature light as air; and they would scarce spare me the time for a perfunctory caress or perhaps a hasty lap of the wet tongue, ere they were back again in sedulous attendance on those dingy deities, their masters—and their masters, as like as not, damning their stupidity.

Altogether the last hours of our tramp were infinitely the most agreeable to me, and I believe to all of us; and by the time we came to separate, there had grown up a certain familiarity and mutual esteem that made the parting harder. It took place about four of the afternoon on a bare hillside from which I could see the ribbon of the great north road, henceforth to be my conductor. I asked what was to pay.

'Naething,' replied Sim.

'What in the name of folly is this?' I exclaimed. 'You have led me, you have fed me, you have filled me full of whisky, and now you will take nothing!'

'Ye see we indentit for that,' replied Sim.

'Indented?' I repeated; 'what does the man mean?'

'Mr. St. Ivy,' said Sim, 'this is a maitter entirely between Candlish and me and the auld wife, Gilchrist. You had naething to say to it; weel, ye can have naething to do with it, then.'

'My good man,' said I, 'I can allow myself to be placed in no such ridiculous position. Mrs. Gilchrist is nothing to me, and I refuse to be her debtor.'

'I dinna exac'ly see what way ye're gaun to help it,' observed my drover.

'By paying you here and now,' said I.

'There's aye twa to a bargain, Mr. St. Ives,' said he.

'You mean that you will not take it?' said I.

'There or thereabout,' said he. 'Forbye, that it would set ye a heap better to keep your siller for them you awe it to. Ye're young, Mr. St. Ivy, and thoughtless; but it's my belief that, wi' care and circumspection, ye may yet do credit to yoursel'. But just you bear this in mind: that him that awes siller should never gie siller.'

Well, what was there to say? I accepted his rebuke, and bidding the pair farewell, set off alone upon my southward way.

'Mr. St. Ivy,' was the last word of Sim, 'I was never muckle ta'en up in Englishry; but I think that I really ought to say that ye seem to me to have the makings of quite a decent lad.'